

Availability and Use of Work-family Policies by Call Center Employees in India

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Abstract

In this exploratory study, the author examined the role of job demand, work-family conflict, compensation benefits and supervisor support on call center employees' knowledge related to the availability of work-family policies in their organization. Furthermore, the role of job demand, compensation benefits and respondents' knowledge related to the availability of work-family policies on respondents' use of work-family policies was also examined. Surveys were used to collect data and regression analyses indicated that high work-family conflict, compensation benefits and supervisor support were significantly related to respondents' knowledge related to the availability of work-family policies and the direction of the relationships were positive. Job demand and respondents' knowledge of the availability of work-family policies were significantly related to use of work-family policies. These results are discussed with respect to implications for policy and future research.

Key words: Business process outsourcing, Job demand, Work-family conflict, Supervisor support, Family supportive work culture, India.

1. Introduction

It has been more than two decades since the Indian economy opened up to the world markets and it is now time to take stock of the impact of this significant change. An important outcome of the sweeping economic changes in India is India's dominance in the global business process outsourcing sector, particularly back office or customer support provided in call centers. India's economic growth created phenomenal job opportunities not only for men but also for women and, more and more women in India are entering the workforce in large numbers (Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2007). This increased labor force participation outside the home among women led to an increase in dual-earner/career families trying to balance their work and family responsibilities. In order to help employees manage their work and family lives organizations (particularly multinational corporations) in the Information Technology sector including call centers introduced work-family policies and benefits. There is some concern among experts, however, that organizational support for employees' work-family issues has not been very successful in helping employees in the Business Process Outsourcing sector in India balance their work-life demands (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

This paper focuses on this gap in the literature by examining the factors that influence call center employees' knowledge and use of work-family policies. Till date the main focus of research on call center employees has been on the negative impact of long work hours and high job demand on the individual employee and for the organization. Specifically, call center employees report high job demand and stress (Subramanian & Vinothkumar, 2009; Suri & Rizvi, 2008), leading to high attrition rates (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006; Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, & Irani, 2006). This paper extends this line of thinking by exploring the relationship between job demand, work-family conflict, compensation benefits and supervisor support on call center employees' knowledge related to the availability of work-family policies in their organization and what factors influence the use of these work-family policies.

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2. Literature Review

2.1.1 Job demand

Call center jobs are very demanding and highly regulated with daily and monthly targets that need to be met. Moreover, pay and benefits are linked to performance – employees' own performance and that of their team's. One such incentive is performance based incentive scheme. The parameters for calculation of performance-based monetary benefit are process performance, that is, speed, accuracy and productivity of each process. Also, when people in India work with clients in other countries such as US, UK, Germany they are engaged in a new kind of shift work; employees work evening and/or graveyard shift because of the time difference between India, US, UK and Europe (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). In an exploratory study of call center employees, 79% reported that the call center job is a physically draining one, 76% reported that call center job affected their health in some way or other (Budhwar, Varma, Malhotra & Mukherjee 2009). Furthermore, Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, and Irani (2006) in a qualitative study of HR managers reported that call center jobs are very stressful and this leads to high burnout and attrition.

2.1.2 Neo-institutional Theory

Demographic and structural changes in the family and a changing economy have generated interest in work and family. In response to these changes, organizations adopted family-friendly policies (Glass & Estes, 1997; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). These family-friendly policies were designed to accommodate the needs of a diverse workforce (Allen, 2001). According to neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), adopting family-friendly policies has an economic value (recruiting and retaining talented labor), and is also a means to maintain legitimacy in a climate where incorporating family-friendly policies is normative. Employers, therefore, provide work-family policies to improve business efficiency (Carless & Wintle, 2007) and to promote gender equality in the workplace (Dreher, 2003).

Hypothesis 1a: Job demand will be positively related to respondents' knowledge of work-family policies.

Hypothesis 1b: Job demand will be positively related to respondents' use of work-family policies.

2.2. Work-family conflict

Although India is the market leader in the global offshore business process outsourcing market, the call center industry in India is not without its challenges. A major issue is high employee turnover which is estimated to be about 15-25 percent (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006; Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, & Irani, 2006). Anecdotal and exploratory research reports the reasons for the high attrition rate to be - assuming pseudo-identities, learning a foreign accent, high burnout due to the long work hours, shift work, a mis-match between work and social life, and lack of work-family balance for employees (Singh, 2005; Sushmul, 2005 as cited in Budhwar et al, 2006). With the increasing numbers of women entering the paid workforce in recent times, families are challenged with managing their work and family responsibilities. This is particularly true with employees working in call centers wherein people in India work with clients in other countries such as US, UK, Germany. This gives rise to a new kind of shift work; employees work evening and/or graveyard shift because of the time difference between India, US, UK and Europe (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). In a study of 500 women employees in the Information Technology sector in India, Madhavi and Vimala (2011) reported that role stress was higher among employees with more work-family issues than employees with less work-family issues. In order to help employees manage their work and family lives organizations (particularly multinational corporations) in the Information Technology sector including call centers introduced work-family policies and benefits.

Hypothesis 2: Work-family conflict will be positively related to respondents' knowledge of work-family policies.

2.3 Organizational support theory

Organizational support theory postulates that employees trade effort and dedication to their organization for incentives such as pay, fringe benefits, esteem, approval and caring (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Although family-friendly policies are not new in India [for example, policies such as the Maternity Benefits Act (1961), Equal Remunerations Act (1971) and anti-sexual discrimination policies (1869; 1997) have been well established prior to the phenomenal growth of the IT sector in India], adopting policies such as job sharing, flex-time, telecommuting, counseling, gym and other wellness programs to name a few were first introduced by multinational corporations in the IT sector in India (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

Although the goal of introducing these work-family policies was to reduce job stress and promote gender equality (Komaraju, 1997) thereby controlling somewhat for high attrition rates as these incentives were linked to employee loyalty, still it was the “bottom line” that was the driving force behind these policy initiatives. It is hypothesized that,

Hypothesis 3a: Compensation benefits will be positively related to respondents’ knowledge of work-family policies.

Hypothesis 3b: Compensation benefits will be positively related to respondents’ use of work-family policies.

2.4 Supervisor Support

Evidence from the research literature suggests that adoption of formal family-friendly policies at the organizational level does not necessarily equate to corresponding practices unless they are accompanied by a change in organizational norms and values regarding the appropriate interaction between work and family life (Allen, 2001; Kossek, 2005). For example, individuals who take advantage of family-friendly policies may face negative judgments regarding their lack of commitment to the organization (Allen, Russell, Poteet & Dobbins, 1999; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Also, compared to other benefits such as health insurance or medical benefits, family-friendly benefits such as flexibility with respect to work hours, schedules and timing fall into the ambiguous category (Osterman, 1995). When organizational policies are ambiguous, intra-organizational interests shape policy usage. This implies that policy usage may vary across the organization and be constructed locally by supervisors (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Supervisors may provide support either by the presence of supportive behaviors (eg., provide information, instrumental aid, mentoring) or by the absence of non-supportive behaviors (eg., prevent use of family friendly programs and benefits by employees or favor employees that do not use these programs). It is therefore hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4a: Supervisor support for family-related issues will be positively related to respondents’ knowledge of work-family policies.

Hypothesis 4b: Supervisor support for family-related issues will be positively related to respondents’ use of work-family policies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedure

Data for this study come from a larger study of employees engaged in the Information Technology enabled Services in India and included both IT professionals who were predominantly software engineers and call center employees. Data was collected from 774 respondents from 54 organizations from three cities in western India and one city in south India. Of these, 377 (from 38 organizations) self-identified as call center employees; data for the current analyses come from the surveys of call center employees only. Human resources managers of various ITeS centers in south and western India were contacted and permission to recruit participants was obtained. Due to heightened security in these centers, the investigator was allowed access to the reception area and cafeteria. Research participants were recruited from the cafeteria when they were there for their break periods. Snowball technique was also used to recruit participants for the study. Participants had the option to fill-in the survey using either electronic format or paper-pencil format.

A majority of the sample of employees surveyed in the call centers were predominantly male (76.7 %); eighty percent of the respondents reported as being single, 18% reported as being married and 2% included divorced, separated and widowed. Twenty-one percent of the sample reported as living in extended family and 79% of the respondents reported as living in nuclear family, that is, living with parents and siblings if one was single and living with spouse and/or children if one was married. This was a relatively young sample; the mean age of the respondents was 24.20 years. These findings are similar to those reported in the literature (Budhwar, Varma, Malhotra, & Mukherjee, 2009; Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, & Irani, 2006; Poster & Prasad, 2005) wherein employees in call centers and Business Process Outsourcing sector in India tend to be relatively young in age. Total work experience reported was 2.42 years on average and tenure on the current job was 1.5 years on average. Employees were primarily engaged in customer care and customer services and worked in organizations that were both captive units and third-party service providers. The average take home pay reported by the respondents was Rs. 7930.59 (approximately \$140.00) per month.

3.2 Measures

The scales to measure participants' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits as also the usage of work-family policies and benefits by the respondents were from the National survey of dual earner couples in the sandwiched generation (1999 as cited in Colton, 2004). The measure for job demand included items drawn from Fenwick & Olsen's (1986) scale and Karasek's (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) skill discretion scale. These items related to the degree to which a worker has to work hard, challenges in job about learning new skills, etc. Factor analysis was done and a single factor was extracted using the criteria of eigenvalue greater than 1.00. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.01$) and all factor loadings were above 0.30. Items related to compensation benefits included on-the-job training, pay, fringe benefits and job security and was measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The measures for work-family conflict and supervisor support included items from the National Study of the Changing Workforce (Family and Work Institute, 2002).

3.3. Method of Analysis

Correlations were computed to explore the strength of the relationship among the study variables. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analysis was done to test the two hypotheses – the effect of job demand, work-family conflict, compensation benefits and supervisor support on the availability of work-family policies and benefits as also to test the effect of job demand, compensation benefits and work-family policy availability on usage of work-family policies and benefits.

4. Results

4.1 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations of the Study Variables

Descriptive statistics such as the means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of the variables included in the study are reported in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Reliabilities of Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Work-family policy availability	-					
2. Work-family policy usage	.66**	-				
3. Job demand	.13*	.14**	-			
4. Work-family conflict	.19**	.07	-.07	-		
5. Compensation benefits	.23**	.11*	.30**	.18**	-	
6. Supervisor support	.22**	.10	.31**	.06	.31**	-
<i>M</i>	5.15	2.47	3.60	2.06	3.10	3.23
<i>S. D.</i>	3.51	2.64	.88	.83	.75	.69
Range	1-12	1-12	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5
<i>α</i>	.85	.75	.69	.80	.67	.84

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As seen in table 1, on average, employees working in call centers in India reported moderately high job demand (mean = 3.60, standard deviation = 0.88), supervisor support (mean = 3.23, standard deviation = 0.69), followed by compensation benefits (mean = 3.10, standard deviation = 0.75), work-family conflict (mean = 2.06, standard deviation = .83), participants' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (mean = 5.15, standard deviation = 3.51), and usage of work-family policies and benefits by the respondents (mean = 2.47, standard deviation = 2.64). The reliability coefficients of the variables included in the study ranged from 0.67 to 0.85 which meets the minimum acceptable criterion of 0.60 for exploratory research as recommended by Hair et al (2006). Also, nine out of fifteen correlations between the variables included in the study were found to be significant ($p < 0.01$), two were found to be significant ($p < 0.05$) and four had no significant correlations. There was a high correlation between respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits ($r = .66$, $p < 0.01$) and so they were tested for multicollinearity. As the tolerance value was in the acceptable range (O' Brien, 2007), they were both included in the model.

4.2 Regression results

Results of the hierarchical regression with the outcome variable respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits are reported in table 2. In the first step, job demand and work-family conflict were entered into the model. There was a significant relationship between job demand and respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .58, $SE = .20$, $p < .01$) and the direction of the relationship was positive. Hypothesis 1a was supported. Work-family conflict was significantly related to respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .86, $SE = .21$, $p < .01$) and the direction of the relationship was positive. Hypothesis 2 was supported. R^2 change = 0.05 and F change = 11.62, $p < 0.01$ for step 1.

Table 2: Variables Predicting Availability of Work-family Policies and Benefits (N = 377)

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Job demand	.58**	.20	.21	.21
Work-family conflict	.86**	.21	.69**	.21
Compensation benefits			.66**	.26
Supervisor support			.78**	.27
R^2	.05		.11	
F for change in R^2	11.62**		9.57**	

Note. ** $p < .01$.

In the next step the variables compensation benefits and supervisor support were included into the model. Once these two variables were introduced into the model, job demand was no longer significantly related to variable respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .21, $SE = .21$) while work-family conflict continued to be significantly related to respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .69, $SE = .21$, $p < .01$). There was a significant relationship between compensation benefits and respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .66, $SE = .26$). The relationship was in the hypothesized direction and hypothesis 3 was supported. There was a significant relationship between supervisor support and respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .78, $SE = .27$, $p < .01$) and the direction of the relationship was positive. Hypothesis 4a was supported. R^2 change = 0.11 and F change = 9.57, $p < 0.01$ for step 2. The overall model predicted 11% of the variance in respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits ($R^2 = .11$) as reported by employees working in call centers in India.

Results of the hierarchical regression with the outcome variable respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits are reported in table 3. In the first step, job demand and compensation benefits were entered into the model. There was a significant relationship between job demands and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .38, $SE = .18$, $p < .05$) and the direction of the relationship was positive. Hypothesis 1b was supported. There was no significant relationship between compensation benefits and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .33, $SE = .22$) and the direction of the relationship was positive; hypothesis 3b was not supported. R^2 change = 0.02 and F change = 4.61, $p < 0.01$ for step 1.

Table 3: Variables Predicting Usage of Work-family Policies and Benefits (N = 377)

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Job demand	.38*	.18	.22 [†]	.14
Compensation benefits	.33	.22	-.23	.17
Work-family policy availability			.57**	.03
R^2	.02		.44	
F for change in R^2	4.61**		279.37**	

Note. † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In the next step respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits was included into the model. Once this variable was introduced into the model, there was only a trace level of significance between job demand and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .22, $SE = .14$, $p < .10$). Compensation benefits continued to be not significant (Estimate = -.23, $SE = .17$). However, there was a change in the direction of relationship; compensation benefits was negatively related to respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits. There was a significant relationship between respondents' knowledge on the availability of work-family policies and benefits and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits (Estimate = .57, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$). The relationship was in the hypothesized direction and hypothesis 4b was supported. R^2 change = 0.44 and F change = 279.37, $p < 0.01$ for step 2. The overall model predicted 44% of the variance in respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits ($R^2 = .44$) as reported by employees working in call centers in India.

5. Discussion, Implications and Limitations

India has emerged as a global leader in the offshore business process outsourcing industry with call centers mushrooming in different parts of the country due to strong state support that has resulted in liberalizing the economy and modernizing technical infrastructure. An enormous supply of English speaking workforce has only added to its value as a preferred destination for call center work (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006). A perusal of the research literature shows that call center employees report high job demand and stress (Subramanian & Vinothkumar, 2009; Suri & Rizvi, 2008), leading to high attrition rates (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006; Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, & Irani, 2006). This paper extends previous research by exploring the relationship between job demand, work-family conflict, compensation benefits and supervisor support on call center employees' knowledge related to the availability of work-family policies in their organization and what factors influence the use of these work-family policies.

Regression analysis revealed that initially job demand was significantly associated with respondents' knowledge of work-family policies and the direction of the relationship was positive. Work-family conflict was significantly related to respondents' knowledge of work-family policies and the direction of the relationship was positive. In order to help employees manage their work and family lives organizations (particularly multinational corporations) in the Information Technology sector including call centers introduced work-family policies and benefits (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). When job demands are high and employees experience high work-to-family conflict then their knowledge of the availability of work-family policies is higher as they need to figure out a way to balance their work and family responsibilities. But when compensation benefits and supervisor support were entered into the model job demand was no longer significantly related to respondents' knowledge of work-family policies. Although jobs in call centers are very demanding with daily and monthly targets that need to be met, pay and benefits are linked to performance – employees' own performance and that of their team's (Budhwar, Varma, Malhotra, & Mukherjee, 2009; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). When supervisors are supportive of their subordinates, then employees try to find out about the various ways by which they can manage both their work and family responsibilities such as flex-time, shift work, job sharing etc without sacrificing on their compensation benefits.

In the Information Technology enabled Sector in India which includes call centers, organizations provide a wide range of work-life policies and benefits (Uma Devi, 2002). But adoption of family-friendly policies at the organizational level alone does not necessarily equate to corresponding practices (Allen, 2001; Kossek, 2005). Hopkins (2005) observed that frontline supervisors have direct influence on subordinates' workload and work-related stressors, which has an impact on the extent to which a subordinate's work role interferes with his/her family role(s). Moreover, Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) reported that employees availed of family-friendly benefits only when they perceived their supervisors to be supportive. There is research evidence that stress can be alleviated by both support and one's own coping to stress (Subramanian & Vinothkumar, 2009; Suri & Rizvi, 2008). From the overall model it is seen that work-family conflict, compensation benefit and supervisor support predicted 11% of the variance in respondents' knowledge of the availability work-family policies in their organization.

With respect to respondents' use of work-family policies, there was only a trace level of significance between job demand and respondents' use of work-family policies and benefits but there was a significant effect of respondents' knowledge of work-family policies on respondents' use of work-family policies; however there was no significant relationship between compensation benefits and respondents' use of work-family policies.

Valk and Srinivasan (2011) reported similar findings in an exploratory qualitative study of 13 women software professionals in India. Their findings indicate that the respondents were able to balance their work and family responsibilities because of the formal (through HR policies and programs such as maternity benefits, paid leave for personal/sick leave, telecommuting, flex-time, etc) that were available to them at the workplace. From the overall model it is seen that job demand and respondents' knowledge of the availability of work-family policies predicted 44% of the variance in respondents' use of work-family policies in their organization. This paper extends our understanding of the situation of employees working in call centers in India as most research in this area till date has focused on the negative spillover and stress experienced by employees working in call centers in India (Subramanian & Vinothkumar, 2009; Suri & Rizvi, 2008), leading to high attrition rates (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006; Mehta, Armenakis, Mehta, & Irani, 2006).

As for limitations, the focus of this study was respondents' knowledge and use of work-family policies among call center employees in India. Most organizations provide family-friendly benefits as a means to reduce work-to-family conflict and reduce psychological stress in their employees that results from the constant juggling of work and family responsibilities. Future research needs to look at the impact of the availability and use of work-family policies on physical and psychological health outcomes for the individual and whether these are linked to turnover intentions. Majority of the respondents in this study were male and single. Future studies need to include more women and married people, particularly parents in the study. This survey used a cross-sectional research design; consequently causal statements cannot be made. Data was collected from single informants, namely, employees working in call centers. Data from multiple informants such as co-workers and supervisors will enrich the data quality in future studies. Also, surveys need to be complemented with other methods such as daily diary method. Future studies also need to take into account the locale of the study such as urban or semi-urban as this will have an impact on the infrastructure and supports available in the community.

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