

Making Sense of Women's Career Progression: Utilization of Work/Life Practices in State Government Agencies

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to make sense of the work/life balance quandary, this article discusses preliminary results of a broader research project (D'Agostino and Levine 2009) empirically examining the utilization of work/life practices by women in state-level government in the United States.- The purpose of this research is to examine whether women's utilization of work/life practices contributes to their career progression. Therefore, the central research question examines, *what is the impact of work/life utilization practices on women's career progression?* Findings indicate that women who have reached executive level positions are more likely to utilize specific practices, such as flexible hours, than others, such as working part time or childcare reimbursement. Furthermore, work/life policies and practices should be framed and marketed to society in general in order to encourage utilization.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, women make up approximately 50 percent of the workforce and run some of the world's best companies (*Economist* 2010). Women have been encouraged to climb the "corporate ladder" and break the "glass ceiling"; nonetheless, they still often find top-level positions out of reach. Despite all the progress American women have made, the United States still trails other industrialized nations in women's professional achievement. Women make up less than 13 percent of board members, and only 2 percent of the Fortune 500 companies are managed by women (*Economist* 2010). One proposed reason for this continued disparity is that work/life options such as childcare and paid parental

leave have not been institutionalized (Hunt 2009). Consequently, many women in the United States are forced to choose between motherhood and careers (*Economist* 2010). A recent study (Mattis 2004) demonstrates that women leave corporate careers to start their own businesses for three main reasons: the need for more flexibility, experience with glass-ceiling factors, and lack of challenges on the job. The federal government has been called upon to provide a model that would move the United States one step closer to institutionalization of work/life policies. The Workplace Flexibility 2010 initiative based at Georgetown University Law Center has been urging the federal government to lead by example by creating a “flexible fed.” Workplace Flexibility 2010 encourages the implementation of flexible work arrangements, such as training, technical assistance, compressed workweeks, and telecommuting, as well as resources to support such arrangements (Vogel 2009).

The Obama administration’s appointment of John Berry as director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has reinvigorated the work/life balance discussion. Berry has vowed to eliminate rules that make it difficult to retain talented workers, starting by introducing dramatic work/life balance programs at the OPM (Vogel 2009; Rosenberg 2009). In addition, federal lawmakers have reintroduced and passed legislation in the House that would provide paid parental leave to all federal employees. The Federal Employees Paid Parental Leave Act of 2009 aims to put rhetoric into practice when it comes to talking about family values in the United States.

The issue of women’s overcoming gender inequity to achieve career progression, however, goes beyond passing new legislation or introducing new programs. In an effort to make sense of the work/life balance quandary, this article discusses preliminary results of a broader

research project (D'Agostino and Levine 2009) empirically examining the utilization of work/life practices by women in state-level government in the United States. Unlike past research addressing work/life policy and women's career progression, this article contributes to research by directly surveying women in the field about the utilization of work/life practices. The purpose of this research is to examine whether women's utilization of work/life practices contributes to their career progression. Therefore, the central research question examines, *what is the impact of work/life utilization practices on women's career progression?* First, this paper reviews past research examining how work/life policies contribute to women's career progression. Then, more specifically, it looks at studies examining utilization of work/life practices. Finally, it reports on a survey of women in executive level positions in state-level government agencies that was conducted in order to explore the possible association of work/family policies and career progression of women in state agencies.

WORK/LIFE POLICIES

Because men have traditionally held positions of power, personnel policies and work structures tend to reflect the life experience of men and are often in conflict with the life experience of women (Newman and Mathews 1999; Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002). As a first step toward achieving gender equality and promoting the career progression of women, organizations can encourage the hiring, retention, and advancement of women by adopting work/life policies (Guy 2003). Among work/life policies found in the literature are flexible work hours, paid leaves of absence, subsidies for childcare, job sharing, and home-based employment (Rose and Hartmann 2004; Blau et al.

1998). Family-friendly, or work-life, policies have been defined as “arrangements designed to support employees faced with balancing the competing demands of work and family in today’s fast-paced, complex environment” (Reno 1993). Family-friendly practices can take the form of maternity leave, career breaks with the right to return to a job, flex-job arrangements, and childcare (Dex and Joshi 1999). Flexibility, which is the underlying principle of family-friendly policies (Newman and Matthews 1999), and gender-neutral language targeting both men and women, are efforts to level the playing field.

As emphasized by Newman and Matthews (1999), however, “while these policies and practices have the potential to provide flexibility to female and male employees alike, they may also have the potential to underscore, if not reinforce, women’s ‘double duty’ at work and at home. Women continue to be responsible for a disproportionate share of domestic duties at the same time they are continuing to enter the workforce in increasing numbers (Hochschild 1989).

Furthermore, employers have found advantages in providing such options including reducing turnover, lowering recruitment cost, reducing recruitment, improving productivity, and keeping valuable employees (Dex and Joshi 1999; Meyer and Rowan 1997; Fletcher and Bailyn 1996). Given that offering family-friendly policies is advantageous (Grover and Crooker 1995; Thompson et al. 1997), policies may be adopted for symbolic rather than substantive reasons and may therefore fail to produce any real changes in organizational structure or behavior (Edelman et al. 1999; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 1995) as they often conflict with more entrenched organizational norms, such as an overtime culture (Freid 1998), work devotion (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2001), and a belief in value of face-time (Perlow 1997). Thus, employees may conclude that using work/family benefits will be costly for

their careers (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002).

UTILIZATION OF WORK/LIFE POLICIES

Despite research indicating the benefits of work/life policies on organizations and employees (Allen 2001; Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1994; Thiede and Ganster, 1995), the availability of work/life practices does not necessarily result in utilization (Fried 1998; Hochschild and Machung 1997). As Eaton (2003) states, “Policies, formal or informal must be available to be used. . . . If employees cannot use the policies, then they do not help” (p. 163). Although organizations measure their family-friendliness based on the presence of formal policies (Eaton 2003), an organization’s informal culture is important in influencing employee behavior (Fletcher and Bailyn 1996). Low rates of utilization exist despite the presence of formal policies (Hochschild 1997), and informal work/family policies (those that are not official and not written down but are available to employees on a discretionary basis) may be applied inconsistently (Eaton 2003).

According to Kottke and Agars (2006), whether or not policies and practices are successful depends on how they are perceived by an organization’s members. A recent study by Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) examines the effects of workplace social context on managers’ and professionals’ use of work/family policies in financial services corporations. They find that employees are more likely to use available practices if they work with powerful supervisors and colleagues, who can buffer them from perceived negative affects on their careers.

The perception is that gender-based policies—including work/life policies, which are often seen as directed exclusively at women—are often underutilized (Konnard and Linnehan 1999; Newman and Matthews 1999). Konnard and Linnenhan (1999) maintain that unless

underlying organizational processes are addressed and organizational practices are embraced by all members, barriers to women's advancement will remain. Although programs aim to improve organizational outcomes, factors other than program usefulness continue to determine whether employees utilize those programs (Judiesch and Lyness 1999).

A 1999 study by Newman and Matthews identifies 13 family-friendly work arrangements across nine federal departments and finds that the majority of available practices are underutilized and, when they are utilized, are utilized largely by women. In addition, they find that compressed and flexible work schedules are the two most widely utilized work/life practices, with more than one-third of the federal workforce reported to be participating. Several explanations for the underutilization of work/life practices are given, including attitude of management, lack of trust, limited communication and training, and a workaholic culture.

Other studies on the utilization of work/life practices maintain that employees are reluctant to participate in such programs if they believe that participation will threaten their career path (Connor et al. 1997; Catalyst 1998; Gerson 1993; Powell 1997; Veiga et al. 2004) because these benefits are perceived as "fringe benefits" (McDonald et. al. 2005). For example, the part-time work option has been found to be incompatible with promotion and access to higher-status male-dominated occupations (Kirby and Krone 2002; Whittock et. al. 2002). Likewise, employees fear that utilizing family-friendly practices may result in a negative assessment of their abilities by others (Gross and McMullen 1993; Lee 1997) or feel that they will be stigmatized as prioritizing family responsibilities instead of being seen as demonstrating commitment to the organization (Fletcher and Bailyn 1996; Allen and Russell 1999). Since women bare

disproportionate responsibility for domestic labor, work/life practices, although generally underutilized, are mostly utilized by women (Charlesworth 1997; Newman and Matthews 1999), and parents of young children are more likely to use such policies than are nonparents (Flack and Resking 1998; Freid 1998; Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Sandberg 1999; Thompson et al. 1999).

A recent study by Hill et. al. (2003) reveals that 35 percent of fathers and 49 percent of mothers have had flexible work schedules; 82 percent of fathers and 89 percent of mothers intend to do so in the future; women are more likely than men (79% versus 68%, respectively) to use flextime when it is available. A study by Armenai and Gertsel (2006) reveals that women (87.7%) are more likely than men (4.21%) to take leave for a newborn, sick child and sick-family leaves taken by women average more than twice as long as such leaves taken by men—48 versus 20 days.

Not only are work/life practices underutilized by men (McDonald et al. 2005), but those men who do utilize available work/family practices, such as the part-time work option, experience the same career disadvantages as women (Kirby and Krone 2002). In fact, it has been argued that repercussions for their careers work place attainment may be more negative for men than for women, since utilization of work/family practices by men represents a departure from prescribed gender roles (Eagly 1987). For example, men utilizing parental leave have been found to be less likely to be recommended for rewards than women in general (Allen and Russell 1999).

WOMEN'S CAREER PROGRESSION AND UTILIZATION OF WORK/LIFE POLICIES

Newman and Matthews (1999) argue that utilizing a work/family practice may stigmatize the beneficiary (male

or female) and become a subtle though fundamental barrier to career advancement. (In this, work/family policies may be similar in effect to other redistributive policies aimed at advancing the career success of those they serve.) In their study of female upper-level public administrators in state government, Newman and Matthews found that the majority of women who had made it into elite positions were either unmarried or did not have children living at home. In other words, they did not have the need to use work/family practices. Whittock et al.'s study (2002) of the career advancement of women in nursing reveals that the use of flexibility and family-friendly practices by women results in females falling behind male colleagues in terms of career development and promotion prospects, with managers selecting males over females (and men thus surpassing women) even in this female-dominated field. As a consequence, "demoralisation linked to poor career advancement and training opportunities has stronger impact on intention to quit than workload or pay" (Antonazzo et al. 2000).

Few studies have examined the relation between usage of work/life practices and career progression. Furthermore, existing studies have not directly sought the input of women regarding the use of work/life practices. The present study contributes to the literature by specifically surveying women in state executive-level positions to inquire whether the utilization of work/life practices contributed to their progression.

METHOD AND FINDINGS

Method

As part of a larger study examining women's career progression in state agencies¹ the impact of work/life

¹ See D'Agostino, M. J. & Levine, H. (2010).

practices on women's career progression was examined. Using the professional online survey system, Psychdata, online surveys were sent to female heads of administrative agencies in 50 states. The identified sample frame, *Council of State Governments Directory III: Administrative Officials* (2008), is a biennial publication listing the administrative heads by type of agency (function). The listing of agency heads was current as of May 2008, the year before the one in which the survey was conducted. Given the limited population of approximately 1,200 female agency heads, the exploratory nature of the study, and the research objective, a purposive non-probability sampling method was used (Singleton and Straits 2010). Although non-probability sampling poses challenges to variability and controlling for bias when conducting exploratory research and working with small samples, sample selection is best left to expert judgment rather than chance (Singleton and Straits 2010). For the purposes of our study, the 779 female agency heads with email addresses were selected; the sample included women working in state governments in all 50 states. A total of 109 emails were returned as undeliverable. The response rate was 9.1 percent (61 responses). Given the use of a purposive sample and the exploratory nature of the research, a low response rate is acceptable since the objective is to learn more about the problem and not to generalize back to the population (Singleton and Straits 2010). The survey instrument, which consisted of 33 questions, was designed to measure the utilization of practices on a four-point Likert scale. Six questions measured the work/life practices. Demographics were collected regarding each respondent's ethnicity/race, marital status, care-giving responsibilities, terminal degree, the number of years she had been at her present position, the number of years she had been at her current agency, and the title that best described her position. Data from the

survey instrument were entered into SPSS for descriptive and regression analysis.

For the purpose of this study, the independent composite variable, *work/family utilization* is defined as use of dependent care services and flexible work option practices, programs and initiatives. *Dependent care services* include childcare services, dependent-care services other than childcare, paid leave to take care of dependents, and reimbursement for dependent care. *Flexible work options* include telecommuting, part-time work, flexible work hours, and job sharing. *Utilization* is defined as use of work/life practices, programs, and initiatives resulting from policy implementation. Work/family utilization was observed via four-point Likert scale survey questions that enabled participants to choose more than one answer.

The dependent variable, *career progression of women*, is defined as women who have achieved the position of agency head—including director, commissioner or chairperson—at the state level. This definition is a standard classification in past and present gender research (Brudney, Hebert, & Wright, 2000). Although the respondents are currently employed as agency heads, for the purposes of this study, this variable is measured by the length of time each respondent was at her agency prior to attaining executive position from the amount of time they have worked at the agency.

Control Variables

In order to achieve gender equality organizational policies such as lack of mentoring directly affect women's ability to progress in organizations (Guy, 2003). Likewise, past research on the implementation of diversity policies has demonstrated their positive impact on women's career progression to executive levels (Cooper Jackson, 2001). Therefore, this study controls for 1.) promotional and 2.) diversity utilization policies. *Promotional utilization*,

measured using survey questions included line position, training and development and gender mentoring; *diversity utilization* included questions surrounding diversity awareness, awards or recognitions, active AA/EEO committee office, targeted recruiting of women for non-managerial positions and diversity efforts given public exposure inside and outside the agency.

Findings

Of the 61 women who responded, 57 percent were married, 6.5 percent were divorced, and 4.9% had never been married: 73 percent had caretaker responsibilities and 34 percent had no caretaker responsibilities (i.e., for a child, parent, or other relative). Respondents had been working in their present executive position nearly 12 years, on average, and had reached executive-level position in an average of 7.2 years.

Table 1

Demographics

Survey Respondent Demographics: n=61			
Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Caretaker status
Average age 53.6	Caucasian 75.0%	Currently Married 57%	No caretaker responsibilities 34%
Age range 32–71	Black/African American 4.2%	Divorced 6.5%	Caretaker responsibilities 73%
Median age 55.0	Hispanic 4.2%	Never Married 4.9%	
	Asian 2.1%		

While 37.5 percent of women who achieved executive-level positions embraced the opportunity to work

flexible hours, only 8 percent opted to work part time (see Table 2).

Table 2

Work/Family Utilization

Dependent-care Services		Flexible work options	
Childcare services	0.0%	Telecommuting	20.8%
Dependent-care services other than childcare	0.0%	Option to work part time	8.3%
Paid leave to take care of a dependent	20.8%	Flexible work hours	37.5%
Reimbursement for dependent-care services	6.3%	Job sharing	8.3%

In addition, as indicated in Table 3, formal work/family policies have proliferated widely in state government agencies. Fifty percent of women reported that their agencies maintain a formal policy on dependent-care services, and 78.5 percent reported flexible work schedule policies.

Table 3
Utilization of Formal and Informal Practices

Indicator	% of Policy formulated, formal	% of Policy formulated, informal	% Utilization of practices
Work family policies/practices			
<i>Dependent care services</i>	50.00	14.20	
Childcare services			0.0
Dependent care services other than childcare			0.0
Paid leave to take care of a dependent			33.3
Reimbursement for dependent care services			33.3
<i>Flexible Work</i>	78.50	14.30%	
Telecommuting			50.0
Option to work part time			20.0
Flexible work hours			50.0

Further analysis using regression analysis [Table 4] revealed that the relationship between career mobility and utilization of work/family practices does not appear to be statistically significant. In addition, the time it took respondents who did utilize work/family practices to reach upper-level management decreased by .037 years.

Table 4: Regression Model

Model 1: Career Progression = $a + B_1$ (Work/Family Utilization) + Control Variables [B_2 (Diversity Utilization) + B_3 (Promotional Utilization)]

	B	SE _B	β	t	P
Dependent variable: Career Progression					
Independent variables					
Constant	4.991	1.764		2.830	.006
Family-friendly utilization	-.005	1.066	.005	.037	.971
Diversity Utilization	-.243	.892	.243	1.880	.65*
Promotional Utilization	.167	.524	.167	1.223	.226

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Work/life policies are one of the key tools to achieving career progression. However, implementation of policies is only a part of the broader puzzle. In order to make sense of the work/life quandary this study examines the utilization of available organizational practices by women in state government.

Although formal programs for dependent-care services and flexible work schedules are prevalent, and 73% of the respondents had caretaker responsibilities, the usage of related practices remains minimal despite the prevalence of caretaker responsibilities within our sample. As discussed by Konnard and Linnehan (1999) these results might be explained by the ongoing perception at the organizational level that view such policies as only

women's issues, rather than a matter for society at large. Such a stereotype is a barrier to understanding that work/life policies and practices are geared toward addressing broader societal issues and creating a better quality of life, beyond childcare or eldercare, not specific for family or women.

What's more, as supported by the literature (Soni 2000) the diversity utilization control variable was significant; that is women who utilized diversity practices would reach executive level positions in less time. This additionally supports Konnard and Linneham (1999) as diversity policies may be seen as targeting a larger population than only women; and therefore have fewer negative career implications than work/family policies. This finding lends support to the notion that the framing, and development of policies and practices should be purposefully marketed toward broader society and not a specific group.

Beyond choosing available practices based on career cost, our findings support the assertion that women choose to utilize practices also based on financial cost. Women in executive level positions are more likely to utilize paid leave, telecommuting and flex-work options, instead of working part-time or utilizing child-dependent services or reimbursement practices. Although these findings are in accordance with the literature (Kirby and Krone 2002) which suggest that choosing such practices carry negative career consequences, they also carry financial consequences. That is working part time may imply a cut in salary; child-dependent services may carry employee costs; reimbursement services may only be partial. Such existing factors may deter their utilization. Future research should examine the basis for why certain options are preferred to others. This could contribute to better understanding and uncovering factors that can be incorporated into formulating more work/family policies

that would be utilized.

This study was an initial attempt to make sense of women's career progression by examining the utilization of work/life policies. Future research should continue to move beyond the already-documented obstacles to utilizing work/life practices (such as aspects of organizational culture) and could uncover other unacknowledged reasons available work/life policies are not utilized. Researchers need to initiate dialogue with both men and women in order to deepen our understanding of women's career-progression quandaries and solve the puzzle.

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