

# Factors Affecting Employee Use of Work-Life Balance Initiatives

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The study examines work-life balance (WLB) using a sample of 153 employees in a large New Zealand organisation. Analysis of company policies identified sixteen WLB initiatives currently being offered. Employees were surveyed to determine the extent of their awareness and use of currently offered initiatives. Factors influencing WLB initiative use and employee outcomes for initiative use were investigated. Female employees and younger employees used more WLB initiatives while employees reporting higher levels of management support and supervisor support, and perceiving fewer career damage and time demands also used more WLB initiatives. No support was found for the role of coworker support on WLB initiative use. Initiative use was related to reduced work-to-family conflict. Work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, and commitment to the organisation were related to intention to turnover. The results highlight the importance of workplace culture in enabling an environment that is supportive of WLB and consequently use of initiatives that are offered by the organisation.

Demographic changes including the increase in the number of women in the workplace, dual career families, single parent families and an aging population have generated an increasingly diverse workforce and a greater need of employees to balance work and home life (Brough & Kelling, 2002; Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992; Frone & Yardley, 1996; Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001). Conflict between work and home life has been linked to job dissatisfaction and turnover and increasingly organisations are using work-life balance (WLB) initiatives to recruit and retain key personnel. Employees may view WLB initiatives as enabling them to balance their work commitments with their non-work commitments, while employers are likely to view these initiatives as key strategies that enable organisations to recruit and retain employees (Allen,

2001; Anderson, Coffey & Byerly, 2002; Haar, 2004; Haar & Spell, 2001; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman, 2001).

WLB initiatives include flexible work arrangements (e.g. working from home, compressed work weeks and flexible working hours), leave arrangements (e.g. maternity leave, paternity leave, and leave to care for a sick dependent), dependent care assistance (e.g. on-site daycare, subsidised daycare, eldercare, and referral to child care), and general services (e.g. employee assistant programs, seminars and programs related to family needs) (Frone, 2003). WLB initiatives give employees flexibility and help ensure that dependents are cared for whilst employees are at work. Both work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict can be reduced when employees use WLB initiatives (Allen, 2001; Anderson et al, 2002; Haar & Spell, 2001; Thompson et al, 1999)

but not all employees make use of the initiatives that are available to them even when those initiatives would be helpful. The present research aimed to identify demographic and workplace factors that influence the extent to which employees use available WLB initiatives and whether the use of these initiatives impact on work-life balance and other outcomes.

## *Demographic factors affecting the use of WLB initiatives*

While consistent age differences in the overall number of WLB initiatives used have not been found, consistent patterns in the extent to which different initiatives are used at different ages have been identified. Career stage models suggest that younger employees are likely to have fewer external demands on their time as they have not established their families to the same extent as mid-life employees and may not have the challenge of caring for aging dependents. Older employees have been found to make more use of dependent care support such as childcare, paid maternity and paternity leave and eldercare than younger employees (Allen; 2000).

**Hypothesis 1a(i):** Older employees will use more WLB initiatives relating to dependent care than younger employees.

Younger employees have entered the workforce at a time when employability is valued more than job security and may place a greater value on non-work commitments or developing their careers through ongoing education

(Finegold, Mohrman & Spreitzer, 2002). Younger employees have been found to make more use of initiatives such as flexitime, compressed work weeks, telecommuting, and working from home than older employees (Allen, 2000; Thompson et al, 1999).

**Hypothesis 1a(ii):** Younger employees will make more use of work flexibility initiatives than older employees.

Women tend to use more WLB initiatives than men (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al, 1999). Compared to employed fathers, employed mothers were more likely to use childcare, flexible working hours, job sharing and the opportunity to work at home (Department of Labour, 1999; Frone & Yardley, 1996).

**Hypothesis 1b:** Female employees will use more WLB initiatives than male employees.

Employees with dependents have been found to have a greater need for WLB initiatives and to make more use of these initiatives than those without dependents (Brough & Kelling, 2002; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999). Frone and Yardley (1996) found the age of the youngest child was significantly related to the importance of initiatives such as flexitime, compressed workweeks, childcare and working from home but not to reduced hours or job sharing, while the number of dependents was significantly related to the importance of childcare.

**Hypothesis 1c:** Employees with more dependents will use more WLB initiatives than employees with no or fewer dependents.

Married employees are significantly more likely to use WLB initiatives than unmarried employees (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al, 1999). It is likely that in general employees who have partners will be greater users of WLB initiatives than employees who do not have partners.

**Hypothesis 1d:** Employees with partners will use more WLB initiatives than employees without partners.

Employees with longer service with an organisation may be more likely to adjust their work commitments when non-work commitments arise but may have greater responsibilities at work and be less able to take time off work to

tend to non-work demands. Employees with longer tenures also tend to have greater non-work demands (Finegold et al, 2002; Kirchmeyer, 1992). Employees with longer service may be more aware of available WLB initiatives and make more use of these initiatives.

**Hypothesis 1e:** Employees with longer tenure will use more WLB initiatives than employees with shorter tenure.

#### **Organisational factors affecting the use of WLB initiatives**

For employees to use of WLB initiatives they must first be aware that those initiatives are offered by the organisation. Awareness of initiative availability is likely to be associated with initiative use.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Employees who are aware of the availability of more WLB initiatives will use more WLB initiatives.

The availability of WLB initiatives does not always mean that these initiatives will be used. There may be unspoken rules, peer pressure or perceived negative consequences from the organisation that inhibit employees from using available initiatives (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Thompson et al, (1999) investigated the effect of workplace culture on work-family initiative use and found that managerial support, perceived career damage and organisational time demands predicted the use of work-family initiatives. There is a need for further research into the organisational factors that influence employees' use of available WLB initiatives.

Thompson et al, (1999) found that managerial support was the strongest predictor of WLB initiative use. Management can influence hours worked through the timing of meetings, deadlines, the scheduling of training and holidays, monitoring work, and role modeling long hours at work (Perlow, 1998). In contrast, family-supportive managers may provide staff with the flexibility to meet external commitments or may model good work-life balance. Managerial behaviour can therefore influence the use of available initiatives or provide the flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments without using these initiatives (Anderson et al, 2002).

**Hypothesis 2b:** Employees reporting higher levels of managerial support will use more WLB initiatives than employees reporting lower levels of managerial support.

Like supportive managers, supportive supervisors may pave the way for employees to balance their work and non-work commitments and to use available WLB initiatives (McAulay 1999; Thomas and Ganster, 1995). It is likely that employees reporting higher levels of supervisory support are more likely to use WLB initiatives than employees reporting lower levels of supervisory support.

**Hypothesis 2c:** Employees reporting higher levels of supervisor support will use more WLB initiatives than employees reporting lower levels of supervisor support.

Little if any research has been done to examine the role of coworker support on the use of WLB initiatives. Coworker support, perceived organisation support and supervisor support are positively correlated (Shinn, Wong, Simko & Ortiz-Torres, 1989; Ladd & Henry, 2000; McAulay, 1999) so it appears that coworker support should yield similar findings to supervisor support but little research has been done to investigate this.

Social pressure from coworkers can inhibit the use of WLB initiatives when resources are stretched (Kossek, Noe & DeMarr, 1999; Kirby & Krone, 2002). However a New Zealand study found that coworker support was positively correlated with the number of family-friendly initiatives used (McAulay, 1999). Coworkers who are supportive and sensitive to the needs of peers can create a work environment that supports WLB and encourages WLB initiative use.

**Hypothesis 2d:** Employees reporting higher levels of co-worker support will use more WLB initiatives than employees reporting lower levels of co-worker support.

In a field study of engineers in a Fortune 100 company, Perlow (1995) observed that perceptions of commitment to the organisation (and eligibility for promotions, pay rises and allocation of challenging and interesting projects) were based on employees' spending long

hours at work and demonstrating that they placed work commitments over outside commitments. Productivity was not enough to gain workplace rewards. In this organisation damage to career prospects occurred for employees who used family-friendly initiatives including working from home and leaving early to care for dependents, even when time was made up elsewhere (Perlow, 1995). Other research has also identified situations in which taking leave, regardless of the reason for it, was associated with fewer promotions and smaller salary increases suggesting a relationship between taking leave and perceived commitment to ones career (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). Employees may perceive that using family-friendly initiatives will have a negative impact on their perceived commitment to the organisation and decrease the likelihood of salary increases, promotions and positive performance appraisals (Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003). In order to make use of available WLB initiatives employees need to feel that their career prospects will not be damaged if they use these initiatives (Anderson et al, 2002).

**Hypothesis 2e:** Employees reporting higher levels of perceived career damage will use fewer WLB initiatives than employees reporting lower levels of perceived career damage.

Time spent on one domain cannot be spent on another domain, indicating that high time demands at work can have a detrimental affect on family life (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Employee may feel unable to use WLB initiatives if their workload is such that most waking hours are spent on work commitments with little time left for non-work commitments (Thompson et al, 1999). Individuals with high time demands may be inhibited from achieving a high quality of life in both work and family domains (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003).

**Hypothesis 2f:** Employees reporting more organisational time demands will use fewer WLB initiatives than employees reporting less organisational time demands.

#### **Impact of the use of WLB initiatives on outcomes**

The availability of work life balance

initiatives can minimise conflict between employees' work and home domains, which can in turn reduce employee intention to turnover and enhance commitment to the organisation (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al, 1999).

**Hypothesis 3a:** Employees using more WLB initiatives will report lower levels of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict than employees who use fewer WLB initiatives.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Employees using more WLB initiatives will report higher levels of commitment to the organisation than employees who use fewer WLB initiatives.

**Hypothesis 3c:** Employees using more WLB initiatives will report lower levels of intention to leave the organisation than employees who use fewer WLB initiatives.

### **The present study**

The aim of the study was to investigate the use of WLB initiatives in a large New Zealand organisation. Much research to date has been conducted overseas, or has used hypothetical scenarios, or has sourced participants from University alumni or membership lists from various professions and so research participants are unlikely to be representative of the general population and findings may not generalise to New Zealand. The present study will investigate practices in a NZ workplace using current employees in a range of roles. The study will identify WLB initiatives currently offered to employees, factors influencing use of these initiatives and the impact of use of these initiatives.

#### **Method**

A cross-sectional survey design was used. All data was collected from staff of one business division of a Government department. This organisation was selected to allow the study to cover a wide range of occupations and geographical locations. The organisation has eighteen divisions nationwide and employed over 300 staff in the participating division. Of the 307 questionnaires sent out, 153 (50%) were returned.

Initially the first author approached the organisation and, once authorization to conduct the research had been

obtained, organisational policies relating to WLB and related initiatives were examined. A total of sixteen initiatives relating to WLB offered by the organisation were identified. These were:

- paid special leave to care for dependents,
- unpaid special leave to care for dependents,
- paid special leave for other purposes,
- unpaid special leave for other purposes,
- flextime,
- compressed work schedules,
- telecommuting,
- part-time work,
- on-site childcare,
- job sharing,
- paid maternity leave,
- paid paternity leave,
- eldercare,
- study assistance – time off for study,
- study assistance – financial assistance, and
- time off to attend non-work events (making up the time elsewhere).

#### **Measures**

The survey consisted of four sections covering WLB initiatives, organisational variables, outcome variables and demographic information.

*Initiative availability* and *initiative use* were assessed by listing each of the 16 initiatives offered by the organisation. For each initiative respondents were asked to select one of four responses: (a) "not offered and I don't need it", (b) "not offered but I could use it", (c) "offered but not used" and (d) "offered and I use it".

*Initiative availability* was measured by coding responses (a) and (b) as 0, and coding responses (c) and (d) as 1. A total was computed by summing availability scores across the initiatives. As all initiatives were available, this was a measure of perceived, not actual, availability.

To obtain a measure of *initiative use*, responses (a), (b) and (c) were coded 0, and response (d) coded 1. A total was computed by summing use scores across the available initiatives (O'Driscoll, Poelmans, Spector, Kalliath, Allen, Cooper & Sanchez, 2003).

*Managerial support, perceived career damage and time demands* were measured using items from the work-family culture scale developed by Thompson et al (1999). Five items assessed *managerial support* (e.g. "In the event of a conflict, managers are understanding when employees have to put their family first"). Five items assessed *perceived career damage* (e.g. "to turn down a promotion or transfer for family-related reasons will seriously hurt one's career progress in this organisation") and three items assessed *time demands* (e.g. "To get ahead at this organisation, employees are expected to work more than 50 hours a week, whether at the workplace or at home"). Respondents answered each item on a 5 point scale where a higher score indicated a higher level of agreement. Scale reliabilities were .91 for managerial support, .79 for perceived career damage and .93 for time demands.

*Supervisory support* was measured using a 9 item scale developed by Shinn et al (1989) and revised by Thomas and Ganster (1995). Participants were asked to rate how often in the past two months their supervisor had engaged in specific behaviors using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (usually), (e.g. "showed resentment of my needs as a working parent"). Some items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated more supportive supervisors. The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .86.

*Co-worker support* was measured using 5 items developed by Ducharme and Martin (2000). This five-point scale asked participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements (e.g., "your co-workers would fill in while you're absent"). Higher scores indicated more supportive coworkers. The alpha reliability coefficient was .93.

*Work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict* were measured using the scale developed by Frone and Yardley (1996). Six items assessed *work-to-family conflict* (e.g. "My job or career interferes with my responsibilities at home such as yard work, cooking, cleaning, repairs, shopping, paying the bills, or child care") and six items assessed *family-*

*to-work conflict* (e.g. "I'm too tired at work because of the things I have to do at home"). Higher scores (from 1-5) indicated greater conflict. Reliability coefficients were alpha = .90 for work-to-family conflict and alpha = .89 for family-to-work conflict.

*Affective organisational commitment* was measured using an 8-item scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements (e.g., "this organisation has a great deal of personal meaning to me"). Higher scores (from 1-5) indicated greater commitment. The alpha reliability coefficient was .83.

*Intention to leave* was measured using a 3-item scale (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994) which asked participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements (e.g., "I have thought about leaving this job"). Higher scores (from 1-5) indicated greater intention to leave. The alpha reliability coefficient was .94.

Information was also collected about participants' *gender, age, marital status, number of dependents and tenure*.

**Procedure**

All employees who had been employed at the organisation for at least three months were identified from the Human Resources database. Questionnaires were distributed to these 307 employees by internal mail, with a covering letter explaining the study and inviting participation. A reminder letter was sent two weeks later by internal mail.

**Statistical analysis**

Data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0.1 for analysis.

Hypothesis 1 was tested by chi-square analyses of demographic variables and use/non-use of each initiative. Correlations of age, number of dependents and tenure with the total scores for initiative availability and initiative use were computed using Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ).

Table 1. Demographic information

		No.	%
Gender	Male	105	69
	Female	46	31
	Missing data	2	1
Age	<20	1	1
	20-29	20	13
	30-39	34	22
	40-49	43	28
	50-59	40	26
	60+	14	9
	Missing data	1	1
Marital status	Single	35	23
	Married	89	58
	Separated/divorced	10	7
	De facto	11	7
	Missing data	8	5
Dependents	None	89	58
	One	17	11
	Two	32	21
	Three or more	9	6
	Missing data	6	3
	Tenure	< 1 year	16
	2-4 years	27	18
	5-10 years	5	3
	10-20 years	18	12
	20+ years	83	54
	Missing data	4	2

Scale scores for managerial support, supervisor support, coworker support, perceived career damage, time demands, work-family and family-work conflict, organisational commitment and intentions to leave provided interval level data (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Correlations were computed using Pearson's *r*. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested using independent-samples *t*-tests with use/non-use of each WLB initiative as the independent variable. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the relative contributions of demographic and organisational predictors to WLB initiative use and outcome variables, as outlined in the Results section.

**Results**

Table 1 lists the demographic information about the study sample.

The most frequently used WLB initiatives were flexitime, time off to attend non-work events, paid special leave to care for dependents, paid special leave for other purposes and time off for study (see Table 2). The five initiatives most frequently cited as being 'not offered but I could use it' were telecommuting (working from home), compressed work schedules, time off to attend non-work events and on-site childcare.

Table 2. Frequency of use and perceived availability of WLB initiatives

	'Offered and I use it'		'Not offered but I could use it'	
	No.	%	No.	%
Flexitime	96	63	4	3
Time off to attend non-work events	34	22	41	27
Paid special leave to care for dependents	30	20	22	14
Paid special leave for other purposes	28	18	19	12
Study assistance – time off for study	18	12	8	5
Study assistance – financial assistance	15	10	14	9
Telecommuting	12	8	63	41
Unpaid special leave for other purposes	10	7	20	13
Part-time work	9	6	16	10
Compressed work schedules	8	5	62	41
Job sharing	7	5	8	5
Paid maternity leave	5	3	4	3
Paid paternity leave	5	3	12	8
Elder care	4	3	18	12
On-site childcare	4	3	28	18
Unpaid special leave to care for dependents	2	1	15	10

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations for all variables.

Awareness of the availability of WLB initiatives was correlated positively with manager support and negatively with perceived career damage and time demands. Several aspects of organisational support were

associated with outcomes: manager support was associated negatively with work-to-family conflict and intentions to leave and positively with organisational commitment, while supervisor support was also associated negatively with work-to-family conflict. Perceived career damage and time demands were positively associated with work-to-family and family-to-

Table 3. Correlations (*r* unless otherwise stated), means and standard deviations

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Use	-													
2. Availability	.88**	-												
3. Manager support	.33**	.26**	-											
4. Supervisor support	.45**	.34	.47**	-										
5. Co-worker support	.07	.15	.19*	.19	-									
6. Career damage	-.24*	-.21*	-.44**	-.30*	-.27**	-								
7. Time demands	-.31**	-.27**	-.55**	-.34*	-.22**	.60**	-							
8. WFC	-.25**	-.26**	-.22**	-.42**	.08	.34**	.46**	-						
9. FWC	-.16	-.17	-.11	.05	-.08	.16*	.38**	.45**	-					
10. Commitment	.14	.18	.33**	.10	.00	-.19*	-.23**	-.07	-.14	-				
11. ITO	-.08	-.08	-.28**	-.09	-.07	.07	.23**	.25**	.25**	-.53**	-			
12. Age ( <i>r<sub>s</sub></i> )	-.19*	-.18	.21*	.01	-.09	-.02	.00	.05	-.10	.13	-.14	-		
13. Dependents ( <i>r<sub>s</sub></i> )	.07	.07	-.13	.27	-.01	.01	.12	.07	.14	-.04	.10	-.15	-	
14. Tenure ( <i>r<sub>s</sub></i> )	-.14	-.09	.09	-.02	-.09	-.01	.04	.08	.01	.10	.10	.73**	-.03	-
Mean	3.3	6.54	3.41	3.47	3.86	2.82	2.77	2.87	2.13	3.27	2.66			
(SD)	(2.45)	(3.92)	(.74)	(.74)	(.80)	(.61)	(.93)	(.79)	(.62)	(.62)	(.99)	N/A	N/A	N/A

\* Significant at the .05 level \*\* Significant at the .01 level

work conflict, and negatively with commitment to the organisation. Those who experienced more time demands had higher intentions to leave.

**Demographic factors predicting WLB initiative use**

Younger respondents used more WLB initiatives than older respondents (see Table 3). However there were no significant age differences in the extent to which any of the individual initiatives were used and so Hypothesis 1a (i) and (ii) were not supported.

Hypothesis 1b was supported as gender was related to number of WLB initiatives used  $t(105)=2.72, p<.01$ . Male respondents used a mean of 2.9 initiatives while females used a mean of 4.3 initiatives. Not surprisingly, women used paid maternity leave significantly more often than men (chi-square=11.50, 1df,  $p<.01$ ). Women also used telework (chi-square=4.70, 1df,  $p<.05$ ) and part-time work (chi-square=10.09, 1df,  $p<.01$ ) more than did men.

No significant correlation was found between number of dependents and initiative use. Hypothesis 1c was not supported for the number of WLB initiatives used although the use of some individual initiatives was affected by the number of dependents. Only respondents with 1 or 2 dependents reported that they had used maternity leave (chi-square=10.94, 4df,  $p<.05$ ). Respondents with more dependents were more likely to have used paid special leave to care for dependents (chi-square=31.12, 5df,  $p<.001$ ).

There were no significant differences in the number of initiatives used associated with having or not having a partner so Hypothesis 1d was not supported. Participants were classed into two categories: 'Partner' (married or de facto) and 'No partner' (single, separated or divorced). Those without partners made more use of paid special leave to care for dependents (chi-square = 7.27, 1df,  $p<.05$ ).

Newer employees did not use more WLB initiatives than longer term employees and so Hypothesis 1e was not supported. Respondents with the longest and the shortest tenure were significantly more likely to use part-time work (chi-square= 12.94, 4df,  $p<.05$ ) than others.

**Organisational factors predicting WLB initiative use**

Awareness of the availability of WLB initiatives was strongly correlated with the actual use of initiatives and so Hypothesis 2a was supported.

The number of work-life balance initiatives used was correlated positively with managerial support so Hypothesis 2b was supported. With regard to the use of specific initiatives, higher levels of managerial support were reported by those who used flexitime  $t(144)=4.48, p<.001$ , telework  $t(145)=2.66, p<.001$  and unpaid special leave for other purposes  $t(129)=2.34, p<.05$  compared to those who did not use these initiatives. Higher levels of manager support were also associated with reduced perceptions of time demands and career damage (Table 3).

Hypothesis 2c concerning the correlation of supervisor support and WLB initiative use was also supported (see Table 3). Those who perceived more support from supervisors used more telework  $t(46)=2.49, p<.01$ , part-time work  $t(44)=2.28, p<.05$ , maternity leave  $t(44)=2.69, p<.01$ , paid special leave to care for dependents  $t(45)=2.34, p<.05$  and paid special leave for other purposes  $t(45)=2.03, p<.05$ . Higher levels of supervisor support were associated with reduced perceptions of time demands and career damage (Table 3).

Co-worker support was not associated with the number of initiatives used overall or with the use of any specific initiatives and so hypothesis 2d was not confirmed.

Hypotheses 2e and 2f proposed that use of WLB initiatives would be negatively correlated with perceived career damage and time demands respectively and both of these hypotheses were supported (see Table 3). Those who perceived more career damage reported less use of flexitime  $t(144)=3.29, p<.001$ , telework  $t(145)=2.24, p<.05$  and time off  $t(142)=2.71, p<.01$ . Those who perceived more time demands reported less use of flexitime  $t(144)=2.51, p<.01$ , telework  $t(146)=2.15, p<.05$  and unpaid special leave for other purposes  $t(130)=2.20, p<.05$ .

In order to test the effects of the organisational variables on the use of WLB initiatives, hierarchical regression was used. By controlling the effects of demographic factors, the following were entered in a hierarchical regression: Step 1 age, number of dependents and tenure; Step 2 perceived WLB initiative availability, manager support, supervisor support, time demands and perceived career damage. Co-worker support was not included as it was not associated with the outcome variable. Table 4 shows that only WLB initiative availability was significantly related to usage once demographic and

Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of demographic and organisational variables on work-life benefit initiative use.

		WLB initiative use	
	Predictors	Betas (Step 1)	Betas (Step 2)
Step 1:	Age	-.17	.02
	No. of dependents	.07	.17
	Tenure	-.02	-.05
Step 2:	Availability		.86***
	Manager support		.08
	Supervisor support		.13
	Time demands		.06
	Career damage		-.05
R		.20	.93
R <sup>2</sup>		.04	.87
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>		.01	.83
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		-	.83

\*  $p<.05$  \*\*  $p<.01$  \*\*\*  $p<.001$

organisational variables were included in the regression.

### *Impact of the use of WLB initiatives on outcomes*

Hypothesis 3a predicted that employees using more WLB initiatives would report lower levels of work-to-family conflict than employees using fewer WLB initiatives. There was a negative correlation between overall levels of initiative use and work-to-family conflict (Table 3) and so hypothesis 3a was partially supported. However WLB initiative use was not related to family-to-work conflict, commitment to the organisation or intention to leave and so the remainder of hypothesis 3 was not supported.

In order to test the effects of the organisational variables on the outcome variables hierarchical regression procedure was used. At step 1 age, number of dependents and tenure were entered; at Step 2 WLB initiative use, manager support, supervisor support, time demands and perceived career damage were added to the regression. Co-worker support was not included as it was not associated with the outcome variables. These procedures were carried out for the dependent variables of work-family and family-work conflict, organisational commitment and intentions to turnover. There were no significant findings for family-work conflict or organisational commitment.

Table 5 shows that with demographic, initiative use and organisational variables entered in a hierarchical regression, only support from management and perceived time demands affected work-family conflict. Use of WLB initiatives did not play a significant role in work-family conflict once other variables were taken into account.

Table 6 shows that intentions to turnover were significantly affected by age and tenure; organisational variables and usage of WLB initiatives did not impact on intentions to leave the organisation. The use of initiatives to improve work-life balance is therefore only one of many factors that may affect key organisational outcomes.

Table 5. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of demographic and organisational variables on work-family conflict.

		Work-family conflict	
	Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1:	Age	-.02	.00
	No. of dependents	.05	-.02
	Tenure	.14	.20
Step 2:	Use of WLB initiatives		-.07
	Manager support		.43*
	Supervisor support		-.28
	Career damage		.07
	Time demands		.69**
R		.14	.76
R <sup>2</sup>		.02	.58
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>		-.003	.44
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		-	.56

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 6. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of demographic and organisational variables on intentions to turnover

		Intentions to turnover	
	Predictors	Betas (Step 1)	Betas (Step 2)
Step 1:	Age	-.35**	-.62*
	No. of dependents	.02	-.28
	Tenure	.33**	.52*
Step 2:	Use of WLB initiatives		.02
	Manager support		.21
	Supervisor support		-.17
	Career damage		-.22
	Time demands		.36
R		.27	.53
R <sup>2</sup>		.08	.28
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>		.06	.04
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		-	.21

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

The aims of this study were to identify the factors supporting the use of available WLB initiatives within a New Zealand organisation and to examine the outcomes of benefit use.

Not surprisingly, awareness of the availability of WLB initiatives was strongly associated with initiative use. All initiatives used in this study were available within the organisation but many participants reported that some initiatives were unavailable. For example telework/working from home was ranked as 'not available, but I could use it' by 41% of respondents yet organisational policy states that managers can approve staff working from home for all or some of their work time for up to 12 months where the employees job enables this and their dependent care responsibilities warrant it. Lack of awareness may be preventing employees from using initiatives. Similarly, some initiatives are only available under certain circumstances. For example employees can take paid time off work to observe days of cultural significance providing this time is made up elsewhere. Broadening the criteria under which employees can use some initiatives may be beneficial.

Age was unrelated to WLB initiative use. This may be because the sample in the present study had a high proportion of respondents (35%) who were over 50 years. Gender was related to initiative use. Female participants were significantly more likely to use

WLB initiatives than male participants. This is consistent with findings from Thompson et al (1999) and Allen (2001). Use of paid maternity leave, telework and part time work indicated that women are reducing their hours to care for children or combining paid work with caring for children.

Contrary to expectations, the number of dependents and partnered status did not relate to the number of initiatives used, although the number of dependents and partner status were related to the use of paid special leave to care for dependents. Tenure did not significantly relate to initiative use overall although part-time work was more likely to be used by those who spent the shortest and the longest time in the organisation. Interestingly age and tenure were positively correlated indicating that employees with longer tenure may no longer have the need for WLB initiatives.

The predictions concerning organisational factors and WLB initiative use were supported with the exception of coworker support. The importance of managerial support is consistent with findings from Thompson et al (1999), Nord, Fox, Phoenix and Viano (2002), and Greenhaus and Powell (2003). Managerial support of WLB is a vital factor in whether an employee uses initiatives that are available. Management has the power to develop WLB initiatives to meet the needs of the current workforce; therefore it is likely that managers can also create a culture that is supportive of WLB. Managerial support was related to less work-to-family conflict and intention to turnover, lower perceptions of time demands and career damage, and greater levels of commitment to the organisation suggesting that managerial support has a wider impact on employee attitudes, particularly WLB, than encouraging initiative use. Consistent with the findings by Thomas and Ganster (1995) and McAulay (1999) the present study found that supervisors have an important role to play in supporting WLB initiative use. Supervisors experience the pressure of ensuring that tasks are completed on time but have little control over the development of WLB policies. Unsupportive supervisors can ensure that tasks are completed by discouraging

employees from using workplace initiatives, especially those that will entail time away from the workplace while supportive supervisors may encourage employees to use workplace initiatives, reduce perceptions of time demands and career damage and consequently reduce conflict between the work and home domain. This is reflected in the negative relationship between supportive supervisors and work-to-family conflict.

Co-worker support was not significantly associated with initiative use. This was unexpected as McAulay (1999) found that initiative use was positively related with supportive coworkers while Kossek et al (1999) and Kirby and Krone (2002) found that co-workers could pressure employees against using WLB initiatives, particularly when resources were stretched. The role of co-worker support in work-life balance clearly needs further study.

Employees who perceived greater damage to their career for using WLB initiatives and who experienced greater demands on their time used fewer initiatives, experienced greater conflict between work and non-work and were not as committed to the organisation. Organisational cultures that support WLB can affect a range of outcomes for employees. A supportive work environment that makes realistic time demands on its employees and does not penalise employees for initiative use is conducive to a good balance between work and family life. Benefits to the organisation can include enhanced employee commitment and reduced turnover if the initiatives on offer are appropriate for employees' needs, used when appropriate and communicated so that employees are aware of what is available.

#### *Practical implications*

This study has identified demographic differences in users and non-users of WLB initiatives. This information is necessary in order for employers to develop a range of WLB initiatives that is appropriate and suitable for the needs of the workforce. The effect of organisational climate on use of available initiatives also needs to be recognised. Management support,

supervisor support, perceived career damage and time demands all play a role in enabling WLB use; if employees do not perceive that their workplace supports the use of family-friendly initiatives, or if they are not aware of the initiatives that are available, then those initiatives will not be used. However when the culture is supportive, employees are aware of and are making use of the work-life balance policies that are in place there can be positive gains for the organisation as well as for the employee.

Good work-life balance is one factor that can affect levels of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict for employees as well as commitment to the organisation and turnover intentions. Turnover, and its associated costs, is a problem for organisations in an environment of skill and labour shortages such as NZ is facing and so careful attention to work-life balance may be one way to promote organisational as well as individual wellbeing.

#### *Implications for research*

It would be beneficial to repeat this study on a larger sample to identify whether these findings can be generalised to other New Zealand organisations. This sample was selected from a Government department and it would be beneficial to replicate the research to include small and medium businesses, particularly those from the private sector, to see whether the findings generalise to the New Zealand working population.

Future research should aim to further clarify how WLB initiative use is influenced by organisational climate. Interviews or focus groups using critical incidents would help in understanding the role between support, pressures or consequences at work, and employees' decisions whether or not to use available initiatives. Work design variables should also be investigated, especially in regard to team-based vs. individual work and the impact on variables such as support from co-workers, supervisors and managers.

The extent to which initiatives are used should also be examined. Some initiatives may be effective in minimising conflict between work and home life but measuring the number of initiatives used may not be an



accurate way to measure the impact of initiative use. For example, an employee may successfully balance these two domains, and consequently report less conflict, turnover intention, and greater commitment to the organisation, but only be using a small number of appropriate initiatives (albeit, frequently) to achieve this. The appropriateness of WLB initiatives to employees' circumstances also needs to be considered. Future research needs to explore frequency and appropriateness of initiative use as well as the number of initiatives used.

## Conclusion

This study has identified how a large New Zealand organisation provides opportunities for its employees to achieve WLB, the degree to which the initiatives were used and who made use of which initiatives. Organisational climate and demographic differences affect employees' needs for WLB initiatives and their willingness to use them. The relationship between WLB and organisational outcomes is a complex one and future research needs to examine this further but this study has demonstrated that an organisational culture that is supportive of WLB will influence whether initiatives are used, reduce conflict between the work domain and the home domain, and result in employees who are committed and less likely to leave in search of other jobs.

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# Factors affecting employee use of work-life balance initiatives

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2007-03-01

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