DISCOURSE ON WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT: ASSESSING THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT ON INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

The struggle of individuals in juggling work and personal responsibilities has gained interest and brought work-family conflict issue to the forefront of current management problems to be resolved. The work-family discourse has framed the issue in terms of depletion mainly because the roles from work and family domain are competing for individual’s limited time and energy. The difficulty to demarcate work and family domain instigates role spillover and emanate work-family conflict. The magnitude of this issue will continue to grow and proper actions are needed to reduce the strain between work and family domain. This article reviewed a range of industrial/organizational psychology literatures to increase the understanding of work-family conflict antecedents and consequences on individuals as well as on organizational well-being. Work demands are more associated to work-family conflict and more detrimental to individuals’ and organizational well-being compared to family demands. In this article, a thorough discourse was also conducted on the effectiveness of family-friendly policies. Many options have been introduced by organizations as an effort to reduce work-family conflict. However, the accumulating evidence from a substantial number of researches suggested that the effectiveness and benefits of each option are inconsistent.


1. Introduction

Globalization has forced work environment to undergo changes in various aspects. Business across countries is possible with less restriction and markets are more open to be explored by those who are willing to take hold of the chances. The numbers of multinational organizations are increasing and vitalize the economic growth. Consequently, employees are required to spend more time at work to ensure organizational survival in the highly competitive market. The rapid innovation and transformation of information technology does not offer any consolation to this issue either. Technologies make communication across different time zones and continents possible, and works become more accessible anytime at any place with the rise of wireless technology such as tablet PCs, Smartphone and blackberry. These technologies can turn homes into virtual office, which emanates work-family conflict by allowing work to spill over to family domain and vice versa (Kossek and Lautch, 2006).
The main purpose of this article is to discuss the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict to individual and organizational well-being. Additionally, this paper will also discuss the effectiveness of organizational family-friendly benefits and addresses the importance of organizational support in reducing the individual's level of work-family conflict. It is important to learn the source of work-family conflict before introducing any options to resolve this issue. Implementing options without sufficient understanding on the root of the work-family issue will only waste precious time and capital. Consequently estimated outcomes could never be achieved. Hopefully this article can shed light on the current situation of work-family conflict and efforts to frame the issue.

2. Work-family Conflict

Work-family conflict is rooted from the role conflict theory introduced by Goode (1960) and derived from the scarcity hypothesis which stated that individual's time and energy are limited. Roles from different domain require specific time and place to be performed and could not be fulfilled simultaneously (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000; Zerubavel, 1991). The role transition process is often unnoticed and spontaneous, but boundary management style preference will determine the magnitude of work-family conflict. Several terms have been used to describe the conflict between work and family domain, such as work-family conflict (Blanch and Aluja, 2009; Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams, 2000; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), work-family interference (Frone and Yardley, 1997; Hill, Yong, Hawkins and Ferris, 2004), and negative work-nonwork spillover (Grotto and Lyness, 2010).

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define work-family conflict as a form of interrole conflict caused by pressure of mutual incompatibility among roles from work and family domain. They classified work-family conflict into three types: (a) Time-based conflict, (b) Strain-based conflict, and (c) Behavioral-based conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when time devoted to one role make it difficult to fulfill another role's requirement. While, strain-based conflict occurs when a strain produced by one role impede the fulfillment of another role's requirement. Behavior-based conflict occurs when behavior required in one role makes it difficult to fulfill the requirements of another role. Early work-family conflict study conceptualized it as a unidimensional (e.g. Kopelman, Greenhaus, and Connolly, 1983). However, recent studies (Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams, 2000; Frone, Russell and Cooper, 1992; Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian, 1996) started to recognize work-family conflict as a distinct bi-dimensional construct: work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict.

People are bound with multiple roles in life and avoiding them is not an option. People can either integrate or segment their roles in a more manageable way. Work and family domain are considered as a completely separate domain. However, the boundary separating those domains became more permeable because of individual’s inclination to work during personal time or responding to personal matter at work (Burke, Koyuncu and Fiksenbaum, 2006) Perception that family demands are less important in comparison to work demands encourages the occurrence of role spillover and work-family conflict. The consequences of disregarding family demands were presumed far less severe than neglecting work demands and personal life is frequently adjusted around work rather that the other way around (Mennino, Rubin, and Brayfield, 2005). Additionally, women’s participation in the workforce has surged the number of dual-earner couples. Both women and men are facing difficulty juggling work and family demands. Nevertheless, it was reported that the levels of work-family conflict experienced by women are slightly higher compared to men (Frone, Russell and Cooper, 1992; Hill, Yong, Hawkins and Ferris, 2004). The Gender theory stated that men and women do not have an equal share on rewards and accountabilities in either household or work responsibilities. However, it is noteworthy to concede that organizational rewards are based on job commitment and employee’s capability to restrict family matters from spilling over to work domain.
3. Antecedents of Work-family Conflict

Many factors range from situational factors such as organizational support to dispositional factors such as individual’s personality contribute to work-family conflict. However, situational factors are the most studied factors which have been classified by Byron (2005) and Pichler (2009) into two categories; work-related variables and family-related variables. Each category consists of work demands, family demands, and demographic factors. Number of working hours, work overload, work-role conflict, lack of organizational support, and lack of autonomy were the most often studied work demands; whereas the presence of spouse, number of children, household responsibilities, and elderly responsibilities are family demands that are often associated with work-family conflict (Eby, Wendy, Lockwood, Bordeaux, and Brinley, 2005). Demographic factors such as age, gender, occupation, and marital status also led to work-family conflict (Eby, Wendy, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley, 2005; Byron, 2005; Pichler, 2009).

3.1 Work-related factors

Previous researches identified work demands as the main contributor to work-family conflict. Demerouti et al. (2005) define job demands as physical and psychological efforts that need to be sustained by employees to fulfill their job requirement. This article will emphasize on five work demands which consist of the number of hours worked per week, job involvement, workload, work-role conflict, and lack of job autonomy and flexibility. Most employees are concerned about the increasing need of working longer hours and the difficulty of taking time off to care for their family matters. Time pressure from long working hours and work overload has intensified work-family conflict among men and women (Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield, 2005). According to Barnett’s (1999) study on 10 companies in the United States, 62 percent of their employees claimed that longer hours spent on work are at the expense of their family time. It exacerbates spillover and derive a greater work-family conflict (Frye and Breaugh, 2004; Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield, 2005; Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler and Cullen, 2010; Scheiman, milk, and Glavin, 2009).

It is also worth noting that long working hour is often associated with high job involvement and heavy workload. Job involvement for instance, was reported to have a significant impact on increasing job satisfaction as well as work-family conflict at the same time (King, Mattimore, King and Adams, 1995). It was claimed that white-collar workers suffer greater work-family conflict compared to blue-collar workers (Frone and Yardley, 1997). Those with highest work pressure, emotional demands had most trouble with combining work and family life (Demerouti, Bakker and Schaufeli, 2005). A research among IBM’s employees from 48 different countries also revealed a strong relationship between job involvement, heavy workload and work-family conflict (Hill, Yong, Hawkins and Ferris, 2004). However, the magnitude of the relationship is higher among those who are working in three western groups compared to the eastern group. Cultural differences may take in a substantial influence on the variable impact of job involvement and workload on work-family conflict among IBM’s employees from different continents.

A number of researches (e.g. Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler and Cullen, 2010; Scheiman, Milkie and Glavin, 2009) also noted work-role conflict as part of work demands that contribute to work-family conflict. The occurrence of work-role conflict are often caused by lack of crucial job resources, conflict with coworkers and supervisor, noxiousness insecurity, as well as boring and not challenging work (Grotto and Lyness, 2010). Incompatibility between employees’ personal value with organizational objectives and mission can also stem work-role conflict which consequently affects their work-family conflict and job satisfaction (Cohen, 2008). Those who value family more over work will face difficulty working with a nonfamily-friendly organization that did not value family as much as they do.
The availability of flexibility from family-friendly policies such as flexihour, telecommuting and parental leave are important as an indication of organizational support on work-life balance (Scheiman, Milkie and Glavin, 2009). Sufficient amount of flexibility and autonomy is crucial in assisting employees to manage their work and family responsibilities more effectively (Grotto and Lyness, 2010; Premaux, Adkins and Mossholder, 2007). It is noteworthy to understand that the implementation of family-friendly policies without genuine organizational support not only fails to benefit the workers, but also could be detrimental to employees too. Mennino et. al (2005) have suggested that with more job autonomy work-family conflict among men will increase; while women will experience less work-family conflict. The finding is plausible given the circumstances that women experience more family-to-work conflict compared to men who were reported to experience more work-to-family conflict (Eby, Wendy, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley, 2005). Job autonomy is viewed as an opportunity for women to alter their work to suit their family demands while men view it as additional responsibilities that require more effort and time spent on work.

### 3.2 Family-related factors

Family-related variable can be classified into two categories, family role characteristic and family demands. Family role characteristics refer to an employee’s role either as a husband, wife, father or mother; whereas family demands comprise of the presence of spouse, number of children, family involvement, and elderly care responsibilities. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) claimed that family role characteristics require a certain amount of time and commitment which may generate strain between work and family realms. They believed it affected women more compared to men, which consequently influence their work involvement and increase their level of work-family conflict. A longitudinal study by Antobelli and Meon (2007) on dual-earner couples report that wives experience more work-family conflict compared to their husbands. However, this assumption contradict with Sieber (1974) who believe the roles accumulation though coming from different domains can be beneficial to the individual. Previous work-family researchers also found inconsistent results on the impact of family role characteristics to the employee’s work-family conflict.

With regard to family demands, the presence of a spouse has different effects on work-family conflict among men and women. Men were reported to experience less work-family conflict compared to women (Mennino, Rubin, and Brayfield, 2005). Premaux and colleagues (2007) found that having a spouse or partner do increase work-family conflict regardless of gender. On the other hand, Hills et. al (2005) indicated that employees experience the same amount of conflict regardless their marital status. Employees whose spouse stay home and care for their children tended to have more support and experience less work-family conflict (King, Mattimore, King and Adams, 1995). Moreover, the number of children in the household also contributes to an employee’s work-family conflict. Responsibilities for children are relatively more significant in the intensification of work-family conflict among women compared to men (Frye and Breaugh, 2004; Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian, 1996). The findings are plausible because childbearing and child-caring often associates more with a woman rather than man. Although household responsibilities among men have increased, women are still accountable for most of the domestic responsibilities.

Family involvement has been listed as one of the family demands that influence work-family conflict, though there is no mutual agreement among work-family researchers to support this claim. A meta-analytic study of Byron (2005) stated that those who are highly involved in family experience the same amount of work-family conflict as those who are less involved with their family. There is no conclusive evidence on the significant relationship between family involvement and work-family conflict. However, employees with elderly-care responsibilities were reported experience high work-family conflict, although only a handful of researches incorporated this factor as part of their family demands variable.
4. Work-family Conflict, Individual Well-Being, and Organizational Well-Being

Numerous dysfunctional outcomes have been linked to work-family conflict. Eby and colleagues (2005) stated that work-family conflict has a negative impact on family relations, quality of life, marital functioning, as well as anxiety and mood at work or home. Work-family conflict influence on individual well-being can be characterized into three categories: (a) physical and psychological consequences, (b) work consequences, and (c) family consequences. The most common physical problems reported by those with high work-family conflict are fatigue and hypertension (Frone and Yardley, 1997) which was instigated by psychological disorder such as stress, mood-swing, anxiety and depression (Bruck, Allen and Spector, 2002). It will also affect employee’s focus on work which consequently leads to job frustration and job dissatisfaction (Parasuraman and Simmers, 2001). According to a longitudinal study by Kinnunen et. al (2004) on dual-earner couples, men reported work-family conflict affect their physical and psychological well-being; whereas work-family conflict affect women's satisfaction on life and work. Work-family conflict is detrimental to an individual’s personal life, if they failed to set a clear boundary between work and family realms. Meta-analytic studies by Kossek and Ozeki (1998) and Eby et. al (2005) provide evidence to support previous findings on the significant impact of work-family conflict on the employee's life satisfaction.

The consequences of work-family conflict on individual and organizational well-being are interrelated. Grzywarcz and Marks (2002) believe that boundary permeability is not the main issue, but what employees allow to pass through the work-family boundaries shaped the consequences they will experience. Long working hours and unsupportive organizational environment, for instance, increase work-family pressure which leads to work frustration. Productivity will be affected due to lack of focus and insufficient work efforts among those who are struggling to juggle work and family responsibilities effectively. Consequently, it will lead to tardiness and absenteeism, decline job satisfaction, and increase turnover intention among those who experience high work-family conflict (Bowling and Burn, 2010). Reaction towards work-family conflict varies from withdrawal behaviors to an actual turnover. When talented employees decided to leave an organization, human capital investment in developing employee’s competency will be wasted and additional budget allocation will be needed to recruit new talent. Disregarding work-family conflict will not only cost time, but financially detrimental to the organization too.

5. Family-Friendly Benefits and Work-family Conflict

Employees are the most important asset that can create value and ensure organizational competitiveness and survival in today’s business environment. Organization will become more appealing to talented employees by offering a great family-friendly benefits package. The most common family-friendly benefits offered by organization cover dependent care facilities, fitness and medical facilities, stock options and flexible work scheduling (Dessler, 2014). Thus, family-friendly benefits are viewed as remedies to ease employees’ struggle juggling their work and family responsibilities. A number of researches (e.g. Eby, Wendy, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley, 2005; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood and Colton, 2005) indicated flexible work schedules and dependent care benefits are significant in reducing work-family conflict. However, there is no general agreement among researchers on the significance of family-friendly benefits in reducing employee’s work-family interference.

Dependent care benefits such as on-site child care facilities, subsidized child care, and father’s time off is increasingly desirable to retain talents, improving performance, and create a favorable public image for the organization (Barnett, 1999; Dessler, 2014). On-site day care that cover early-morning meetings may ease the burden of parents with preschool children, but it would do little in assisting parents with school-age children or employees who have other early-morning commitments (Barnett, 1999). Furthermore, unexpected absence due to last-minute child care emergencies can be
problematic for organizations because temporary help might be needed and they also have to cope with reduced productivity (Dessler, 2014). Findings from a study conducted by Mennino and colleagues (2005), suggest that dependent care benefits have little effect on work-family conflict in either direction: work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict.

Work-family conflict issue started in 1970 when women participate to fill-up the shortage of the workforce in the America due to the world war two, WW II (Smith, 2000). Up to now, working women are still struggling with discrimination in the workplace as well as managing their work and family responsibilities effectively. Although the utilization of flexible work schedules often associated with women, organizations are aware that men experience work-family conflict too. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the significance of flexible work schedules in portraying family-friendly environment as part of organizational image to potential employees and the community. Flexible work scheduling comprises of flexible working hours (Flexihour), telecommuting, compressed workweek, and job sharing. However, this article will only focus on flexible working hours (Flexihour) and telecommuting as they are more relevant in addressing work-family conflict issue (Premaux, Adkins and Mossholder, 2007).

According to Dessler (2014), flexible working hour and telecommuting can increase productivity and job satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of flexible work scheduling implementation such as flexihour and telecommuting in reducing work-family conflict spurs debates among researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Some believed that flexible work scheduling can create more conflict most when employees fail to establish a clear boundary between work and family realms. Those with valuable talent noticed their worth and start to demand better family-friendly benefits that can assist them for a better balance in life. Flexibility and autonomy in work are desirable to most employees. They are willing to trade promotion opportunity and even willing to change their job to acquire better work and family responsibilities reconciliation (Barnett, 1999).

Maimunah (2008) stated that flexihour permit employees to set the opening hour and when to end their working hour, while the organization is responsible to decide the bandwidth, and when employees are thought to be present at their work station (core hours). There are three key elements of flexihour which consists of core hours, bandwidth, and mutual agreement between employees and employers. Offering flexihour can create a sense of autonomy as well as control to employees by allowing them to decide their preferred working time (Mumin, Siganul and Ai-Yee, 2014). Clock-in and clock out time flexibility does not make much difference to those with elderly care responsibilities and children. It may assist employees to stretch their time to prepare children to school, but their daily predicament also occurs in the middle of the day. Besides, flexihour did not provide total freedom as employees are still required to be present during the core hours and during any important events in the organization (Greenberg, 2011; Maimunah, 2008; McShane and Von Glinow, 2010).

Telecommuting is another common alternative work arrangement in the western countries and has begun to reach popularity in Malaysia. Telecommuting offer work place flexibility with technologies support and a mutual agreement between telecommuters and the organization (Maimunah, 2008; Quick and Nelson, 2009). Opting to work from the comfort of own home, the possibility of achieving better balance in work and family life would be higher among telecommuters. It has commonly been assumed that telecommuting is beneficial for the first-time parent, employees with care giving responsibilities to the newly born baby, and those with elderly care responsibilities. Employees can be more focus and productive without any need of worrying about their dependents at home. Despite the benefits of telecommuting, those who utilize it might be exposed to greater work-family spillover if they are not capable to separate their work and family domain effectively (Grotto and Lyness, 2010). Lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and supervisor were also reported as the main cause of why employees are reluctant to fully-utilized telecommuting. A study conducted on 80
major companies in the United States indicated that less than 2 percent of employees participate in telecommuting due to their concern of being viewed as less committed and not desirable for the promotion (Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999). Most women are reluctant to utilize telecommuting as it may be perceived as an indication of the inadequacy of handling work and family demands (Barnett, 1999).

6. Discussion

Work demands have been reported as the main contributors of work-family conflict. Although various options have been introduced over the years, apparently they are still not able to fully-assist employees and organizations deal with work - family issues. Theoretically, the introduction of family friendly benefits such as flexible work scheduling seems like an ideal solution, but in practice they were not as beneficial as they are claimed to be. Previous researchers were not able to reach a mutual agreement on the role of family-friendly benefits in reducing work-family conflict. Preference on ideal working condition keeps on changing in line with the business environment’s constant changes which will worsen the irreconcilable issues between work and family domain. Organizations would fond for options than can maximize their profit and increase their chances of survival; while employees will opt for an alternative that can balance or at least ease their struggle with work and family demands.

The disappointments of family-friendly benefits are generally caused by employee’s own perception and attitude. Fear of isolation, anxiety of being viewed as incompetent, and concern on career development opportunities impede employees to fully-utilize family-friendly benefits to lessen their work-family conflict. Although organization has developed clear and thorough family-friendly policies, perception is difficult to be altered. The misperceptions could be eliminated gradually with proper communication and support from the top level management. Burke (2004) stated that not much difference can be seen by offering family-friendly benefits unless organizations are willing to change their structure and culture. There is a need to introduce a new range of policies, revisit organization current policies, and develop clear criteria of human resource practices that can influence employee career development (Barnett, 1999). Human resource practices such as performance assessment should be changed to accommodate the new work arrangements which some of the employees will embark on. A clear and proper guideline should be communicated to those who are going to involve in flexihour and telecommuting especially the appraiser. It would be difficult to ensure performance assessment is objective, bias-free and conducted in an ethical manner. Nevertheless, clear guidelines can reduce human bias in the assessment process. The results may not be relished immediately but persistence is the key to gain employees’ trust on the eminence of family friendly benefits in reducing their work-family conflict.

Installing information communication technology to ease the interaction barrier between telecommuters, coworkers and their supervisor are another vital element in determining the effectiveness of flexible work scheduling. Efficient communication will lessen concern on lack of face-to-face interaction and reduce the isolation feeling among telecommuters. The installation of hardware, software, and communication infrastructures may be costly; nevertheless it needs to be done to maintain and improve telecommuters’ performance at the comfort of their home (Mumin, Siganul and Ai-Yee, 2014). Assessing the effectiveness and profitability of family-friendly benefits are difficult and the monetarily contribution of family-friendly benefits to the organization need to be carefully reexamined.

Frye and Breaugh (2004) propose training and rewards as a method of creating awareness of the benefits associated with family-friendly practices. Awareness can be developed through appropriate trainings, especially for those who directly or indirectly involved in flexible work scheduling. Changing individual’s perception and attitude is difficult through training; however, continuous
training will create awareness which in a certain period of time will alter employee’s perception, attitude and behavior. Organization need to provide different types of training to accommodate those who are involved in flexible work scheduling directly or indirectly with a proper set of competencies. Telecommuters for instance, should be equipped with time management skills, reporting procedures, and preparation of transition from office to home-based work. Those who utilize flexihour are supposed to be well-informed on the clock-in and clock-out flexibility, core hour and their number of working hours, while, supervisors should be prepared with guideline and skills for monitoring and evaluating those who are utilizing flexible work scheduling.

8. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

Although the numerous amount of researches has been conducted on work-family conflict, organizations and practitioners are still struggling to find the best solution to overcome this issue. Work-family conflict issue keeps on surfacing in line with the constantly changing work environment and individual’s work-life demands. Work-associated variables were identified as more detrimental to work-family interface compared to family-related variables. Factors such as longer working hours, heavy workload and job involvement are the main contributor to work-family conflict. Alternatives such as dependent care benefits, flexihour and telecommuting are offered by organizations to lessen work-family conflict, but the effectiveness of its implementation remains questionable. Organizations are not solely responsible to reduce work-family conflict; employees are also accountable to evaluate and discover the best strategy to reduce the impact of their work and family incompatibility.

It is also noteworthy to recognize that the amount of spillover whether from work to family or vice versa are determined by the permeability of boundary separating work and family domains. Individual differences, especially their work and family characteristics, personality, boundary preference and management styles are also associated with work-family conflict. A handful of studies has investigated the influence of personality traits based on five factor model (Michel, Clark and Jaramillo, 2011), core self-evaluation (Boyar and Mosley, 2007), type A and B personality (Bruck and Allen, 2003) on work-family conflict. There is also a growing interest in investigating the influence of boundary management on the employee’s work-family conflict. Employees with a lower control on boundary management claim to experience more work-family conflict compared to those with high control over their work and family boundary (Kossek, Ruderman, Brady and Hannum, 2012). Work-family conflict research is moving to a more constructive and practical approach on assisting employees to understand how their personal characteristic influence their work-family conflict.

References


