HOW WELL ARE CHINESE EMPLOYEES COPING WITH WORK-FAMILY CONFLICTS?

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of globalization, work-family conflict is becoming an issue of increasing importance to the labor force in China. Workers in China are becoming more educated and, with this education, there comes a demand for jobs that accommodate the family-related needs of employees. Chinese job applicants are becoming more interested in lifestyle factors and they are focusing less on wages and promotion opportunities. Workers want to have sufficient time to spend with their families and children. A recent study found that 40% of Chinese parents have turned down jobs or promotions because of the toll it would have taken on their families. This indicates that in order to create a good working atmosphere, employers must create jobs that support workers’ family situations. If they do not, it will be difficult for those employers to hire and retain high quality employees.

Clifton and Edward [4] note that more and more organizations in the U.S. are adopting programs to meet the specific needs of families. Such programs, often called “family-friendly projects,” often take on one of three forms noted by Glass and Finley [6]: 1. Leave policies for vacation, sickness, child care, and maternity; 2. Flexible work arrangements such as job-sharing, flexible hours, and working from home; 3. Social support such as counseling, child-care services, and education services. While such formal programs do not exist in China today, many employers are beginning to offer some kind of support for coping with work-family conflict situations.

The purpose of this study is to estimate the current work-family condition of white-collar employees in China. There have been many studies investigating work-family conflicts in America (see [2] and [5] for literature reviews) but little research has been done on the conflicts facing employees in China (see [8], [9], [10] for related research published in Chinese journals). Through an empirical study of workers in Shanghai, this current research investigates factors and variables related to perceived work-family conflict. It also determines the types of strategies that are being used by employees and employers to cope with work-family conflict situations in China.

We use the definition of “work-family conflict” provided by Greenhaus and Beutell [7]. These authors suggest that when an individual’s work and family roles are not coordinated, conflicts will arise. These conflicts can be related to time, strain, or behavior and, as noted by Bruck, Allen, and Spector [1], can occur in either direction; that is, work-family conflicts (work interferes with family) or family-work conflicts (family interferes with work). In this study, we will focus on the former – when factors related to one’s job lead to conflicts with family commitments. For example, factors such as job involvement, work schedules, career path, job characteristics, and working hours can have a negative impact on one’s family life. If an employee is experiencing work-family conflicts, the result can be inefficiency on the job, absenteeism, and low quality of life. Such work-family conflicts are detrimental to both the employee and the employer.
In this research, questions to be addressed include: What are the reasons for work-family conflicts in China? What measures can be taken to avoid such conflicts? What strategies can be used to alleviate existing conflicts? How are employees coping with the conflicts? How serious is the work-family conflict problem in China? How do the work-family conflict situations in China and the USA compare? In order to address these questions, a questionnaire was administered to 250 white collar employees in Shanghai. Each of the surveyed employees was earning an M.B.A. at Fudan University while working full-time. The survey respondents worked in a variety of industries including banking, consumer goods, information technology, medicine, scientific research, service industries, and telecommunications. Of the 250 administered and returned surveys, 38 were invalid, leading to 212 useable questionnaires.

The administered survey consisted of five parts. The first part included nine questions related to demographic characteristics: gender, age, job position, working hours per week, family responsibilities, elder care provided, marital status, spousal work situation, and number of children. The second part of the survey consisted of five Likert-scored items aimed at understanding the source of the respondents’ work-family conflicts. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of nine Likert-scored items related to the amount of work-family conflict that employees experienced. The fourth part of the survey consisted of five items related to coping strategies for dealing with work-family conflicts. The fifth and final part of the survey consisted of four items related to the level of social support the employees were receiving from employers, co-workers, and family members. Using scales developed by Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams [3], the survey measured four antecedent variables (work role conflict, work role ambiguity, work social support, and work involvement). Job satisfaction and family satisfaction were the two outcome variables that were measured.

Demographic results for the sample of 212 Shanghai employees who returned useable surveys are as follows:

- Survey respondents consisted of 26% females and 74% male.
- Fifty-one percent of respondents were in the 25-30 year age group, 48% in the 31-40 year age group, and 1% were over 40 years old.
- Nine percent of respondents were top level managers, 55% middle level managers, 27% low level managers and 9% were not in managerial positions.
- Nineteen percent of respondents worked up to 40 hours per week, 46% worked between 41 and 50 hours per week, 29% worked between 51 and 60 hours per week, and 6% worked more than 60 hours per week.
- Forty-two percent of respondents assumed up to 20% of their family’s responsibilities, 30% assumed between 21 and 40 percent, 16% assumed between 41 and 60 percent, and 12% assumed more than 60 percent of their family’s responsibilities.
- Seventy percent were married and 30% were not married.

The analysis of the non-demographic data is currently in progress. We are performing a number of statistical procedures, including the following: factor analyses to test the validity of the measurement scales, correlation analyses on the satisfaction outcomes, comparisons of the severity of the work-family conflict components, and regression analyses to determine the explanatory roles of the antecedent variables. The results we obtain for the Chinese employees will then be compared to earlier findings for American workers.

REFERENCES


