Your Work is Interfering with Our Life!

The Influence of a Significant Other on Employee Job Search Activity

Abstract

This research draws on family systems theory to examine the influence of those external to the organization, the significant other in particular, on employees' job search behaviors. Data from 102 matched pairs of employees and their significant others showed that significant others' perception of the employee's work-to-family conflict was positively related to the employee's job search activity after controlling for employee self-reported work-to-family conflict. Contributions and implications are discussed.

Key Words: work-to-family conflict, significant other, & job search activity

Your Work is Interfering with Our Life!

The Influence of a Significant Other on Employee Job Search Activity

Research demonstrates the deleterious effects of work-family conflict (WFC, Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005), which occurs when the demands of one domain (e.g., work) negatively affect meeting the demands of another domain (e.g., family), or vice versa (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Although one's own experience of WFC is related to a variety of withdrawal behaviors (e.g., turnover), family members' perceptions of an employee's WFC may be an additional source of influence on employee work withdrawal behaviors. To advance theory and research on organizational withdrawal behaviors it is important to consider the influence of those external to the work environment on employee behaviors, in addition to focusing on how individuals in one's work environment may shape his or her attitudes and/or behaviors (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Our objective is to examine the influence of significant other perceptions of the focal employee's WFC (i.e., the extent to which one individual views the *other's* job as interfering at home; Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007) on employee's job search activity.

Family systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Day, 1995) suggests that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are, in part, influenced by the attitudes of their family members. We propose that a significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC is directly related to the employee's search for alternative employment, beyond the effect of the employee's own WFC. We suggest that the stress caused by WFC may increase the dependency between the couple, and thus, the amount of influence that a significant other has on an employee. We focus on employee job search activity as it has theoretical relevance and practical implications to understand work-related negative consequences of WFC and specifically, the role of family member perceptions in influencing employee withdrawal behavior.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

WFC occurs because the time and/or energy expended in one role (e.g., work) is drained from another role (e.g., family, Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), and it is likely to foster negative work attitudes and work withdrawal (for a review, see Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Given our interest in understanding the role of a significant other's perception of the focal employee's work as a source of interference with the family, we focus on *work-to-family conflict* rather than family-to-work conflict in this study.

Family Systems Theory

Individuals operate within a larger system in which those immersed interrelate with and are affected by each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Although employees' attitudes and behaviors can be influenced by those with whom they work such as their peers and supervisors (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny & Ford, 1990), family members also play a pivotal role in employees' work-related decisions (e.g., Smith & Moen, 1998). Family systems theory states that family members have an influence on the attitudes and behaviors of other family members (Day, 1995). Family members are emotionally attached to one another in that they have "an emotional balance or equilibrium" (Beal, 1979, p. 141). This emotional attachment is indicative of two important processes that occur in families (Beal, 1979). One process leads to individuality and emotional autonomy, what a person defines as important for him/herself. The other process leads towards emotional fusion and dependency, that is, what a family defines as important for the family. It has been suggested that the more stress present in a family "…the more intense is the relationship" and "…the more emotional fusion predominates over emotional autonomy and, therefore, the greater the emotional influencing" (Beal, 1979, p. 142). Thus, considering observed WFC as a stressor, emotional fusion, rather than emotional autonomy, is likely to

occur, which indicates that a family member will influence the attitudes and behaviors of another family member. Due to emotional fusion, an individual may be particularly attuned to and easily swayed by the perceptions of a family member.

Research has paid little attention to the influence of family members on employee work withdrawal behaviors. Yet, family members may influence what a person thinks about his/her job and work-related activities (e.g., Edgell, Becker, & Moen, 1999; Smith & Moen, 1998; Streich, Casper, & Salvaggio, 2008). Extending this, we expect that a significant other has knowledge and feelings regarding how the focal employee's job intrudes on the home domain, and that these perceptions can help facilitate an employee's decision to leave his/her job. This can be explained by crossover effects which occur when one person's experiences are transferred to another person of a dyad (e.g., Green, Bull, Schaefer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2010; Hammer et al., 2005; Westman & Etzion, 2005). Crossover effects can happen when partners talk, engage in household duties together, or simply share the same space (Larson & Richards, 1994). Empirical studies indicate that a partner's WFC (i.e., WFC experienced by the partner in his/her own job) is positively related to the spouse's own WFC (Ilies et al., 2007).

We construe significant other perceptions of the *focal employee's* WFC as the extent to which the former views the *employee's* job as interfering at home (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007). For example, a significant other may perceive that the employee is experiencing WFC if the significant other perceives that the employee's work demands are impeding on the family (e.g., missing family functions). We argue that the significant other's concerns regarding the employee's work may, in a sense, "crossover" to the employee (Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002), ultimately helping to shape his/her withdrawal behaviors. We assess employee job search activity as an indicator of an employee's withdrawal from the organization, as it reflects interest

in leaving the organization (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). We argue that a significant other has an influence above and beyond the employee's perceptions and expect that a significant other's perception that the employee's job is interfering in the personal domain will "push" that employee to initiate a search for a job perhaps more conducive to satisfying both family and work demands.

> *Hypothesis 1: A significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC is positively related to the focal employee's job search activity beyond the employees' perception of WFC.*

Methods

Data and Sample

The research was part of a larger project looking at employee attitudes and retention and was conducted in two phases with a two-month time lag. Employees working as contractors with a government agency located in the Southern U.S. were recruited. A total of 824 employees who participated in the research project indicated that they were married, engaged, or in a long-term relationship (29% of the sample population). Employees were given the option to fill out an online survey or a paper survey (returned to the researchers in a prepaid envelope). During phase 1, data unrelated to the present research and employees' demographics were collected. Employees were also asked to give a separate survey and a prepaid envelope to their significant others or provide their significant others' email addresses so that a web survey could be sent to their significant others. After approximately 2 months, the second employee survey was administered, and data on employee perceptions of WFC and job search activity were collected. We received 102 (12.4%) matched employee-significant other surveys.[1] Respondents were

---

[1] We examined sample representativeness by comparing demographics and study variables of the 102 employees to those employees who indicated having a significant other but had no matched significant other data ($N = 722$). Results showed that

primarily male (82%), married (93%), and had children (86%). Most respondents were

Caucasian (78%). The majority (56%) reported completing at least a college degree. Ninety two

percent were between 25-54 years of age.[2]

Measures

We used Gutek, Searle, and Klepa's (1991) four-item work interference with family scale

to assess the significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC. Following Boswell and

Olson-Buchanan (2007), the items were framed to capture the individual's perspective regarding

his/her significant other's (i.e., the focal employee's) WFC ($\alpha = .92$). Employee job search

activity was measured using Blau's (1993) four-item job search intensity scale ($\alpha = .91$). All

items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*).

Control variables.[3] We controlled for employee gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age (1 =

24 and under, 2 = 25-34, 3 = 35-44, 4 = 45-54, 5 = 55-64, and 6 = 65 and over), satisfaction with

marriage/relationship ("To what extent are you satisfied with your marriage/relationship?" 1 =

Strongly Dissatisfied, 7 = *Strongly Satisfied*), job demands, job security, and employees' self-

perception of their WFC. Employee job demands were measured with a five-item scale drawn

from Quinn et al. (1971; $\alpha = .88$). Job security was measured with Oldham et al.'s (1986) four-

item scale ($\alpha = .91$). WFC reported by the focal employee was measured by Gutek et al.'s (1991)

four-item scale ($\alpha = .83$). Finally, we controlled for the employment status of the significant

other (1 = employed, 0 = not employed).

---

these two groups were not significantly different in gender, age, or study variables (i.e., focal employees' WFC, job search),
suggesting that our final sample was representative of the target sample of employees who had significant others.
[2] The majority of the significant other participants were female (68%), worked outside the home (77%), and had not completed a
college degree (53%). Most significant other respondents were Caucasian (79%).
[3] We created three dummy variables to control for the four different contracting agencies that participated in our study. However,
given our sample size, and the fact that the dummy variables did not change our results, we did not include them as control
variables in the analyses presented here.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables are reported in Table 1. The significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC was positively related to the focal employee's job search activity ($r = .25, p \leq .05$).[4]

Insert Table 1 about here

We tested our hypothesis with hierarchical linear regression. Results in Table 2 show that a significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC was positively related to the focal employee's job search activity ($\beta = .29, p \leq .05$), even after controlling for the employee's self-perception on WFC. Our hypothesis was supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

This study proposed and found that a significant other's perception of the focal employee's WFC contributes to the focal employee's search for alternative employment, beyond the employee's own perception of WFC. Our study contributes to the literature in the following ways. First, drawing from family systems theory (Day, 1995), we suggested that employee behaviors are, in part, shaped by the attitudes of their significant others. The significant other's perceptions could crossover to influence employee work behaviors. We further the recent work of Green et al. (2010) by demonstrating the influence of individuals *external* to the organization

---

[4] Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the discriminant validity of employee self-reported WFC, significant other-reported employee WFC, and job search activities. The results were satisfactory, demonstrating that employee self-reported WFC and that reported by their significant others were two distinct constructs. Due to space limitation, results were not reported here.

(i.e., the significant other's perceptions of the focal employee's WFC) on employee workplace outcomes (i.e., job search activity).

Second, findings from this study extend our knowledge on antecedents of job search activity. Our findings suggest that employees may search for alternative employment if their current job interferes with the family, as perceived by the significant other. Notably, the influence of the significant other's perceptions was over and above employee reported job demands and job security, further reinforcing the crossover effect beyond employee's own job experiences. An interesting result is worth noting. Contrary to existing literature, employees' perceived job demands were negatively related to their job search activity (β= -.28, $p \leq$ .05. In such a situation, high job demands may indicate to employees the needs of the organization resulting in a lower willingness for employees to seek alternatives in such challenging times. Yet, as shown by our results, when work demands conflicted with family, employees were more likely to search for alternatives because it was important for employees to take care of the family demands as well.

Practical Implications

The current study offers important practical insight on managing work-family conflict and employee retention. Due to increased level of employee work stress, many employers are implementing coping assistance programs for their employees, such as Employee Assistance Programs and employee counseling (e.g., Hartwell et al., 1996; Maiden, 1988). Our findings support the value of family support programs aimed at addressing family-related needs, such as on-site child care, wellness programs, and elder care (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Findings from the current study suggest that it may be valuable for employers to direct coping assistance toward employees' significant others. WFC not only affects the employees, but affects

employees' family members as well. The significant other's perception of the focal employee's work may be a catalyst to the employee's decision to search for another job. This is consistent with many international corporations' approaches to preparing expatriates for their overseas assignments by providing training for expatriates' family members, especially spouses.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has several limitations. First, the current sample only comprised workers who reported that they had a significant other as defined in this study. It is likely that other family members, such as parents, children, or close friends could influence employee work behaviors. We also note the relatively small sample size. Given the difficulties of collecting data from both employees and non-employees, it is understandable that our response rate was low. Though our sample size was sufficient to find significant and theoretically supported results, a larger sample would allow testing of more complex relationships such as how significant other and employee perceptions of WFC may interact to influence work outcomes.

Most employees in our sample were male (82%). Eagly's (1987) work on gender and social influence indicated that men are thought to be more influential and women more likely to be influenced. In addition, Pleck's (1979) sensitization theory suggests that women are more likely to perceive higher levels of WFC because societal expectations make women more sensitive to problems that would hinder their family role success. Thus, gender can be a valuable moderator in future research.

There are several additional future research avenues suggested by our findings. First, potential moderators should be examined. For instance, employees holding higher level positions have more job demands and may be more likely to be connected with their work through cell phones, blackberries, and emails. Such employees and their significant others may experience

more WFC than those holding lower-level positions. Another potential moderator is the extent to which people identify with their work and/or family. If both members of the family are workaholics, they may feel less of a need to spend time engaged in family activities, perhaps experiencing less WFC and/or having different reactions to such conflict.

In conclusion, the present research shows that, based on WFC, family members can influence employees' job search. Findings indicate that it would be prudent for organizations to consider family members in employee retention endeavors.

REFERENCES

Allen, T.D., Herst, D.E., Bruck, C.S., & Sutton, M. (2000). Consequences associated with work-to-family conflict: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *5*(2), 278–308.

Bakker A.B., Demerouti E., & Dollard, M.F. (2008). How job demands affect partners' experience of exhaustion: Integrating work-family conflict and crossover theory. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93,* 901-911.

Beal, E.W. (1979). Children of divorce: A family systems perspective. *Journal of Social Issues 35,* 140-154.

Blau, G. (1993). Further exploring the relationship between job search and voluntary individual turnover. *Personnel Psychology*, *46*, 313-330.

Boswell W.R., & Olson-Buchanan, J.B. (2007). The use of communication technologies after hours: The role of work attitudes and work-life conflict. *Journal of Management*, *33*, 592-610.

Bretz, R. D., Boudreau, J. W. & Judge, T. A. (1994). Job search behavior of employed managers. *Personnel Psychology*, *47*, 275-301.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, *32,* 513–31.

Day, R.D. (1995). Family-systems theory. In R.D. Day, K.R. Gilbert, B.H. Settles, & W.R. Burr (Eds.), *Research and theory in family science* (pp. 91-101). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Eagly, A.H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Edwards, J.R., & Rothbard, N.P. (2000). Mechanisms linking work and family: Clarifying the

    relationship between work and family constructs. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*,

    178-199.

Felps, W., Mitchell, T.R., Herman, D.R., Lee, T.W., Holtom, B.C., & Harman, W.S. (2009).

    Turnover contagion: How coworkers' job embeddedness and job search behaviors

    influence quitting. *Academy of Management Journal, 52,* 545-561.

Green, S.G., Bull Schaefer, R.A., MacDermid, S.M., & Weiss, H.M. (2010). Partner reactions to

    work-to-family conflict: Cognitive appraisal and indirect crossover in couples. *Journal of*

    Management. Published online on January 28, 2010 as doi:10.1177/0149206309349307.

Greenhaus, J.H., & Beutell, N.J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles.

    Academy of Management Review, 10, 76-88.

Griffeth, R.W., Hom, P.W., & Gaertner, S. (2000). A meta-analysis of antecedents and correlates

    of employee turnover: Update, moderator tests, and research implications for the

    millennium. *Journal of Management, 26*, 463-488.

Gutek, B.A., Searle, S., & Klepa, L. (1991). Rational versus gender role explanations for work–

    family conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 76*, 560–568.

Hartwell, T.D., Steele, P., French, M.T., Potter, F.J., Rodman, N.F., & Zarkin, G.A. (1996).

    Aiding troubled employees: The prevalence, cost, and characteristics of employee

    assistance programs in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 86*, 804-

    808.

Higgins, C.A., Duxbury, L.E., & Irving, R.H. (1992). Work-Family Conflict in the Dual-Career

    Family. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes, 51,* 51-75.

Maiden, R.P. (1988). Employee assistance program evaluation in a federal government agency. *Employee Assistance Quarterly*, *3*, 191-203.

Major, V.S., Klein, K.J., & Ehrhart, M.G. (2002). Work time, work interference with family, and psychological distress. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 427-436.

Mesmer-Magnus, J.R., & Viswesvaran, C. (2005). Convergence between measures of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict: A meta-analytic examination. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *67*, 215-232.

Oldham, G.R., Kulik, C.T., Ambrose, M.L., Stepina, L.P., & Brand, J.F. (1986). Relations between job facet comparisons and employee reactions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 38,* 28-47.

Pleck, J. (1979). *Work-family conflict: A national assessment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Boston.

Quinn, R.P., Seashore, S.E., Kahn, R., Mangione, T.*,* Campbell, D.*,* Staines, G., & McCullough, M. (1971). *Survey of Working Conditions: Final Report on Univariate and Bivariate Tables*, Document No. 2916-001, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.

Rothbard, N.P., Phillips, K.W., & Dumas, T.L. (2005). Managing multiple roles: work-family policies and individuals' desires for segmentation. *Organization Science, 16,* 243-258.

Salancik, G.R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 23*, 224-253.

Smith, D. B., & Moen, P. (1998). Spousal influence on retirement: His, her, and their perceptions. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 60*(3), 734-744.

Streich, M., Casper, W.J., & Salvaggio, A.N. (2008). Examining couple agreement about work-family conflict. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *23*, 252-272.

Westman, M., & Etzion, D.L. (2005). The crossover of work-family conflict from one spouse to

the other. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 35*, 1936-1957.

Zalesny, M.D., & Ford, J.K. (1990). Extending the social information processing perspective:

New links to attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. *Organizational Behavior and Human

Decision Processes*, *47*, 205-246.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables

Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	.83	.38								
2. Age	3.73	1.10	.19†							
3. Satisfaction with marriage/relationship	5.79	1.89	-.02	.11						
4. Job demands	4.55	1.31	.05	-.12	-.12					
5. Job security	3.90	1.58	-.28**	.16	.12	-.06				
6. Sig. other work	.77	.43	.01	-.09	.03	-.03	-.10			
7. WFC (self)[a]	3.63	1.66	.07	.03	-.29**	.48**	-.24*	.07		
8. WFC (SO)[b]	3.79	1.52	.03	.09	.03	.33**	-.19†	-.05	.44**	
9. Job search activity	2.89	1.47	.19†	-.04	-.12	.04	-.12	.24*	.39**	.25*

$N = 102$; † $p \le .10$; $*p \le .05$; $**p \le .01$

[a] WFC (self): Focal employees' self perceived work-to-family conflict.

[b] WFC (SO): Significant others' perception of the focal employees' work-to-family conflict.

Table 2. Regression Results

| | DV = Job search activity | |
	Step 1	Step 2
Control variables		
Age	- .09	- .11
Sex	.26*	.25*
Job demands	- .20†	- .28*
Job security	.09	.14
Satisfaction with marriage/relationship	- .02	- .07
Significant other employment	.24*	.26*
WFC (Self)[b]	.46**	.36**
Independent variables		
WFC (SO)[a]		.29*
F	4.27**	4.76**
Adj. R^2	.24	.29
R^2 change		.06*

$N = 102$; † $p \leq .10$; *$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$

Standardized regression coefficients were reported.

[a] WFC (SO): Significant others' perception of the focal employees' work-to-family conflict.

[b] WFC (self): Focal employees' self perceived work-to-family conflict.