Organizational Barriers (2003)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

Many organizations have responded to the changing demographics of the workplace by implementing a variety of benefits and policies designed to help employees balance their work and nonwork lives. These benefits and policies are instituted with the desire to create what has been termed as the "family-friendly" workplace. [For a description of the family-friendly workplace, see Pitt-Catsoupes' entry in the Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia.] Despite these efforts, there are a number of organizational barriers that can inhibit employers from developing and maintaining a family-supportive work environment.

For the purposes of this entry, organizational barriers are defined as factors that prevent organizations from implementing, and/or factors that reduce the effectiveness of family-supportive benefits and policies after they are in place.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Because a family-friendly workplace has been shown to relate to employee quality of work life and well-being, as well as to organizational productivity (Lobel, 1999), it is important to recognize the factors that may inhibit the successful implementation and facilitation of family-supportive policies. For example, organizational work and family initiatives do not always help employees experience a better balance between work and family because many initiatives do not facilitate a better distribution of personal resources across life domains (Kirchmeyer, 2000). Knowledge of the obstacles that stand in the way of creating a family-friendly workplace can be used by organizations to develop training programs for managers and workshops for employees that better link worker needs with business goals.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Researchers have identified a number of specific organizational barriers. The barriers included in this entry are gender role assumptions, lack of national policy, rigid schedules, lack of management support, and corporate culture. These barriers do not operate independently, but rather work hand-in-hand in preventing organizations from achieving a family-supportive environment.
One barrier that prevents organizations from implementing family-supportive policies concerns prevailing assumptions regarding gender roles and their relation to work and to family (Thompson, Thomas, & Maier, 1992). Thompson et al. refer to this as the "masculine ethic" in organizations. Workplaces and their reward systems are still generally built around the male model of work. Guidelines for achieving success in organizations (e.g., assertiveness, competition, heroic action) are closely associated with conventional images of masculinity (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt 2002). The "ideal worker" is one who works full time and overtime and takes little or no time off from work for childbearing or child rearing (Williams, 2000). The persistent view regarding the career patterns of men and women is that women are more committed to family than to work, and that men are more committed to work than to family (Cook, 1994). Consequently, family supportive policies continue to be seen as policies primarily designed to "help" women (Lewis, 2001).

Another barrier mentioned by Thompson et al. (1992) is the lack of leadership on national policy regarding work and family issues. Although the lack of national policy might more accurately be considered a societal barrier rather than an organizational barrier per se’, the lack of national policy provides little motivation for organizations to initiate change. The United States continues to lag behind other countries in championing policy designed to help in the effort to balance work and family. As reported by Waldfogel (2001), the family leave policy of the United States differs dramatically from that of other highly industrialized countries. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of the United States offers employees the right to a 12-week, unpaid job protected leave to care for a newborn or a sick family member. [For a more detailed discussion of FMLA, see Nowicki’s entry in the *Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia.*] However, FMLA applies only to companies with 50 employees or more, and to individuals who have worked for that employer for 12 months and 1,250 hours. In contrast, the policies of other countries typically offer a longer period of leave, normally provide some form of wage replacement, and are more likely to be universal (e.g., available to all new parents). Moreover, the United States provides a lower level of publicly supported childcare than that of most other industrialized countries. Advancing national policy can help reduce organizational barriers. For example, as noted by Nowicki, the FLMA has served as a linchpin in the development of efforts to foster work and family balance. National policy helps heighten awareness of work-family issues among employers.

Rigid schedules and long work hours also serve as organizational barriers. The conflicts produced by workplace norms and time demands have been well chronicled by scholars such as Hochschild (1989), Schor (1991), Bailyn (1993), and Moen (2003). The term the "politics of time" has been used to describe how employees use their time at work and how employers interpret that use (Rapoport et al., 2002; Sirianni, 1988). Many employers continue to operate under the assumption that the best employee is the one who spends the most time at work. Time at work is equated with employee commitment and productivity. This makes it difficult to offer the single policy that seems to offer the most value to the greatest number of workers, flexible work arrangements. Research suggests that one of the most
Effective ways to create a family-supportive environment is to offer employees flexibility in the scheduling of work (e.g., flexible work hours, compressed work week; telecommuting) (Allen, 2001; Rodgers, 1993; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Sirianni called for a new politics of time with self-management of time as its foundation. Such conditions help facilitate a more democratic workplace. However, work is still primarily conducted in the workplace during a standard set of hours and within the proximity of management (Brewer, 2000). Additionally, even companies that offer flexibility options, typically make them available to only a subset of the population (Brewer). Scheduling demands can be particularly difficult for individuals in professions such as medicine and law where the norm is that employees should be readily available to patients and clients (Barnett & Gareis, 2002). Greater employee control over work scheduling is important in that it has been associated with multiple indicators of quality of life (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Accordingly, many scholars have recommended that organizations play a larger role in increasing workplace flexibility (e.g., Sirianni, Rapoport et al.; Thompson et al. 1992).

Another related organizational barrier is lack of commitment and support from management. Policies such as flexible work arrangements are difficult to successfully implement without commitment from management and supportive supervisors. As noted by Nord, Fox, Phoenix, and Viano (2002), garnering the support of top management is frequently mentioned as critical to addressing work and family issues. However, support from first-line management is likely to be what is most important when it comes to effective work-family policy implementation and administration. Supervisors may be resistant to enacting flexible work options and make it difficult for employees to utilize the benefit (Allen, 2001; Brewer, 2000; Thompson et al., 1992). Not only do supervisors need to support and effectively manage family-supportive policies, they need to use the benefits themselves. Kossek, Barber, and Winter (1999) found that managerial use is critical to the implementation of family friendly benefits such as flexible schedules. Managers serve as role models to their employees. If managers take advantage of benefits, they send a signal to employees that benefit use is okay.

Perhaps the most challenging organizational barrier is that of corporate culture, or more specifically work-family culture. Indeed, Levine and Pittinsky (1998) suggested that the biggest obstacle to supporting a more father- and mother-friendly workplace was culture. Briefly, work-family culture refers to "The shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives" (p. 394) (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). [For a more detailed discussion of work-family culture, see Thompson's entry (forthcoming) in the Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia.] Researchers have recognized that even when benefits geared toward helping employees balance work and nonwork needs do exist within the organization, employees may not use the benefits out of fear that they may jeopardize their career and risk being perceived as less committed to work (Fried, 1998; Lewis, 2001; Nord et al., 2002). If employees do not use the benefits, the effectiveness of family-supportive policies is limited. It should be recognized that obstacles previously discussed, male-based models of work, rigid assumptions concerning the value of face-time at work, and unsupportive
supervisors all underlie an organizational culture unlikely to implement and facilitate family-supportive policies. Each of these barriers needs to be eliminated to help develop a family-supportive culture. Thus, as Galinsky, Friedman, and Hernandez (1991) suggested, culture change is an advanced stage in the evolution of an organization moving toward the creation of a family-friendly workplace. In organizations with a family-supportive culture, developing solutions to help employees balance work and family is viewed as integrative, strategic part of doing business.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Future research is needed to address the work processes, systems, and structures/practices that inhibit organizations from maintaining a family-friendly workplace. Human resource systems need to adjust to align job requirements, evaluations, and rewards with the work-life balance objectives of the organization (Nord et al., 2003). Nord et al. contend that effective work-life balance programs depend on human resource processes and technical infrastructures. Similarly, Lobel (1999) notes that work-family initiatives need to be included with diversity initiatives that consider the impact of family-supportive policies on the career development of women. In their report of collaborative action research conducted within a variety of firms, Rapoport et al. (2002) discuss the importance of focusing on the integration of work and personal life. Thinking innovatively about ways to restructure work can provide organizations with the opportunity to create a workplace that is more equitable for everyone and ultimately more productive.

**References**


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:**


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains
Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker-relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
**Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map**

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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