

# Work-Life Policy Implementation: Breaking Down Or Creating Barriers To Inclusiveness?

Ann Marie Ryan and Ellen Ernst Kossek

Michigan State University

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Although many employers have adopted policies to support the integration of work with personal and family life, expected positive gains due to enhanced workplace inclusion are not always realized. One reason for this gap is that practitioners and researchers often overlook how variation in how policies are implemented and used by different employee stakeholder groups fosters a culture of inclusiveness. We discuss four ways in which work-life policies are implemented differently across and within organizations that can affect the degree to which policies are seen as promoting inclusion or exclusion. They are: the level of supervisor support for use, universality of availability, negotiability, and quality of communication. These implementation attributes affect whether an adopted policy is seen as leading to fulfilling work-life needs and signaling the organization's support for individual differences in work identities and life circumstances, thus affecting levels of inclusiveness. Implications for HR practitioners are discussed.

Key words: Work-life policies, work and family, inclusiveness, diverse work-life identities



Over the past few decades, employer policies and practices to support work-life integration have proliferated as a means to attract and retain a high quality workforce (Kossek & Lambert, 2005). *Work-life policies* include any organizational programs or officially sanctioned practices designed to assist employees with the integration of paid work with other important life roles such as family, education, or leisure. Examples of work-life policies include flexibility in the timing, location or amount of work (e.g., flextime, job sharing, part time work, telework, leaves of absence), direct provision of caregiving and health benefits (.e.g., child or elder care, domestic partner), and monetary and informational support for nonwork roles (e.g., vouchers, referral services).

Despite rising adoption in the number and range of work-life policies and growing practitioner claims regarding their value (cf. Shellenbarger, 1997, 1999), it is clear that the existence of a policy alone does not guarantee employee recruitment, satisfaction, or retention. Sutton and Noe (2005) recently provided a review of family-friendly program effectiveness and concluded that programs had either no relationship or even a negative relation with attraction of new employees, improvement of retention rates, reduction of stress, and enhancement of productivity. We believe that one reason for these findings is that more attention is needed to linkages between how work-life policies are implemented and how they promote or deter from a culture of inclusiveness. That is, greater attention to the ways in which work life policies promote perceptions of workplace inclusion can improve their effectiveness as diversity management resources.

The primary aim of this paper is to discuss how the ways in which work life policies are implemented can break down or reinforce (and even create) barriers to the creation of an inclusive workplace and to provide four indicators employers can use to benchmark or measure their implementation effectiveness. We first provide a definition of inclusiveness as related to

work life policies and a framework to illustrate how work-life policies relate to the goal of workforce inclusion. Then we discuss the unique implementation challenges of work-life policies and introduce these indicators that can be used to understand the degree to which policies are likely to be seen as promoting inclusiveness. We provide some illustrations as to how those implementation differences can affect whether work-life policies are viewed as meeting individual needs and respecting individual value preferences and hence create feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Finally, we discuss how HR professionals can implement work-life policies to be more inclusive.

### **The Role Of Work-Life Policies In Creating An Inclusive Workplace**

An inclusive workplace is one that values differences within its workforce and uses the full potential of all employees (Gasorek, 2001; Mor Barak, 2005). Research by Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin (1999) found indicators of inclusion to include equality in the distribution of decision-making influence, access to information, and job security. Roberson (2006) conducted a study to distinguish definitions of diversity from inclusiveness and found that inclusion focuses on employee involvement and integration. Considering these definitions of inclusiveness, we suggest that a workplace would be considered inclusive with regard to work-life issues if the organization:

- values individual and intergroup differences in the primacy of work versus other life roles,
- supports variation in domestic backgrounds and the processes of blending work and nonwork demands,
- does not view differing nonwork or caregiving identities as barriers to an individual fully contributing and fulfilling one's potential at work.

- promotes involvement of all employees regardless of their nonwork demands and preferences

That is, an inclusive workplace would be one where individuals feel accepted and valued (Pelled et al., 1999; Roberson, 2006) regardless of whether they are single or partnered, have children or not, are heterosexual or not, work full time or a reduced load, or are present daily or telecommute. An inclusive workplace would be one in which there is acceptance and high levels of engagement of individuals who telework so that they may provide home care for an aging parent as well as those that choose nursing homes as the best option for their parents' care. It is one that equally values those who believe leaving work early to attend a child's soccer game is critical as well as those who do not mind missing games, and for those who use all their available paid time off leaves to train for a triathlon as well as those who feel personal time is reserved for family emergencies. It is one that equally engages those who rearrange work hours to attend religious services or to perform National Guard duties.

The adoption of work-life policies is one means that companies use to create a workplace that is inclusive. To understand why an organization might desire an inclusive workplace Thomas and Ely (1996) identified three perspectives on diversity: a discrimination-and-fairness perspective, access-and- legitimacy perspective, and an integration-and-learning perspective. Note that these are not mutually exclusive reasons for work-life policy adoption, but perspectives as to why an organization might adopt policies as a means of promoting inclusion.

First, organizations may adopt work life policies due to legal mandate and a desire for equal treatment of employees. For example, in the U.S., employers are legally mandated to offer unpaid leave and time off from work up to twelve weeks for the birth or adoption of a child, a serious health condition, or to care for a spouse, parent or minor or disabled child who has a serious health condition (Block, Malin, Kossek & Holt, 2005). In the European Union,

Directive 2002/73 requires that employers provide a job to women returning from maternity leave that is equivalent to the one they held prior to the leave (European Parliament and European Council, 2002). Organizations may implement work-life policies to comply with legal expectations regarding inclusiveness.

Second, the access-and-legitimacy perspective suggests the adoption of work-life policies is seen as “good business” in terms of recruitment and retention of under-represented individuals and good public relations (Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Kossek & Friede, 2005). For example, employers seeking to increase the number of women in certain positions also may tout flexible work arrangements and the availability of other work-life policies as a way to be more attractive to potential new hires (cf. General Mills, 2005). In those cases, the organization’s adoption of the work-life policy is driven by the view that a more inclusive workplace will make one a more attractive employer (Avery & McKay, 2006).

Third, a learning-and-effectiveness perspective integrates employee needs and values in new ways into the culture as part of organizational adaptation to a changing labor market (cf. Lee, MacDermid, Buck, 2000). Individual family and personal life needs are not considered irrelevant or detrimental to profitability, but are deemed important to address to enhance organizational and personal effectiveness (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). The connection between workplace inclusion and organizational effectiveness has been the focus of a great deal of research, although primarily at the level of workgroup diversity and group outcomes (see Mannix & Neale, 2005 for a recent review). Researchers have found mixed support at the organizational level for the connection of diversity and effectiveness, in terms of productivity and profitability (Kochan et al., 2003; Richard, 2000; Richard, McMillan, Chadwick & Dwyer, 2003; Sacco & Schmitt, 2005). In the work-life area specifically, Sutton and Noe (2005) found there is inconsistency in whether the adoption of policies relates to organizational

effectiveness. The theoretical premise is that inclusion leads to employee engagement which leads to organizational productivity. While the link between engagement and productivity has been well-established (see Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002 for a meta-analytic review), research in this area assesses demographic diversity or policy adoption, not perceptions of inclusion directly, and hence does not provide a true test of the link between inclusiveness and organizational effectiveness.

Figure 1a illustrates the presumed connection between work-life policy adoption and inclusion and outcomes that has been traditionally followed. Employers often assume that adopting policies can lead to perceptions of inclusion. Figure 1b shows that in reality the link is more complex. We contend that a key explanation for why expected gains from work-life policy adoption are not consistently found is because the ways policies are implemented do not necessarily foster perceptions of inclusion. While policy adoption may be intended to promote inclusiveness and positive effects on individual and organizational outcomes, it is policy implementation that determines whether inclusion occurs. Variation in ways policies are implemented can promote or deter from member perceptions of cultural support for different work-life needs and identities, both through direct experiences of employees as well as vicarious experiences by observing what happens to other users of similar identities (ranging from backlash to positive cultural support). In order to increase the potential of work-life policies as a diversity management vehicle, greater understanding of these linkages is needed.

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Insert Figures 1a and b about here

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## **Work-life Policy Implementation and Inclusion**

While one can certainly discuss how variability in implementing *any* human resource (HR) policy affects inclusiveness, our specific focus on work-life policies is intentional. We see multiple reasons why work-life policy implementation is particularly critical for fostering or deterring from inclusion. First, work-life policies historically were adopted with an explicit goal of breaking down barriers to the inclusion of women and those with caregiving demands (Rothausen, 1994). Today, this intent to support individuals who heavily identify with caregiving roles remains; however, the goals of work-life policies have now broadened to include a multitude of nonwork identities. Thus, unlike many HR policies (with the exception of EEO and diversity policies), work-life policies are presumed to directly impact inclusiveness (Rothausen, 1994) because they show that differences in role primacy are accepted, variation in blending work and nonwork roles is supported, and the involvement of all employees regardless of nonwork demands is promoted.

Second, the use of work-life policies is distinctive from use of other HR policies in that there are possible negative outcomes or backlash from the use of some work-life policies, particularly those related to flexibility and lower investment in the work role. For example, many co-workers and managers assume that users of flexibility policies create more work for supervisors and receive unfair benefits at the expense of co-workers (Grover, 1991, Kossek, Barber & Winters, 1993). While a rational perspective assumes that use of an adopted HR policy designed to enhance individual organizational attachment (e.g., mentoring program, training) usually leads to positive outcomes for employees, this assumption does not necessarily hold for work-life policies. For example, research suggests that users of work-life policies risk experiencing possible backlash and negative career outcomes (cf. Powell, 1999; Rothausen, Clarke, Gonzalez, & O'Dell, 1998). Although there are some exceptions (users of whistleblower,

grievance, or sexual harassment policies), users of work-life policies are more likely to face backlash effects than users of most other HR programs. In this sense, use of work-life policies can lead to exclusion.

Third, implementing work-life policies requires a fundamental cultural change in the assumed hegemony of work and nonwork that is typically not required from implementing other HR policies (e.g., changing dental insurance benefits, changing a performance evaluation system, adopting a new pay system). Work-life policy implementation demands major culture change to include members for whom work may not always be primary (referred to as second and third order culture changes; Bartunek & Moch, 1987). This is a radical assumption for many workplaces, since most have been designed based on the assumption that work identities are the central identity in an individual's life; hence work-life policy implementation can have a greater effect than other HR policies on whether a culture is transformed to be inclusive. This assumption is increasingly challenged today as workers from generation Y may be less likely to see the work role as paramount compared to previous generations (Bosco & Bianco, 2005).

Fourth, many firms espouse rhetoric that they support work-life integration and have policies formally available, but in practice vary in the degree to which use is sanctioned (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Lyness, Judiesch, Thompson, & Beauvais, 2001). For example, the American Bar Association reported that although 95% of law firms have a policy allowing part-time employment, only 3% of lawyers have accepted the offer, fearing it will hurt their careers (Cunningham, 2001). When policy use is not supported, it can detract from promoting feelings of inclusiveness and engagement in the work role.

Finally, and central to arguments in this paper, the wide variability in how work-life policies are implemented affects whether they break down or build up barriers to inclusion. As a simple example, consider how an organization's members treat those on maternity or parental

leave. In one implementation of the policy, the norm is for coworkers to cover key areas of an individual's job while s/he is gone; in another, no one is assigned the worker's tasks, forcing the employee to work part-time during what is supposed to be a leave, receive numerous work-related calls, cut the leave short, or work long hours on return (Ralston, 2002). It is our contention that variability in implementation can have strong effects on inclusiveness. In the next section, we outline 4 ways that policy implementation varies.

### **Implementation Attributes**

While much literature has examined variation in policy adoption across organizations (cf. Ingram & Simons, 1995), there are only indirect discussions of how implementation attributes of a policy within an organization have influence. As Bourne, Barringer, and McComb noted "Family-friendly policies may originate from the organization, but they are implemented (or not) in the local work context" (2004: 3). Focusing on policy implementation reflects the reality that typically policies to support work and life integration are formally adopted at the organizational level, yet have variation in how they are implemented across work groups, business units, and national locations (Kossek, 2005).

We reviewed the work-life research and popular literature to examine cases where policies did not lead to desired effects, concerns were raised about policy fairness, or where researchers or practitioners noted a variation in implementation. On the basis of this review, we identified four implementation attributes that appear to be key sources of variability: *supervisor support* for policy use, the degree to which policies are seen as *universally* available to all employees, whether their use is an entitlement or must be *negotiated*, and the *quality of communication* regarding how and when the policy can be used. Table 1 summarizes the aspects of implementation discussed in this paper. We next define each of these implementation attributes, followed by a discussion of how they relate to inclusiveness.

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**Supervisor Support.** Considerable research has indicated that supervisor support plays a key role in the experience of work-family conflict (Allen, 2001; Barrah, Shultz, Baltes, & Stoltz, 2004; Casper & Buffardi, 2004; Casper, Fox, Sitzmann & Landy, 2004; McManus, Korabik, Rosin, & Kelloway, 2002; O’Driscoll et al., 2003). Supervisors are the gatekeepers to effective implementation of work and family policies. By this, we mean that supervisors: (a) often have final approval as to whether employees can use an optional work-life policy such as reduced work load, telework, and flextime; (b) influence whether employees are cross-trained and able to back-up each other during absences or periods of heavy workload; (c) affect whether policies are well publicized and well understood; and (d) lead in the creation of norms supporting use of existing policies (Hopkins, 2005). This line of research has typically found that a supervisor’s support of an employee’s efforts to manage multiple roles relates to whether a policy helps reduce strain (see Hopkins, 2005 for a review). However, the majority of this research looks at general supervisor supportiveness (e.g., Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002) rather than support in the context of a specific policy.

*Supervisor support* of policy use is defined here in terms of emotional and instrumental support for use of a work-life policy. Do supervisors encourage and support employees when they ask to use a specific policy, removing any obstacles to policy use? Or do they discourage employees from using a policy, either actively and vocally or through making it difficult? For example, employees may have the right to telecommute one day a week, but supervisors can vary in how easy they make it for an employee to do so through how meetings are scheduled, how those who telecommute are communicated with and treated, et cetera. As another example, greater supervisor support of a policy that allows job sharing would be shown by a supervisor

who works with those engaged in job sharing to clarify roles and pinpoint obstacles than by a supervisor who does not communicate equally with both job sharers regarding responsibilities. A third example is how supervisors ensure effective implementation of a part time or reduced work load policy where an individual takes a pay cut for reduced work load or hours (Lirio, Lee, Williams, Haugen, & Kossek, 2004). Supervisor support for use of a reduced load policy would involve guarding against a common problem of part time workers ending up working more hours than they are paid for because of ineffective workload management.

Supervisors can affect backlash and jealousy in co-worker relations by thinking about use of work life policies in terms of their effect on the entire work group. For example, this can involve cross-training, setting core hours, and modes for communication and back up systems when people are flexing.

Thus, policies vary in how they are implemented because of variation in supervisor support for their effective use. As we will develop further, supervisor support of policy use affects inclusion. In the above examples regarding telecommuting and job sharing, individuals are not purposefully excluded but the lack of support for policy use leads to a less inclusive work environment. A lack of supervisor support can lead to nonwork roles serving as barriers to full contribution and engagement and to non-supported employees feeling excluded.

#### Case Box: Supervisor Support

Chris manages 55 individuals at a computer systems organization, 35 of whom telecommute to some degree. Chris started supervising telecommuters over 12 years ago and is supportive of telework because it gives employees a way to get uninterrupted time to work. "I have seen an increase in productivity as my workers have had the time to process." Chris feels that telecommuting has "increased morale" as well as increased ability to recruit and retain knowledgeable employees. While Chris is supportive of the arrangements of his employees, he has to work continually to convey to upper-level management that these employees are valuable and promotable as "they still don't understand how telecommuters can be just as productive as those who work in the office. They still value face-time." Chris does certain things to make sure that telework works for everyone in the office – all employees have "tough points" in the office so that they can keep "connectedness to the group. He requires that all spend at least some time

in the office to enhance team interaction. Chris is proud of providing a telework option for employees and recognizing employees as “whole people.”

**Universalism.** *Universalism* refers to the degree to which work-life policies are perceived as readily available for use by everyone in all levels and jobs, in contrast to availability limited to specific employee groups (e.g., partners but not associates; managers and professionals but not clerical workers) or geographic locations (e.g., corporate headquarters but not at the plants; U.S. compared to non U.S. locations). Few of the commonly studied work-life policies are universal throughout an organization. That is, policies may exist as being available on the books at a particular firm, but research shows wide internal variation in the degree to which different employee groups have access to policies (Kossek, 2005; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Policies such as on-site child care or fitness centers may be available at corporate headquarters but not in the field (Kossek, 1989). National labor statistics show that unionized workers are less likely to have access to flexibility policies than nonunion workers (Golden, 2001). Holcomb (2001) noted survey results showing workers in low-wage jobs are less likely than managers and professionals to have flextime, on-site child care, or company-sponsored tax breaks to pay for childcare. Although many companies see their health insurance benefits as universal, the argument has been made that without same-sex domestic partner benefits (which are offered to only 18% of U.S. workers; Bradsher, 2000) or without public sector bridging coverage for uninsured part time low income workers, health care is low on universalism. Co-pays on health care can also vary widely between employee groups from union to nonunion, exempt to nonexempt, and across different geographic locations in the U.S..

Thus, a second implementation attribute is whether a policy is universal or particularistic to a certain employee demographic, job, unit, location, or work group. To the extent that a policy is more particularistic it can create barriers to inclusiveness within the organization,

particularly because access is often not available to those at lower wages, who tend to be disproportionately minorities and women (Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Particularistic policies can lead to individuals feeling that they are not valued similarly to those who can access the policy.

**Negotiability.** *Negotiability* reflects both the degree to which an individual's policy use or practice can be negotiated with an organizational agent (e.g., supervisor, HR department, coworkers, senior management) and the perceived fairness of the negotiation process. For some work-life policies, such as the ability to take an unpaid maternity leave after the birth of a child, organizational actors have little latitude in how the policy is interpreted in practice. The way the policy is used and when it can be used is consistent across the organization. For other policies, such as the ability to work at home one day a week, someone must approve use of the policy, resulting in greater intraorganizational variability in policy use depending on latitude allowed locally. For example, research on access to reduced work load policies among professionals showed wide variation in how workloads and work arrangements were customized depending on the individual workers' desires, the nature of the job, and the degree of organizational learning about the practice (Lee, MacDermid, Williams, Buck, & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 2002).

Growing evidence suggests inconsistency in the enactment of negotiable work-life policies, as the preferences of managers and administrators and employees regarding how to best manage policy use differ (Eaton, 2003; Glass & Fujimoto, 1995; Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999). For example, a study of three types of flexible work schedules (flextime, leaves of absence and part time work) found that employers are often willing to negotiate more work-life flexibility if not too many workers in the same work group want to use the discretionary policy at the same time (Kossek, Barber, & Winters, 1999). Negotiation can also be reflective of subtle

discrimination. Barham, Gottlieb, and Kelloway (1998) found that supervisors may be more willing to approve a request in reduction of hours for female than for male employees.

Note that negotiability is conceptually distinct from supervisor support of using a policy in a number of ways, although it is not always unrelated. A supervisor can be non-supportive when an employee uses a policy regardless of its negotiability, and a policy can be negotiable whether there is or is not supervisor support for using what is negotiated (e.g., employee has negotiated ability to telecommute one day a week but important meetings are not scheduled considering the employee's preferences for days out of the office). Also, negotiability can involve a wide range of organizational actors from coworker support to client approval to the human resource department to senior management to the direct supervisor. Negotiability is also conceptually distinct from universality, although the two can connect in practice. A policy can be universal (anyone can telecommute one day a week) but the terms of enactment (which day of the week) may be negotiated or fixed. Further, negotiability can lead to particularistic implementation of a policy that is universal in principle (i.e., all employees can request reduced loads; only those that are top performers are able to successfully negotiate them).

Negotiable policies can clearly lead to greater inclusion or greater exclusion. Inclusive implementation does not equate to meeting all employee requests, but to insuring that negotiable factors are approached consistently across all employee groups and departments. Further, while perceptions of process fairness are enhanced by procedurally just administration (such as consistency in administration), perceptions of process fairness are distinct from perceptions of the fairness of the outcome (Colquitt, 2001). Jealousy and backlash are likely to occur if individual deals are not communicated effectively. The tenets or parameters for negotiation and customization must be clearly developed in order to foster positive perceptions of justice and feelings of inclusion.

## **Quality of Communication**

Variability exists within organizations in the degree to which formal written work-life policies exist for different organizational units (Kropf, 1999). A lack of a written policy can impede employee awareness and limits guidance on different possibilities in implementation. Even with written policies, sometimes they are poorly communicated, which also limits cognizance of the policy's availability and/or a lack of understanding of policy applicability to individual situations (Christensen, 1999). Studies specifically related to awareness of work-life policies support these notions. For example, survey research has indicated employees are not always aware of the availability of government mandated entitlements (Baird & Reynolds, 2004). One reason many fathers may not take parental leave is a lack of knowledge and clear communication of their right to use the policy (Powell, 1999). As another example, a department may allow some top performers access to flexibility but will not publicize that this option is available in order to prevent lesser performing employees from requesting it (Williams, 2000). Employee groups without regular access to the organization's website and email (e.g., custodial staff, plant line workers, store associates) may be less aware of policy availability. Further, Casper, Fox, Sitzmann and Landy (2004) demonstrated that supervisors generally reported low levels of awareness of work-life programs and this affected their referrals of employees to those programs.

Studies have long demonstrated that communication affects acceptance of HR and managerial innovation (e.g., Kossek, 1989; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). In their case study on organizational implementation of innovation, Nord and Tucker (1987) found that when there is communication on the features of the innovation and how it will be implemented, members feel consulted in the decision-making process and informed people show less resistance to change. The study found that even when implementation decisions are made at the top of an organization,

if communication channels are open, dissatisfaction and resistance are much lower. Greater application of these concepts regarding quality of communication from the innovation and change management literatures should lead to greater perceptions of inclusiveness regarding the implementation of work-life policies.

#### Case Box: Quality of Communication

Ann is a 31 year old white supervisor in a large midwestern city working for a major electronic systems corporation. Ann has been supervising a teleworker for the past year but has recently asked that individual to take a new position and discontinue telework. When she came to the department, the telework arrangement with this individual was already in place. She stated that “there was no written contract, no structure. I was handed a difficult scenario and I had to make it work.” Ann sees telecommuting as difficult to carry out unless there is a structure in place that sets up expectations, standards, feedback and a contingency plan if the arrangement is not going well. While some supervisors in the organization contend that there is formal written policy on teleworking, Ann has never seen it. Ann expressed frustration as the organization’s treatment of telework is that “it is not being publicized and that makes it difficult to find ways to make it work.”

#### **Linking policy adoption and implementation to inclusiveness**

We have argued that policies vary in implementation attributes and that variation affects perceptions of inclusion. In this section, we outline how work-life policies affect inclusion through two non-mutually exclusive mechanisms: need fulfillment and value signaling.

Need Fulfillment. The existence of a policy can fulfill a need (e.g., for a flexible schedule, for childcare), and therefore provide individuals with inclusion -- the ability to be fully engaged in their work role, or in some cases, even to take on a work role. For example, a family leave policy that has broad parameters for leave can meet the needs of individuals with unique family situations: a lesbian couple adopting a child would be afforded the same benefit as a heterosexual woman giving birth within the context of a traditional marriage or a single male taking on a guardianship or an individual whose parent is suffering from a debilitating illness. Allowing all of these individuals the opportunity to address life needs without conflict with the

work role would increase inclusion; disallowing one to fulfill the need would increase feelings of exclusion.

Individuals vary in their needs, preferences, and values with regard to managing work and nonwork roles and recognizing or ignoring this variability will affect perceptions of whether the organization is promoting inclusiveness or creating barriers to inclusion. Much of the established work-life literature has used demographic variables such as gender or number of children or marital status as proxies for needs, preferences and/or values (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). While this approach was valuable when the field was in its infancy, researchers have noted that to advance work-life research there is a need to examine individual differences in family related needs and preferences so as to better capture work- family beliefs than simple demography does (e.g., Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). That is, not all women with children act the same in regard to work and family, nor do all people with children, or all persons of a similar marital status act the same way or hold the same values regarding the work-family interface. Implementing work-life policies in ways that ignore differences in needs may work against the goal of promoting inclusion by adopting the policy.

As a more detailed illustration, the common assumption is that work-life policies designed to assist those with care-giving responsibilities (i.e., for children or elders) should have greater impact on the work attitudes and behaviors of those with responsibilities than those without such responsibilities (Grover, 1991). However, such a link has not been consistently found. For example, although some research has argued that job satisfaction would be more strongly linked to access to flexibility for parents than nonparents (Rothausen, 1994), rigorous research has not consistently found such a relationship. Care-giving responsibility does not automatically equate to positive reactions to policies related to care-giving because individual needs, preferences and values are not well-captured by the demographic “has or does not have

care-giving responsibility.” For example, an employer may assume that the implementation of on-site child care will lead to more positive work attitudes and the retention of those with child care responsibilities. However, some care-givers may not see the onsite childcare center as meeting their needs because of the specific type of setting they would like for their child (e.g., one provider and no other children) or because of mixed needs (e.g., easier to enroll younger child in preschool at same location as where older child attends school). As the example illustrates, the most inclusive approach to implementing a work-life policy would be one where the organization obtains a direct assessment of needs and preferences rather than assumes these.

Whether a work-life policy will lead to greater inclusion also could depend in part on the resources an individual has available to meet needs. For example, flextime policies may have little impact on inclusion if one’s spouse/partner has flextime or is unconstrained by a set work schedule and can handle time-based family interferences with work for the partner. As another example, emergency well-child care may be an important resource for a single mom newly moved to an area even if other employees with her care-giving responsibilities do not use the benefit, simply because of her lack of family resources. Thus, neither policy availability nor individual demographics are key to whether the policy will break down barriers to inclusion, but whether individuals have unmet needs met.

The implementation attributes of a policy will affect whether it fulfills needs. As an example, if an employee has a need for flexibility in his work schedule during certain months to allow him to train and compete in a sport, whether flextime is available, negotiable, supported by his supervisor and communicated well will affect whether he has his needs met or unmet, and hence whether he feels more included. In general, if a manager does not support policy use or creates obstacles to use, employees will experience exclusion. If one is unaware the policy is

available or does not understand that the policy can help meet a need, it can also promote feelings of exclusion.

A slightly different relationship occurs when one considers particularistic or negotiable policies because the level of the implementation attribute means that different employees will receive different outcomes (i.e., some can use a policy and some cannot or the nature of use differs across employees). Those employees who are directly negatively affected by the particularistic or negotiable nature of the policy (e.g., the administrative assistant who cannot use flextime) are more likely to see the organization as less inclusive than those not adversely affected. In general, research has shown that a “frustration effect” occurs for those who require a policy and find it unavailable to them, as Kossek and Nichol (1992) found in comparing work-life outcomes for users of an on-site child care center and those on the waiting list.

Further, it is not just outcome favorability that drives inclusiveness assessments for particularistic and negotiable policies but whether these implementation characteristics are seen as leading to *fair* outcomes. Distributive justice refers to perceptions of the fairness of outcomes, with considerable research indicating those who obtain desired outcomes perceive greater distributive justice (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Thus, if employees seek flextime or telecommuting privileges and do not obtain them, they are more likely to see the decision as unfair than if they obtain the outcomes they seek. However, justice theory has established that it is not just self-interest that drives perceptions of distributive justice. Distributive justice perceptions can be affected by the “rule” used to decide allocations (Leventhal, 1976). That is, if a work-life policy allocates resources on the basis of location or seniority rather than on the basis of equity (e.g., those who derive the benefit are those who put forth the most effort at work or perform the best), this may be viewed as an unfair distribution of resources to those who feel equity should be the rule in allocating resources. As another

example, if a department decides only one employee can telecommute on Fridays and this ability will rotate among employees (an equity allocation), those with long commuting times may see this as less fair than a need-based allocation. In general, employees who see a work-life policy as allocating resources on a basis that they perceive as less fair (Grandey, 2001) will have less positive evaluations of the organization's culture in terms of inclusiveness.

**Value signaling.** A second mechanism for work-life policy influence on inclusion is via the role a policy serves in signaling the organization's values. Traditionally, work-life policies are presented as "good business" because they let employees know that the organization is a caring and family-friendly workplace. While individuals do show preferences for organizations that display concern for others, research has also found that individuals' specific value orientations also play a role (Cable & Judge, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1992). Rynes and Cable (2003) noted that while there are some organizational characteristics that are widely valued by most job seekers, the strength, and sometimes direction, of preferences varies according to individual differences in values and beliefs.

Employees vary in their values and work-life policies may not match employee values. Returning to our earlier illustration regarding caregiver responsibilities, care-giving responsibility does not automatically equate with valuing work-life support from organizations. For example, an organization might provide a certain number of days of visiting nurses to stay with sick children. Given growing research suggesting important cross-cultural differences in work-family stress (Spector, Cooper, Poelmans et. al., 2004), for some individuals in certain cultural traditions, this might not coincide with their values and how they view their parental role. They may see this policy, in fact, as being "unfamily friendly"--as not allowing a parent to stay home with a sick child.

Implementation attributes convey organizational values related to inclusion. For example, research has indicated that “caring” is a value that individuals universally seek in employers (Ravlin & Meglino, 1989). Supervisor support for a policy’s use will be seen as validating that the organization cares. Further, supervisor support for employee policy use will be seen as reflective of overall organizational supportiveness or Perceived Organizational Support (or POS; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). Conversely, a positive message of concern that adopting a policy is meant to send can easily be offset by messages of lack of caring or unfairness through a lack of supervisor support for use.

Implementation attributes also send signals regarding organizational values about differentiation among employees. Whether this signaling will affect an individual depends on the extent to which the way a policy is implemented is inconsistent with the individual’s values. For example, collectivists are motivated by the goals and norms of the collective, prefer egalitarian rewards, and are more likely to object to inconsistency in treatment across the collective (Colquitt, 2004; Hui, Triandis, & Yee, 1991). Hence we would expect collectivists to react more negatively to particularistic and negotiable policies as these lead to differential treatment across the collective.

### **Interactive and Dynamic Effects of Implementation Attributes on Inclusion**

The implementation attributes are conceptually distinct but their co-variability within organizations and for specific policies is likely to vary. For example, universal policies may be high or low in negotiability (e.g., everyone can work flextime but you must negotiate; everyone has healthcare and the nature of coverage is nonnegotiable). Because an individual’s perceptions of the organization as an inclusive environment are influenced by multiple policies with differing implementation attributes, there can be an offsetting of positive and negative influences. This suggests that examining single policy effects on work outcomes (e.g., does organization-

sponsored daycare increase employee satisfaction) requires assessing and controlling for the role of other policies (both those that exist and those that are nonexistent in a context but of importance to an individual) and their implementation attributes.

It is also important to reiterate that because policies have both “need meeting” and “value signaling” effects, the effects of policy adoption and implementation may be different for different groups of employees. For example, teleworking might meet an employee’s needs for a shorter commute and more family time, but may ultimately lead to less inclusion if there is a lack of supervisor support for use. Another example would be the provision of a benefit (e.g., eldercare support) that does not relate to any need of an employee but promotes inclusiveness because of its value-conveying role to those in ethnic traditions where caring for elders is important (Yang, 2005)

Also, a policy may initially be viewed as promoting inclusion but then reassessed. For example, teleworking may be seen by job applicants as a way to achieve work-life balance. However, researchers have reported women experience greater work-life interference when teleworking (Mirchandani, 1999) and that those whose teleworking leads to putting in more hours than being in the office actually experience a decrease in work-life balance (Cree, 1998). Several studies have shown that teleworkers have difficulties in establishing boundaries between work and personal lives (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998; Loscocco, 1997). Thus, the policy as actually experienced --in part because of implementation attributes--may not be as positive as the individual expects and may not lead to greater inclusion.

Further, family needs of individuals change over time as unions are made and dissolve and children are born and grow; changes in views of policies can reflect changes in family needs. Phenomena such as “family-friendly backlash” (Harris, 1997; Rothausen et al., 1998) also may occur as a result of reevaluations over the course of time. A single, unattached job seeker who

does not have family issues may not be considering an organization's stance on work-life in choice decisions. However, once on the job, such policies may lead to problems for the individual. For example, s/he may experience problems in how the work of someone on parental leave is reassigned to him/her (Herst & Allen, 2001) or experience greater expectations regarding client entertainment in the evenings or travel than coworkers with young children. This can lead to reassessing whether the organization is inclusive of all individuals or if "singlism" exists (DePaulo, 2006).

### **Implications for HR Practice**

What are the implications of this framework for HR professionals seeking to break down barriers to inclusion via implementing work-life policies? We see three general checkpoints for determining if policies are promoting inclusion:

- Consider what implementation attributes will be part of planned adoption
- Consider how policy implementation breaks down or reinforces or creates barriers to inclusion
- Consider that there will be interactive and dynamic effects between implementation attributes of a policy and across policies.

We discuss each of these briefly.

**Planning implementation.** An organization must consider how it plans to implement policies broadly and how intraorganizational variation is likely to manifest itself. For example, an employer should consider what policies it wants to make particularistic and what it wants to make negotiable. Such decisions might be based on a desire to attract a particular group with a policy, or a desire to attract a diverse applicant pool (in terms of work-life concerns). The decisions may also be based on the overall human resource strategy: is this an organization with individualized HR policies or it is one where having the same contract across the work force is

the goal? Or is this an organization where business unit variation in policies, such as based on geography (e.g., North American, compared to European and Asian workforces), industry group (e.g., different product groups in a conglomerate) or organizational operational levels (e.g., corporate headquarters and the field) is desirable? The level of permissible intraorganizational variability can be controlled via clarity in organizational level communication, management training, and regular auditing of policy awareness and use.

Further, is a way of implementing a policy a conscious strategic decision by a unit or did it simply evolve that way? Sutton and Noe (2005) noted that organizations may adopt policies because of normative pressure (e.g., a group of internal employees pressures for adoption), mimetic pressure (e.g., a successful competitor offers the policy), or coercive pressure (e.g., government mandate such as with regard to family leave). Implementation attributes may relate to what pressures led to policy adoption. For example, instituting flextime in a department in response to mimetic pressure might lead to a more universally implemented policy than if a specific group has pressured for flextime.

Lambert and Waxman (2005) suggest that there is a need to consider whether a policy is consciously particularistic or just unavailable. In practice, policy variations may be attributed to obstacles that an organization or unit is unwilling to address. For example, to implement a policy universally may require a business unit to rethink how work is scheduled or conducted, to invest in new technology, or to negotiate new contracts with unions. Changing the way a policy is implemented may meet with much resistance or dramatically change cost considerations. It also may require fundamental changes in work redesign and the way employees are managed (Rapoport et al., 2002). For example, employees might need to be cross trained to allow backup, or employees may be given input as a group to decide how and if flexible work arrangements

would be implemented in their work unit. These barriers may need to be overcome to implement the policy in a more inclusive manner.

**Considering barriers.** Firms must recognize that a single “best practices” approach to work-life issues may not exist because of the great variability in needs, preferences, and values. Attempting to reduce intraorganizational variability in policy content and policy implementation may not be possible or desirable, and therefore training and supporting managers so that implementation is inclusive is imperative. Table 1 provides indicators that HR professionals and managers can use in determining whether implementation is breaking down or reinforcing barriers to inclusion.

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Insert Table 1 here

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Organizations must monitor when policies do not have the intended effects depending upon how they are implemented. For example, an employee may expect that he/she will be able to work flextime when a policy is announced but then find he/she cannot because the policy is not universal, is negotiable and he/she is unable to secure the arrangement, or that a lack of supervisor support makes it difficult to carry out. Raising expectations and not meeting them can have undesirable effects (e.g., Grandey, 2001; Parker & Allen, 2001). Organizations need to recognize some of the inherent tensions in making work-life policies attractive and used. For example, negotiability may meet more employee needs, but it may also increase the likelihood of being seen as unfair.

**Considering interactive and dynamic effects.** An inclusive culture is based on numerous inputs. Understanding the relative role of work-life issues vis-à-vis other determinants such as compensation, meaningful work and coworker relations is essential to making

predictions regarding the effects of work-life policies. While the demand in the workplace for attention to work-life issues seems a clear indicator of their importance to employees, empirical research is needed to understand their role in affecting inclusion relative to other employment concerns that have established relationships to satisfaction, commitment, and other work-related outcomes.

Because organizations may be simultaneously enacting multiple policies related to work-life integration and these may vary in how they are implemented, consideration needs to be given to this covariation. For example, a manager might consider how implementing a particularistic policy will be received when other policies in the work-life domain are universal, or implementing a policy with little room for negotiation might be viewed in relation to other more negotiable policies. Such interactive effects may affect perceptions of a more or less inclusive work environment.

**Conclusion.** In order for research on work-life policies to reach a higher level of sophistication, organizations and scholars need to move beyond promoting the mere existence of work-life policies as a means to a more inclusive workplace. Focusing on implementation attributes will enable firms to achieve greater gains from work-life policies. Considering how implementation leads to feelings of inclusion and exclusion can aid in understanding how work-life policies can lead to more positive individual and organizational outcomes.

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NJ: LEA Press, pp. 287-318.

➤ Table 1: Implementing Work-Life Policies to Break Down or Reinforce Barriers to Inclusion

Implementation Attribute	Breaks down barriers	Reinforces/Creates Barriers
Supervisor support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for policy use recognizes individual needs and value preferences</li> <li>• Support promotes feelings of respect and inclusion</li> <li>• Removing obstacles to policy use signals that employee is valued</li> <li>• Looks at how implementation will affect the workload and social justice perceptions in work group.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of support can prevent individuals from being able to fully engage in the workplace</li> <li>• Lack of support for policy use can be form of subtle discrimination</li> <li>• Discourage employees from using a policy by making it difficult to use</li> <li>• Signals a lack of appreciation for individual needs and preferences</li> </ul>
Universality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal policies (i.e. by definition of being open to all employees simply on the basis of being a member of a firm) reflect inclusiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Particularistic policies signal that some are excluded</li> <li>• Particularistic policies can serve as barriers to full engagement for some individuals</li> <li>• Particularistic policies can have adverse impact against certain groups if availability is limited on the basis of job level, geographic region, and these are related to ethnicity and/or gender</li> </ul>
Negotiability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiable policies allow for consideration of individual needs and avoid a one size fits all approach to implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When individuals feel negotiations are unfair or based on some bias that creates a barrier to inclusion.</li> </ul>
Quality of Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effectively communicated policies signal inclusion and employer caring by demonstrating that policies exist not merely as public relations vehicles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective communication of policies creates barriers to inclusion</li> <li>• Ineffective communication leads to policies existing on paper for employer symbolic purposes without adding instrumental value to employees</li> </ul>

➤ Figure 1a: Assumed link between adoption and inclusion.

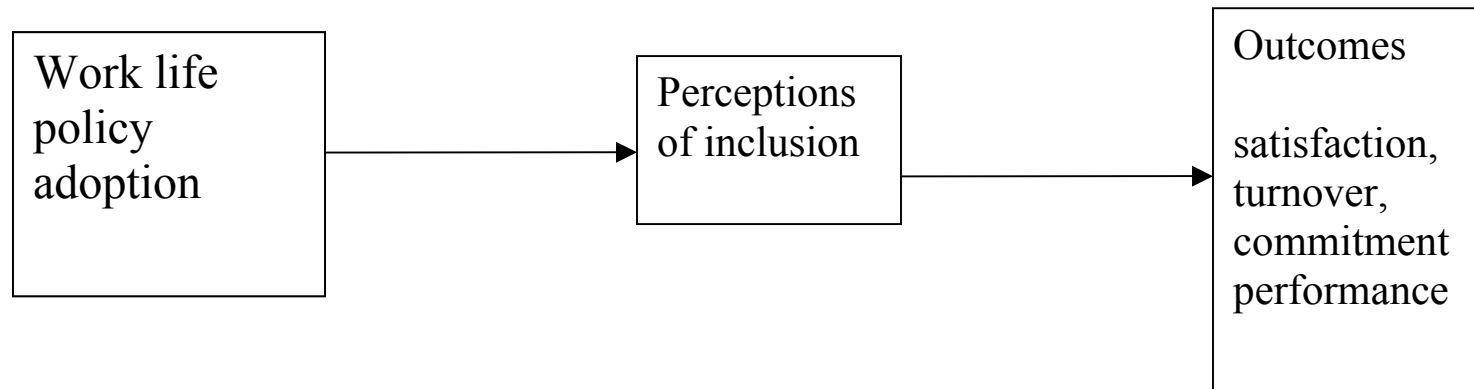




Figure 1b: Proposed link between adoption, implementation, and inclusion.

