

The Effectiveness of Family-Friendly Policies and Practices in Hong Kong

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Abstract: Hong Kong is one of the most efficient cities in the world. Its have a reputation for being workaholics and high stress burden upon employees. Knowing that a caring employer can adopt appropriate family-friendly policies and practices (FFPP) to help employees achieve work-family balance. There are several successful examples in implementing these policies in western countries. However, does Hong Kong laissez-faire economic suitable for adopting such FFPP? "Economics and Wellbeing Research" of HKSYU conducts a survey to focus on determining the factors influencing the launch of FFPP as well as its relationship with workers' quality of life in Hong Kong.

Introduction

Nowadays, work and family are the key domains for most of the people. People join to the workplace for different reasons, for example, the economic reason, social reason, or to achieve the self-fulfillment. A dual-career person may not only face pressures and stress from work, but may also need to share family responsibilities. Moreover, the importance of the work is raising and people tend to spend more time on it. People may even need to spend longer time at work than to their family. Many people report on the

imbalance between work and family, and even detract from employees' quality of life; more research has tended to look into the work-family conflict.

Theoretical Framework

Work-Family Conflict

There is a considerable body of literature on employees' experiences of work-family conflict in Western countries, for example, the studies by Gutek *et al.* (1991), Aryee (1992), Eagle *et al.* (1998) and Barrah *et al.* (2004). Extensive research on the antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict has been carried out over the past few decades. Identifying the specific antecedents of work-family conflict can help produce an understanding of the subtleties of how work-family stress spills over (Eagle *et al.*, 1998; Law, 2008).

Historically, Kahn *et al.*'s (1964) role theory provides a strong underpinning for the study of work-family conflict. This theory assumes that mutually incompatible pressures between roles, and conflicting expectations associated with different roles, have detrimental effects on wellbeing. Frone and Rice (1987) further linked the role

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and involvement. They suggest an individual with a high role involvement in one role, for example at work, may find it more difficult to comply with the expectations associated with other roles, for example in the family, leading to conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) further define the work-family conflict in a more specific way by adding three forms of conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict and behavior-based conflict.

The societal changes have created a potential interference and conflict between the competing demands of work and family for resources (Peeters *et al.*, 2005). Time and energy are commonly perceived as limited resources. Most literature has shown that work-family conflict in terms of work time has a negative impact on its employees (Law, 2008). Excessive time demands at work will mean this resource needs to be borrowed from the family (Gutek, *et al.*, 1991; Shaffer and Joplin, 2001). In particular, it may lead to problems with the family role and may even affect the quality of life of an individual. For this reason, most work-family conflict focuses on time issue (Major *et al.*, 2002; Luk and Shaffer, 2005).

Specifically, time-based conflict occurs when multiple roles compete for a person's time. Regarding this concept, several research found time-based work-family conflict to be positively related to the number of working hours (Kinunnen and Mauno, 1998), the amount and frequency of overtime, and the presence and irreg-

ularity of shiftwork (Law, 2008). In addition, Elloy and Smith (2004) found that time-based conflict is also linked to role overload and role conflict. Major *et al.*'s (2002) study of the Fortune Company showed that long work hours are significantly positively related to work-family conflict. There are negative consequences for families and for workers who struggle to balance the demands of work and home life. More examples, like the hotel case studies by Cleveland *et al.* (2007) and Bohle *et al.* (2004) showed evidence that the long working hours in the hotel industry create both individual and family stress, and caused great disruption to family and social lives and a poor work-life balance.

Furthermore, with the pressure from organizations downsizing, redundancy, and work intensification, employees face increased workloads and are required to work overtime in order to maintain employment (Law, 2008). Research showed that frequency of overtime work is another antecedent of work-family conflict (Lewis and Cooper, 1988; Law, 2008). Chan and Chan's (2002) study in Hong Kong showed that nearly 30% of respondents needed to work overtime on a regular basis. This increased their work-family conflict, with nearly a quarter of respondents claiming their family members had complained of the lack of time they had available to spend with families because of work.

Family-Friendly policies and practices

On the other hands, several researchers believe that there is a need to explore the ways in

which employees achieve a balance between the demands of work and family life. For example, Cohen and Wills' (1985) research on social support showed the positive association between social support and well-being in terms of both the beneficial effect of support (main- or direct-effect) and a process of support protecting persons from the potentially adverse effects of stressful events (a buffering effect). It is believed that social support significantly and effectively helps individuals cope with stress. Furthermore, a number of researchers have found that levels of employee satisfaction can be a critical variable in the health of an organization (Vodanovich and Pitorowski, 2006).

Knowing that the employer has concerned for their wellbeing, employees will be happier, more committed to their job and more loyal. An organization's policies are most likely to be a source that affects employees' dissatisfaction level (Herzberg, 1957). A caring and considerate employer can adopt appropriate family-friendly policies and practices to help employees achieve work-family balance and a concern of those interested in the quality of working life and its relation to a broader quality of life (Guest, 2001; Siu, 2006).

Family-friendly policies and practices (FFPP) refer to formal or informal terms and conditions that are enacted by the company and exceed the statutory minimum, and are designed to enable an employee to combine caring responsibilities and personal needs with business objectives in paid employment (Rapaport *et al.*, 1998; Siu,

2006). For example, the assistance with child and dependent care, employee support programs, counselling and career path alternatives, flexi-time and paternity benefits (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Elloy and Smith, 2004). They are important to minimize stress, and can help lower levels of work-family conflict through the conforming of normative working hours and have greater opportunities to enjoy personal activities and the flexibility to shift work to non-traditional hours, which consequently increased employees' work productivity (Law, 2008).

Organizations that attempt to support work-family balance do so with the aim of helping the employees in integrating work and family roles successfully and to reduce the strain of multiple roles (Lewis, 1997). Family-friendly policies and practices may enhance organizational attachment even amongst workers with no current dependent care responsibilities, because the employer is perceived as caring for its workers (Harker, 1996). It leads to higher organization commitment (Hochschild, 1997) and job satisfaction (Scandura and Lankau, 1997). Family-friendly policies and practices which were beneficial in managing employees' lives, and which were intended to provide a win-win situation to benefit employers, workers and families (Lewis and Cooper, 1996; Raabe, 1996).

There are several advantages and successful examples in implementing family-friendly employment practices in western countries. However, due to differences in the cultural context (Hofst-

ede, 2001), organizational practices and family structure are likely to vary between societies (Law, 2008). Thus, it leads to the hypothesis of this study to determine the work-family conflict and the effectiveness of family-friendly policies and practices in Hong Kong, the Eastern case.

Hong Kong is one of the most efficient cities in the world. It is particularly noted for its high degree of globalization and its capitalist economy, a business-friendly environment, well-established and comprehensive financial networks (*Invest Hong Kong*, 2005). Hong Kong workers have a reputation for being workaholics (Chan and Chan, 2002). According to the results of a questionnaire survey in Hong Kong on 'Hong Kong Work and Life Balance', which indicated that over 61% of respondents need to work overtime and average working hours were 51.3 hours per week, which was far in excess of the international recognized standard (Cheung, 2006). This has placed a high stress burden upon employees, especially in terms of long working days and hours due to competitive environment (Lo *et al.*, 2003; Law, 2008).

Aryee *et al.* (1999) further indicated that in Hong Kong women are perceived as responsible for family caring and child rearing in general, despite the fact that they are now also economic providers for the family. Venter (2002) emphasizes the strong need for financial security in Hong Kong that encourages dual-earner families to seek to increase both salaries. Siu's (2005) research indicated that 40% of the workforce in

Hong Kong feels either 'high' or 'very high' work pressure.

On the other hand, Hong Kong SAR government has worked as an initiative leader of implementing the family-friendly policy, for example, the five-day week arrangement, which has been introduced into the civil service by phrases since July 2006. It aims to reduce work pressure and to improve the quality of family life of workers.

However, does Hong Kong laissez-faire economic suitable for adopting such family-friendly policies and practices? This research focuses to determine the factors influencing the launch of family-friendly policies and practices in Hong Kong. Further, this research investigates the effectiveness of family-friendly practices and policies and its relationship with workers' quality of life in Hong Kong.

Methodology

Data were collected by means of a survey conducted by the Economics and Wellbeing Research Project at Hong Kong Shue Yan University in the last two weeks of October 2008 using randomly selected telephone numbers from residential telephone directories. A total of 1,828 adult respondents with a job were successfully interviewed with the marginal sampling error of $\pm 2.34\%$ at a 95% confidence level. The average weekly working hours of the respondents are 45 hours and on average give their family 3 hours per day. Since the majority of the population of Hong Kong is Chinese, the original question-

naires were written in Chinese.

In addition, this paper further uses the Ordered Probit Model as the empirical tool to get a full picture of the relationship between satisfaction of work-family balance and some of its determinants. Ordered Probit Model is a kind of empirical tool that designed to handle ordinal data.

Results

The questionnaire consisted of three main parts, the first part collecting data on respondents’ change in work-family balance hours, their subject feeling on work-family balance and their subjective well-being (happiness).

Table 1 and 2 show that even though the respondents spent longer time at work and less time was available to spend with family member, the respondents still have a higher percentage

on satisfaction (happiness) than dissatisfaction (unhappiness) on the time distribution between work and family.

One possible explanation may due to the financial situation and living standard in Hong Kong. This may relate to the economic and working culture in Hong Kong along the historical background. People are required and accepted to spend longer time at work in exchange to maintain their position and earn of living. Furthermore, even financial tsunami started in September 2008, respondents still had not suffering serious from the lay-off impact during the research period. Hong Kong unemployment rate still maintained at 3.4% for July-September which was enjoying the fruitful result on the first-three quarters of 2008. Thus, the happiness index was still maintained and was not interference from financial tsunami as expected.

Table 1: Change in Work-Family Balance Hours

	Reduce	No Change	Increase
Are there any changes in your weekly working hours this year in compare with last year?	15.86%	45.35%	38.79%
Are there any changes in the time you give your family this year in compare with last year?	33.21%	52.57%	14.22%
	More to Family	No Change	More to Work
If you are allowed to change your work-family time, what are you going to do?	54.60%	36.00%	9.41%

Table 2: Satisfaction of Work-Family time arrangement and Happiness

Are you satisfied with your current work-family time arrangement?				
Very unsatisfied 5.20%	Unsatisfied 23.96%	indifference 30.69%	Satisfied 36.71%	Very Satisfied 3.45%
Are you happier now than last year?				
Certainly Unhappier 4.87%	Unhappier 21.06%	The same 40.65%	Happier 28.56%	Certainly Happier 4.87%

Table 3: Working and Family Condition

	Yes	No
Do your company follow five days working policy?	28.88%	71.12%
Do your job need you to go shifting?	22.59%	77.41%
Do your job have a fixed working hour?	71.01%	28.99%
Do you need to take care of your children?	25.93%	74.07%
Do you need to take care of any elder dependence?	17.29%	82.71%

The second part of the questionnaire collects information on the work-family policy and family condition facing the respondents.

Table 3 shows that about one third of the respondents' company follow five days working policy. After all these years of promoting five days working, only few employers can enjoy this work-family policy. Table 3 also shows that about 22% of the respondents' job need to go shift, one fourth of the respondents need to take care their child and about 17% of the respondents need to take care their elder dependence. This indicates that the work-family condition facing by the public is quite stressful, some of them need to look after their dependence, some of them need to go shift but there is little work-family balance policy implemented by their company. Indeed in the current survey, over 90% of the respondents claim that their company do not

offer any other supportive work-family policies, like childcare, eldercare or counselling service.

The last part of the questionnaire collects demographic information, such as gender, Job nature, education level, household income level, marital status and age, of the respondents.

Ordered Probit Model¹⁾

Furthermore, as mentioned in the methodology, this paper uses the standard ordered Probit model as the modeling tool to take into account the ordinal data. Statistical summary only provide the facts and the correlation coefficient only consider two variables at a time. To get a full picture of the relationship between satisfaction of work-family balance and some of its determinants, Ordered Probit Model is used appropriately.

1) Technical details of the ordered probit model can be found in Greene (2000).

Table 4: Notation and Description of the Model

Notation		Description
Dependent Variable		
WFB	Are you satisfied with your current work-family time arrangement?	
Independent Variables		
Demographic variables	AGE	Age (1=18-24, 2=25-34, 3=35-44, 4=45-54, 5=55 or above)
	EDU	Education (1=Primary school or below, 2=Secondary school, 3=Post-Secondary or equivalent, 4=College or University and above)
	GENDER	Gender (1=Male, 2=Female)
	MARR	Marital status (1=Married, 2= Unmarried)
	JOB	Job nature (1= full time, 2=part-time)
	INCOME	Monthly Household income in HK\$ (1=Below \$4000, 2=\$4000 to \$7999, 3=\$8000 to \$14999, 4=\$15000 to \$29999, 5=\$30000 or above)
Working Condition	FIVE	Do your company adapt five days working policy? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
	SHIFT	Do you need you to go shifting? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
	FIX	Do you have a fixed working hour? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
	CWORKHR	Are there any changes in your weekly working hours this year in compare with last year? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
Family condition	CHILD	Do you need to take care of any children? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
	ELDER	Do you need to take care of any elder dependent? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
	CFAMHR	Are there any changes in the time you give your family this year in compare with last year? (1 = No, 2= Yes)
Work -Family hours	WHR	On average how many hours do you work every week?
	FAMHR	How many hours per day are you going to give your family on working day?

Table 4 provides the notation and descriptions of working condition, family condition and work-family hours, considered in this paper. the determinants, namely demographic factors,

Table 5: Empirical Result

Dependent Variable: WFB			
	Independent Variables	Full Model Coefficient(Std. Error)	Adjusted Model Coefficient(Std. Error)
Demographic variables	AGE	-0.0376 (0.0288)	-
	EDU	0.0470** (0.0230)	0.0540** (0.0211)
	GENDER	0.0030 (0.0510)	-
	INCOME	-0.0041 (0.0110)	-
	JOB	0.1129** (0.0531)	0.1229** (0.0523)
	MARR	0.0546 (0.0587)	-
Working Condition	CWORKHR	-0.1795** (0.0395)	-0.1780** (0.0393)
	FIVE	0.0495 (0.0295)	-
	FIX	-0.0187 (0.0603)	-
	SHIFT	-0.1423** (0.0650)	-0.1534** (0.0605)

	CFAMHR	0.3700** (0.0425)	0.3716** (0.0424)
Family condition	CHILD	-0.2007** (0.0775)	-0.1906** (0.0642)
	ELDER	-0.2024** (0.0679)	-0.2146** (0.0673)
Work- Family hours	WHR	-0.0115** (0.0018)	-0.0119** (0.0017)
	FAMHR	0.0812** (0.0139)	0.0793** (0.0139)

Note: ** is significant at the 0.05 level

In Table 5, the full model report the coefficient of all determinants considered, while the adjusted model delete the insignificant determinants. Table 5 indicates that the coefficient for JOB is positive and significant. This indicates that respondents that are having a part-time job have higher satisfaction in work-family balance than those that have a full time job. It is obvious that part time respondents can put more time to their family, thus improve their work-family balance. This can also be seen in the negative significant coefficient of the variables working hours (WHR) and change in working hour (CWORKHR). Increases in working hours reduce the satisfaction of work- family balance. On the other hand the positive significant coefficient of the variables family hours (FAMHR) and change in family hours (CFAMHR) indicate that increases in family hour improve the satisfaction of the work-family balance. This is similar to the finding on Table 1, although, Hong Kong people have a higher tolerance on time uneven distribution at work and family, respondents indicated, in Table 1, that if they have the chance to choose, they would prefer to spare longer time with their family. Additionally, in Table 5, the coefficient of edu-

cation level is significantly different from zero. With higher educational background, respondents would like to express their talent and knowledge. They would prefer to achieve their self-esteem and even self-actualization. Hence, they report to have higher satisfaction than the low education respondents do, even though both high education and low education respondents face the same stressful work-family condition.

Table 5 also shows that respondents that need to go shift and/or those that need to take care their dependence (child and/or elder) are less satisfy with their work-family balance. However, the variable that represents five days work policy (FIVE) or fixed work hour (FIX) are insignificant, thus indicates that these work-family policy does not significantly affect respondents' satisfaction of work-family balance.

Conclusion

The empirical result in this paper shows the satisfaction of work-family balance does not affected by five days work or flexible work hours. One possible reason is that the people in Hong Kong actually work more than their office hour, thus five days work or flexible work hour can-

not reduce their working hours or increase their family hours. Indeed, the core determinants of the satisfaction of work-family balance lies on the number of work and family hours. Therefore, any work-family policy such as maximum working hours that limits the working hour can help to improve the satisfaction of work-family balance of the public.

Another point to be notice in the empirical result is that, satisfaction of work-family balance tends to decrease as respondents need to take care child or elder. Thus, to improve the satisfaction of work-family balance, there is a need of childcare services and/or elder care services that help the employers to look after their dependence.

Through this exploratory study, it is hoped this most recent research will shed greater light on those factors contributing to work-family conflict in Hong Kong and, in turn, facilitate the formulation of policies to effectively tackle this issue, and enrich the knowledge of management by adding information about the East.

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