

Managing the Work and Family Roles. Does Flexibility Reduce the Negative Interference? An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. *Balancing work and family demands has become a great challenge for employees. By providing flexible benefits, organizations actively engage in endeavours aimed at reducing the negative interference between the two life spheres. Even if some empirical studies have examined the effects of family supportive initiatives, focusing on flexibility, however, the findings tend to lack consistency. If flexible benefits are traditionally associated with reduced levels of work-family conflict, in some studies no significant results have been reported. Another line of research suggests that flexibility can actually increase the negative work-family interface. From this perspective, the current study examines the relationship between the flexibility benefits used and work-family conflict, focusing especially on the role flextime and telecommuting. Using flexible benefits is negatively associated with time and strain-based conflict, the effects of flextime and telecommuting varying accordingly to the type of conflict examined. Limitations of the current study and future research directions are examined.*

Keywords: *family supportive initiatives, flexible benefits, flextime, telecommuting, negative work-family interface.*

Introduction

Work-family conflict is considered a key topic of organizational research, an array of studies exploring its consequences, such as reduced job and life satisfaction, impaired health physical or mental health, or poor performance (e.g., Bruck, Allen & Spector, 2002; Butler & Skattebo, 2004; Frone, 2000; Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1997; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Traditionally assessed in a multidimensional manner (Carlson, Kacmar & Williams, 2000), work-family conflict (*WFC*) is a bidirectional construct (Bellavia & Frone, 2005) that includes three forms (time, strain and behaviour based conflict) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985 as cited in Brough & O'Driscoll, 2005).

A great interest resides in examining the predictors of the conflict, empirical (e.g., Bruck & Allen, 2003) or meta-analytic studies (Michel, Kotrba,

Mitchelson, Clark & Baltes, 2011) being published in the last decades. Big Five traits (Wayne, Musisca & Fleeson, 2004), workaholism (Russo & Waters, 2006), coping styles (Andreassi, 2011), or negative affectivity and type A behavior (Bruck & Allen, 2003) have been explored as individual sources of WFC (Bellavia & Frone, 2005), whereas family role stressors (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999 as cited in Geurts & Demerouti, 2003) or spousal support (Aycan & Eskin, 2005) have traditionally been considered family predictors. Among the job and organizational variables that were tested as WFC antecedents, work demands (Lu, Gilmour, Kao & Huang, 2006) and job characteristics (Butler, Grzywacz, Bass & Linney, 2005), or organizational support (Foley, Hang-Yue & Lui, 2005) can be mentioned.

In modern organizations, managing the demands of job and family roles has become a great challenge for employees. A key concept emerged, namely work-family balance, traditionally defined as “an accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his/her role-related partners in the work and family domains” (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p.458). Empirical research linked work-family balance to job satisfaction (Saltzstein, Ting & Saltzstein, 2001) or the quality of life (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003), underlining its significance in assuring individual and organizational effectiveness. Thus, personal and organizational initiatives (Frone, 2003) that promote balance have become extensively examined. A strategic role is held by the family-supportive programs and policies. According to Bellavia and Frone (2005, p.138), organizations which actively engage in alleviating the work-family negative interface “would be wise to offer a variety of family-supportive programs and encourage their employees to utilize them”. Among these, “flexible work arrangements (...), leaves (...), dependent-care assistance and and general resource services (...)” are traditionally included (Frone, 2003, pp.157-158).

Along with dependent care benefits, flexible work arrangements (FWAs) represent the most widely employed formal organizational practices (Allen, 2013) aimed at reducing the negative interference between work and family life (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Flexible work arrangements “enable employees to vary, at least to some extent, when and/or where they work or to otherwise diverge from traditional working hours” (Lewis, 2003, p.1). Traditionally, FWAs imply offering flexibility related to the location or schedule of work (Grzywacz, Jones & Casey, 2009). The flexible work arrangements typically examined in empirical studies include part-time work, compressed work week, flextime or telecommuting (Allen, 2001; Masuda et al., 2012), Allen (2013) suggesting that various studies have

documented their positive effects. For example, schedule flexibility represents a longitudinal predictor of health (Grzywacz et al., 2009), whereas the availability and use of FWAs are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction ($r=.13$ vs. $r=.14$) and organizational commitment ($r=.16$ vs $r=.15$) or lower levels turnover intentions ($r=-.11$ vs $r=-.10$) (Allen, 2001, p.424). Also, the relationship between FWAs' availability and organizational outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and turnover intentions) has been explored cross-culturally (Masuda et al., 2012).

However, when examining the role of FWAs in reducing work-family conflict, mixed results emerge (Allen, 2013; Allen & Shockley, 2009). Allen (2001, p.424) provided evidences according to which the use of flex benefits was negatively related to WFC ($r=-.14$); also, negative correlations have been reported between the availability of some FWAs and some forms of work-family interference (WIF), the relationships being however documented only on specific cultural samples (e.g., Masuda et al., 2012).

Two FWAs are traditionally explored in empirical studies, namely telecommuting and flextime (Allen & Shockley, 2009). Various authors provide evidences according to which flextime (e.g., Shockley & Allen, 2007) or telecommuting (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) are associated with lower levels of WIF, the relationship being stronger for flextime (Shockley & Allen, 2007).

The positive work-family interface has also been explored, McNall, Masuda and Nicklin (2010) reporting that FWAs are associated with work-family enrichment. From another perspective, meta-analytic results underline a negative relationship between flexibility (e.g., schedule flexibility) and both WFC directions (CMF: $\rho= -.30$; CFM: $\rho=-.17$) (Byron, 2005, p.184). However, other studies indicate a detrimental role of FWAs in managing job and family pressures. For example, flextime can increase work-family conflict (Haar, Spell & O'Driscoll, 2009), and telework augment time-based FWC (Lapierre & Allen, 2006).

Kossek (2005) as cited in Kossek, Lautsch and Eaton (2006) draws attention to the fact that a clear distinction must be made in empirical studies between the availability and the acces to work-family benefits. For example, if FWA's use is negatively related to WFC, no similar results have been reported in the case of FWA's availability (Allen, 2001, p.424).

Starting from this theoretical framework, the current research examines the relationship between the use of flexible work arrangements and the three forms of work-family conflict. Also, differences related to reporting time,

strain and behavior-based WFC were assessed through the lens of flextime and telecommuting utilization. Thus, three main research questions emerged:

1. What is the relationship between FWA use and the forms of WFC (time, strain and behavior-based)?
2. Are lower levels of time-based, strain-based and behavior-based WFC experienced by employees using flextime?
3. Do telecommuters report reduced levels of time-based, strain-based and behavior-based WFC?

Method

Sample

The research is based on a non-probabilistic sample, consisting of 102 participants. 85.3% of the participants are women and 14.7% men, with ages ranging between 26 and 57 years old ($M=36.04$, $S.D=7.04$). Regarding the marital status, 77.5% are married (13.7% in couple relationships and 10.8% divorced or separated). 72.5% of the participants have children, and 9.8% other dependant care responsibilities. In what concerns their occupational status, 91.2% are employed in various organizations, whereas 6.9% are self-employed (a small percentage working as volunteers or being on maternity leave). 40.2% of the participants work in the public sector, and 59.8% in the private sector, 21.6% occupying management position. A significant percentage works in Education and Higher Education (21.6%) sector, whereas a smaller number in IT (10.8%), Human Resources (6.9%), Health (3.9%), Accounting (4.9%) and Banking (4.9%). The average organizational tenure of the participants is of 7.94 years ($SD=6.83$). Based on this sample composition, a research limitation must be clearly stated from the beginning. Thus, having in view the heterogeneous sample structure, it is impossible to examine the moderating effects of demographical and organizational variables in the relationship between FWAs and WFC (for example the role of gender or occupational sector).

Measures

Work-family conflict was examined using three subscales from the Carlson et al. (2000) WFC scale. The scale was translated and adapted in Romanian (Șulea, Vîrgă, & Galben, 2010). Time-based, strain-based, and behavior based WFC were each measured with three items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5= *strongly agree*), higher scores indicating higher

levels of WFC. Cronbach alpha values ranged from .90 (*Time-based WFC*) to .88 (*Strain-Based WFC*), and .87 (*Behavior-based WFC*).

Flexible work arrangements were assessed using a list by developed Allen (2001) that included flextime, compressed workweek, telecommuting, and part-time work. Employees were asked to mark each benefit that they use or had previously used when working in the current organization. The responses regarding each FWA were dummy coded (1-*It is used* and 0-*It isn't used*). According to Allen (2001), a total flexible work arrangement usage score can be computed, by summing the number of benefits checked by the participants. FWA use was negatively associated with work-family conflict and turnover intentions, and positively with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Allen, 2001).

The participants also reported the average number of hours worked during a week. Additional data were collected concerning various demographical and organizational variables such gender, age, marital status, the number of children living at home, other caretaker responsibilities, type of organization, management level, or tenure.

Procedure

The measures were administered online, being included in a larger survey that examined work-family conflict. The research is based on a convenience, non-probabilistic, sampling procedure. Invitations were sent by four external collaborators to individuals who complied with the work-family research criteria. The participants were assured that the responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

Results

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Means and standard deviations for each variable and the matrix correlation are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations among study variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Work hours	45.35	7.85	-			
2. FWA used	1.30	1.34	.06	-		
3. Time-based WFC	3.13	.98	.47**	-.20*	-	
4. Strain-based	2.99	1.00	.31**	-	.44**	-

WFC					.38**		
5. Behavior-based WFC	2.66		.92	.08	-.05	.19*	.39**

Correlations significant at * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

As we can observe, work hours are significantly associated with time-based ($r=.47$, $p<.001$) and strain-based conflict ($r=.31$, $p=.001$). No significant correlations have been reported between work hours and flexible working arrangements used ($r=.06$, $p>.05$), or behavior-based conflict ($r=.08$, $p>.05$). From another perspective, using flexible work arrangements is negatively associated with time-based conflict ($r=-.20$, $p<.05$) and strain-based conflict ($r=-.38$, $p<.001$).

When using flextime ($M=3.02$, $SD=1.04$), the participants do not report higher levels of time-based WFC ($t(100)=1.13$, $p>.05$) in comparison with their peers ($M=3.24$, $SD=.91$). However, when using telecommuting ($M=2.78$, $SD=1.02$), they report lower levels of time-based WFC ($t(100)=2.80$, $p<.01$) than their peers ($M=3.33$, $SD=.91$) (Table 2).

Table 2. *t* Test results comparing the effects of flextime and telecommuting use on time-based WFC

	Time-based WFC						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df
	Isn't used			Is used					
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N			
Flextime	3.24	.91	50	3.02	1.04	52	-.16, .60	1.13	100
Telecommuting	3.33	.91	64	2.78	1.02	38	.16, .93	2.80**	100

** $p < .01$.

Also, significant differences have been reported in experiencing strain-based WFC in what concerns the use of flextime ($t(100)=3.33$, $p=.001$) and telecommuting ($t(100)=3.49$, $p=.001$) (Table 3). Thus, lower levels of strain-based WFC are reported when using telecommuting and flextime.

Table 3. *t* Test results comparing the effects of flextime and telecommuting use on strain-based WFC

	Strain-based WFC						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df
	Isn't used			Is used					
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N			
Flextime	3.31	.88	50	2.67	1.02	52	.25, 1.01	3.33**	100
Telecommuting	3.24	.96	64	2.56	.94	38	.29, 1.07	3.49**	100

** $p < .01$.

No significant differences have been reported in experiencing behavior-based WFC in regard to the use of flextime ($t(100)=.46, p>.05$) and telecommuting ($t(100)=1.01, p>.05$) (Table 4).

Table 4. *t* Test results comparing the effects of flextime and telecommuting use on behavior-based WFC

	Behavior-based WFC						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df
	Isn't used			Is used					
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N			
Flextime	2.70	.85	50	2.62	.98	52	-.27, .44	.46	100
Telecommuting	2.73	.85	64	2.54	1.02	38	-.18, .56	1.01	100

Conclusions

The current study examined the relationship between the use of FWAs and the three forms of WFC, exploring the role of flexible schedule (flextime) and flexible location (telecommuting). Results indicated that using of FWAs is negatively associated with time and strain-based conflict. If telecommuters experience lower levels of time and strain-conflict, only strain-based conflict is reduced when using flextime. From this perspective, the current research enhances the positive role of FWAs in managing the work-home interface underlined in previous studies (e.g., Allen, 2001; McNall et al., 2010; Shockley & Allen, 2007). According to Major and Cleveland (2007, p.113), employees are traditionally accountable of “identifying, negotiating, or creating accommodations for family”. From this perspective, organizations should provide and allow employees to access flexible work arrangements. Thus, in order to reduce the negative spillover of time and strain between work and family domains, telecommuting can represent an effective measure, whereas flextime can be useful in alleviating the strain-based conflict. Also, if the availability of FWAs is mandatory, organizations should also provide informal support aimed at facilitating their use.

A series of limitations can be identified in the research focused on family-supportive initiatives, which circumscribe to the current study. Thus, the effects of family-friendly programs are rarely assessed in multiple organizations (traditionally the sample sizes being relatively small), or throughout longitudinal research designs (Sutton & Noe, 2005). Also, Frone (2003) underlines the fact that WFC should be assessed as a bidirectional construct, and experimental studies designed. In addition, the effects of family-friendly programs on other work group members (Sutton & Noe,

2005), or in relationship with the positive interface should be explored (Frone, 2003).

Another strong limitation regards the sample structure of the current study. For example, the effects of flextime and telecommuting on WFC might be explained by the relatively large number of participants working in the Education and Higher Education and IT sectors (in which flextime and telecommuting are traditionally used) and by the gender imbalance of the sample, composed mainly of women, which actively used FWAs in order to balance work-family demands.

From this perspective, future studies could examine the role of FWAs in various sectors or among different occupational groups, a better segmentation of the sample ensuring a clearer perspective of their effects on WFC. Also, experimental designs and longitudinal studies could be conducted (Allen & Shockley, 2009) in order to examine causal relationships between the two constructs. The effects of a larger number of FWAs, such as part-time work or compressed workweek could be assessed.

The role of informal organizational support, such as supervisor support (Hammer, Kossek, Zimmerman & Daniels, 2007), or work-family culture (Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999), could also be explored in regard to the relationship between WFC and FWAs' use. From another perspective, individual differences related to WFC (e.g., boundary management strategies) (Allen & Shockley, 2009) might be examined along with flextime or telecommuting. Finally, future studies should focus on exploring the relationship between FWAs and individual and organizational outcomes (such as well-being, job satisfaction, performance, organizational commitment or turnover intention), and between FWAs and positive work-family interface.

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