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# More Research With a Purpose: Advancing Work–Family Program Utilization

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In a timely challenge to the work–family research community, Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews (2011) have urged us to support work–family policy implementation through research with a purpose. The question raised by the authors is increasingly critical: With so many people in the workforce struggling to integrate often conflicting life roles, why are work–family programs under utilized, and what can be done to change this situation? This commentary is meant to expand upon some of the crucial points made by Kossek and her colleagues and to address practical issues surrounding the implementation and utilization of work–life programs: building cultures of support, addressing management resistance, ensuring sufficiently broad research frames, and demonstrating the organizational return on investment in work–family programs.

## **Build Cultures of Support**

Kossek et al. clearly recognize the benefits of framing work–family program implementation as organizational culture change. Although the literature does note the importance of supportive culture to the success of programs, too few studies have

identified the exact attributes of a culture supportive of work–family program implementation. One intriguing exception is the study conducted by McDonald, Brown, and Bradley (2005). They identify five key dimensions of culture necessary to sustain work–life programs: manager support, organizational time expectations, career consequences, nongendered perceptions of policy use, and coworker support. How to actually achieve cultures with these essential characteristics is too often left unaddressed in both practice and research.

The change management literature does provide a source of possible approaches for achieving supportive cultures. For example, change models have long identified leadership support as antecedent to successful change efforts (e.g., Worley & Cummings, 2005). The modeling of anticipated behaviors by leadership at all levels relays important messages regarding values and expected norms. Manager use of work–family programs is likely to encourage employee participation in these programs. Manager participation serves to symbolize organizational support and signal that organizational values extend to an appreciation of employee participation in nonwork roles. Research studies should include measures of supervisor participation and tests of the conditions under which such participation predicts subordinate use of work–family programs.

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## **Appreciate Management Resistance Through the Lens of Change**

Organizational change engages sensemaking when key stakeholders struggle to assign, integrate, and take action on evolving meanings (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Managers are often central stakeholders in the implementation of any change effort and may display behaviors often labeled as resistance to change. These behaviors are typically cast as unreasoned reactions posing impediments needing to be overcome. However, Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio (2008) have offered an alternative perspective by arguing that such middle manager behaviors are more appropriately framed and understood as evidence of sensemaking.

To illustrate how sensemaking applies, consider the case of telework among U.S. federal government agencies. Beginning in 2002 and each year thereafter, a survey has been administered to federal agencies with an item that asks respondents to select from among several key barriers to the successful implementation of telework. Findings from the 2010 report indicate that nearly half of all 79 respondent agencies selected management resistance (see Status of Telework in the Federal Government, 2010, [www.telework.gov](http://www.telework.gov)). However, this “resistance” is probably better understood as sensemaking on the part of federal managers as they seek to reconcile assurances that telework presents “business as usual” with actual daily experiences of telework as a distinct organizational change with implications for management practice.

Arguably, the general practice of management can be affected by telework in fundamental ways depending upon how programs are implemented. Often telework is bundled with other flexible schedules, including compressed work schedules and flexible arrival and departure. The impact of individual programs on overall work processes can be minimal, as in the case of flexible arrival and departure times—neither is

likely to require alterations in workgroup behavior beyond the delay of a morning meeting or earlier timeframe for an afternoon meeting. When flexibilities in scheduling (e.g., compressed work weeks) and work location (e.g., telework, virtual mobile work) are bundled across workgroups, extra demands can be placed on managers. Scheduling even a simple staff meeting becomes more complicated, and ensuring adequate office coverage can be notably difficult. The management challenges become more complicated when we consider that telework implementation strategies tend to vary from organization to organization and even within the same organization. Some telework programs are arranged to allow work from an approved alternative worksite only as the situation demands to enable continuation of work or more focused work (e.g., to avoid lost work time when a medical appointment is scheduled, to devote uninterrupted time to completion of a project). Other programs are implemented as completely virtual work in which employees are very rarely, if ever, located at a central worksite.

Finally, recall that federal government agencies are generally organized as bureaucracies. As such, rules and the equitable application of rules are central values, with managers expected to practice accordingly. Bailey and Kurland's (2002) review of the literature suggests that telework is often implemented so that programs are more accessible and attractive to professional employees when compared with clerical employees. The potential for challenges to equitable implementation of telework policies (i.e., rules) is readily apparent, again posing hurdles for managers to address.

As this example suggests, recommendations made by Kossek and her colleagues could be effectively extended to include exploration of manager sensemaking among work–family research topics as an important conceptual lens for considering the experiences and actions of managers. Study should begin with the examination of the theoretical literature to better understand the drivers of sensemaking (e.g.,

Weick, 2001) and solutions for addressing the potential challenges surrounding the workplace changes associated with work–family program implementation.

### **Broaden the Research Focus**

Consequences associated with the implementation of work–family programs can extend beyond the individual (as suggested in the telework example just described). In fact, Kossek et al. comment on the tendency to consider implementation of work–family policies without examining how they link to other workplace characteristics, such as conditions of employment or culture. At the same time, the authors applaud the recent expansion of stakeholders considered in work–family research, especially the coworker experience. To broaden the scope of studies suitably, systems theory should be used as the framework for work–family research in order to emphasize the dynamic complexes of interdependence among groups of individuals, structures, and processes.

Through systems theory, organizational interrelationships are considered rather than single components of the system (Levin, 1947 as cited in Ash, 1992). The implications are substantial: More informative work–family research agendas result when studies address how the decision to participate in work–family programs influences relationship dynamics at work and at home. To consider how a supervisor’s reaction to employee efforts to integrate work and family roles might influence employee use of work–family programs is recognizably important. Equally important are questions regarding how the employee’s decision to engage in work–family programs could affect the supervisor, coworkers, and even work teams. Again, supervisor resistance to work–family programs takes on a different meaning when we enlarge the scope of our enquiry to consider the entire system of the workgroup, especially the dynamic interplay between key stakeholders.

### **Establish and Sustain Robust Programs Through Evaluation**

With the current economic downturn employers across sectors have had to significantly tighten budgets and find ways to reduce costs. Employee benefits, consequently, are being reconsidered. Work–family programs (e.g., child care subsidies) are an expense some employers may not be able to bear. Other employee work–life benefits are being reexamined for utility to employers as potential cost-cutting strategies. Wellness programs are implemented with the expectation of savings to employer health care costs, and telework programs are increasingly implemented not as an employee work–life choice but, rather, as a tool to achieve real-estate cost savings for organizations.

The value of program evaluation becomes clear at precisely this point when organizations place increasing value on efficiency and cost-savings measures and challenge work–family practitioners to identify which work–family practices are most likely to result in cost containments (e.g., reduced turnover and absenteeism). Applied research goals often end with a description or prediction of relationships between variables. Evaluation, however, seeks to establish causality. It asks the researcher to insert the level of rigor necessary to demonstrate that program variables actually caused observed outcomes. Establishing causality is essential to creating the evidence-base necessary to convince organizational leaders to invest in and support implementation of work–family programs. Moreover, evaluations are typically conducted using a systematic approach that often begins with an assessment to establish whether the program meets the needs of a specific organization and its employees. Programs are more likely to be used when they satisfy existing needs.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, evaluation allows program planners to consider under what conditions unintended outcomes might occur. Results of a study of

teleworkers revealed both positive and negative unintended consequences for office-bound coworkers of teleworkers (Horan & Wells, 2005). Some reported that teleworkers were quicker to respond to work requests as compared with others working onsite in the central office. At the same time, coworkers also remarked upon the lost opportunities for social learning, raising concerns for knowledge management.

Similarly, Kossek et al. describe other unintended consequences of work–family programs, especially coworker backlash. Some coworkers may feel exploited when another employee's participation in a work–family benefit means extra work for that coworker. In the federal government, work–family programs are intentionally integrated within a larger menu of work–life programs (e.g., wellness, caretaker courses, employee assistance programs). In this way, employees are more likely to view work–family programs as inclusive benefits; each employee is more likely to find something that can help him or her achieve important life goals. Whether or not such an approach is able to guard against negative outcomes, such as unintentional burdening of coworkers, is a subject for evaluation. Such topics should be considered in a program of systematic evaluation designed with sufficient rigor to identify occurrences of unintended negative consequences. By employing evaluation, safeguards can be planned and more robust programs implemented for future employees.

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