

Coping with the dark side

While work-family practices are becoming more common, we still don't know a lot about their effects on fellow employees, report Jarrod M. Haar and Chester S. Spell.

Separate studies by Lu (1997) and Argyle (1992) found that receiving work-family support can actually make a person feel dependent and guilty which amounts to the "dark side of helping". On average, most employees feel little resentment towards their own use of work-family practices and even less so towards their co-workers, however this new study reveals that employees who do feel resentment have significantly higher turnover intentions – but the fallout can be limited with constructive, problem-focused coping strategies.

The study found that employees who reacted to their feelings of work-family negativity by being more positive about their work and engaging in it more thoroughly were less likely to resent workmates and consider leaving their organisation.

Research focused only on negative attitudes and it might be that positive attitudes relating to work-family practices mean positive outcomes. Given the lack of evidence in the work-family backlash literature for differences between users and non-users, this study indicates that the links between work-family practices and job outcomes call for more sophisticated measures. This supports the findings of a 1995 study that found both users and non-users were positive towards work-family program benefits. In addition, studies exploring how negative attitudes also influence other job-outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational

commitment, perceived organisational support and co-worker behaviour, would be useful.

Overall, it appears that negative feelings with respect to work-family practice use, whether targeting oneself or a co-worker, have a negative influence on the job. Organisations offering work-family practices without adequate support systems need to be aware of this. For example, co-workers covering for someone using work-family practices (e.g. someone on parental leave) might feel resentful at being burdened with an additional workload. Thus, the organisation may need to seek solutions (e.g. use of a temporary employee).

This study's focus on the negative influences of support does indicate that negative attitudes associated with work-family practices can lead to negative outcomes. Further studies exploring these negative attitudes towards other policies and benefits would be worthwhile in determining

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whether the "dark side" of support extends beyond work-family support practices.

Finally, the finding that problem-focused coping strategies can provide significant buffering effects is significant for individuals and employers, and provides ways to better manage these negative influences.

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