



Work-life benefits and organizational attachment: Self-interest utility and signaling theory models

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Received 24 June 2007

Available online 4 January 2008

Abstract

This study examines two competing theoretical explanations for why work-life policies such as dependent care assistance and flexible schedules influence organizational attachment. The self-interest utility model posits that work-life policies influence organizational attachment because employee use of these policies facilitates attachment. The signaling model posits that these policies facilitate attachment indirectly through perceived organizational support. Regression analyses explored both models using a sample of 286 full time employees. Results supported both the signaling model and the self-interest utility model. For women, the availability of work-life benefits influenced organizational attachment irrespective of use, and these effects were mediated by support perceptions, consistent with the signaling model. In contrast, the self-interest model was also supported for men only. Specifically, the availability and use of flexible schedules interacted in predicting affective commitment among men such that flexible schedule availability was positively related to commitment only when use was high and negatively related to commitment when use was low. Dependent care assistance and schedule flexibility also interacted in predicting affective commitment, turnover intentions, and perceived organizational support, suggesting that the effect of policy implementation may depend on what other policies are already offered by the organization. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for theory and organizational practice.

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Keywords: Work-life; Employee benefits; Work–family; Employee attitudes; Organizational support; Sex differences

1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly offering work-life benefits (WLBs) such as dependent care assistance and flexible work schedules to aid employees in managing work and family (Friedman, 1990). Studies have found that work-life benefits facilitate organizational attachment by increasing organizational commitment (Grover & Crooker, 1995; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999) and lowering intentions to turnover (Behson, 2005; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Thompson et al., 1999). However, whether it is the mere availability of these policies

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or their use that leads to these positive effects is less clear. This study considers two theoretical explanations for why WLBs enhance organizational attachment.

1.1. Work-life benefits

Organizations often offer WLBs with the goal of facilitating positive outcomes (Osterman, 1995), so understanding whether they actually do so is important. This study examines dependent care assistance (DC) and schedule flexibility (SF), two commonly explored WLBs (e.g., Casper & Buffardi, 2004; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Rau & Hyland, 2002). It is important to examine distinct WLBs because different benefits may have unique effects on organizational outcomes (Grover & Crooker, 1995) and may interact in predicting outcomes (Arthur, 2003; Casper & Buffardi, 2004).

Studies have found that WLBs relate to important outcomes, including increased affective commitment and decreased turnover intentions. For example, onsite childcare has been related to reduced turnover (Auerbach, 1988; Youngblood & Chambers-Cook, 1984), and increased organizational commitment (Goldberg, Greenberg, Koch-Jones, O'Neil, & Hamill, 1989; Kossek & Nichol, 1992). Studies have also found that providing childcare information is related to reduced turnover intentions and increased affective commitment (Grover & Crooker, 1995). Family leave has been linked to higher commitment and lower turnover intentions (Thompson et al., 1999). Finally, flextime and compressed work schedules have also been found to relate to lower turnover intentions and enhanced affective commitment (Allen, 2001; Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). In short, research suggests that the availability of DC and SF positively relate to affective commitment and negatively relate to turnover intentions.

H1: Availability of DC (H1a) and SF (H1b) positively relate to affective commitment.

H2: Availability of DC (H2a) and SF (H2b) negatively relate to turnover intentions.

1.2. Why do work-life benefits affect attachment?

Although research suggests that WLBs relate to organizational attachment, the mechanism by which this occurs is less well-understood. Theory suggests two ways in which WLBs might influence commitment and turnover. A self-interest model (Lind & Tyler, 1988) suggests WLBs enhance attachment when employees find them personally useful. Findings from several studies support this notion. Employees who stand to gain from WLBs view them more favorably than those who do not (Grover, 1991). Use of WLBs is related to lower family-to-work conflict (Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005). Users of on-site childcare are more positive about managing work and child care than non-users (Kossek & Nichol, 1992). Users of WLBs also have lower turnover intentions (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006) and perceive WLBs as more fair than non-users (Parker & Allen, 2001). If use of WLBs accounts for their positive effects, the effect of WLB availability on outcomes should be moderated by use such that WLBs have a positive effect for those with high use and little or no effect for those with little or no use. This self-interest utility model is depicted in Fig. 1.

H3: The DC availability-commitment (H3a), SF availability-commitment (H3b), DC availability-turnover intention (H3c), and SF availability-turnover intention (H3d) relationships are stronger when policy use is higher.

Other studies suggest that it is what WLBs represent that drives their positive effects. Grover and Crooker (1995) found that the availability of WLBs was related to enhanced commitment and reduced turnover intentions among all employees, not only WLB users. They suggested that WLBs influence attachment by signaling that the organization cares about employee well-being. This is consistent with signaling theory which argues that observable actions by an organization are interpreted as signals of less observable characteristics (Spence, 1973). WLBs are observable actions that may signal that the organization is caring.

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