

# Practices of Dual Earner Couples Successfully Balancing Work and Family

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**ABSTRACT:** Researchers have long explored conflict and strain in dual-career couples. Recently, the focus has begun to shift toward documenting the adaptive strategies of dual-earner couples in balancing family and work. The current study investigates workplace practices perceived as supportive in balancing work and family. Respondents were middle-class, dual-earner couples ( $N=47$ ) who described themselves as successful in balancing family and work. These supportive practices include: flexible work scheduling, non-traditional work hours, professional/job autonomy, working from home, supportive supervisors, supportive colleagues and supervisees, and the ability to set firm boundaries around work. Additionally, many participants describe their efforts to actively secure employment at workplaces that offered family-friendly alternatives, and describe the tradeoffs they are willing to make.

**KEY WORDS:** couples; dual-earner; opportunity costs; tradeoffs; work-family balance.

As families increasingly need two salaries to be economically viable and as men's and women's roles in both the workplace and at home have changed, questions have been raised regarding how best individuals and couples can balance family and work. This study focuses on the workplace factors that a sample of dual-earner couples believe facilitate

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their successful balance of family and work. The data for the study were part of a larger data set drawn primarily from in-depth qualitative interviews with 47 middle-class dual-earner couples with children. This sample of dual-earner couples is unique in that both partners identified themselves as successful in balancing family and work.

While the intent of the overall project was to discover the general adaptive strategies that couples utilize to successfully balance family and work, this paper focuses specifically on the workplace supports of these couples. Kropf (1997) stated a need for “research...that focuses on identifying and evaluating successful strategies” for work-family balance (p. 74). Kropf (1997) believes that identifying these successful strategies is an important next step in the work and family literature. Studying the strategies utilized by self-identified successful couples is consistent with the research of Gottman (1999) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995), and is based on an assumption that solving a “problem” (i.e. difficulties in managing family and work) is often best accomplished, not by further exploring the problem itself, but by learning about those circumstances in which the problem is less present. Also, Greenhaus (1989) also called for research on “resilience in two-career relationships” (p. 25), in his review of the state of research on work and family roles. Thus, couples who are successfully balancing work and family can tell us a great deal about how they are able to do that, and the focus of this paper is on how they do this at work. These workplace strategies identified by these successful couples may then inform other couples about ways that they can strategize at work, and may also inform businesses in ways to support couples attempting to balance work and family.

The findings of this study confirm much of the writing on family-friendly workplaces, but are unique in that this confirmation comes from couples who are successfully balancing work and family. It is important that family economics researchers and those influencing workplace practices listen to the voices of those who are successfully negotiating this often challenging balance between work and family.

In this paper, we briefly review demographic changes as well as workplace norms and practices that constrain some families in their efforts to balance family life and work. We review emerging literature on workplace practices and policies that have been found to have promise, and compare those to the supports provided in the workplaces of these successful couples. We hope to contribute to the

literature showing that successfully balancing work and family is beneficial for all involved: families and employers.

## Literature Review

### *Demographic Changes and Workplace Response*

Although women, particularly those in marginalized economic and racial groups, have long been in the paid labor force, in previous decades the number of dual-earner couples has increased dramatically. Dual-earner couples now outnumber male breadwinner/female homemaker families nearly three-to-one (Hayghe, 1990; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), and there has been a rise in mothers with children under the age of one in the workforce, from 49.4% in 1985 to 61.8% by 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Similarly, 63.7% of all married mothers with children under the age of six were employed outside the home. These significant demographic shifts have resulted from: (a) economic changes that now require most families to have two incomes for economic viability (Galinsky, 1999) and (b) from an increase in women's desires to have both an active and fulfilling family life as well as professional careers.

Workplace norms and practices have not adequately responded to these demographic shifts. Present-day norms and practices can be traced back to the industrial revolution, when paid work in the labor force became separate from non-paid work at home (Coontz, 1992). This separate sphere ideology gave rise to norms of domesticity that guide thinking about work and family in the US (Williams, 2000). These norms involve several implicit assumptions: that the ideal worker is a (White) male who is employed full time; that his (female) partner is either not employed or is a secondary wage earner, and that she bears primary responsibility for caregiving (elder care and child care) and housework (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Williams, 2000). The lag in changes to workplace practices leads to continued constraints on successfully balancing work and family.

These workplaces norms also contribute to the gender-based inequities that characterize many families. Despite increased labor force participation, women continue to be primarily responsible for the majority of household labor and childcare (Williams, 2000). This inequitable division of labor persists even in families where women work outside the home (Demo & Acock, 1993; Shelton & John, 1993). Employed women continue to shoulder nearly 80% of the "second

shift” of household chores and childcare responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Williams, 2000). In a recent study of 860 business professionals, employed mothers spent more than three times the number of hours per week on childcare activities than did men (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Women also are the primary caretakers of ill and elderly family members (McGoldrick, 1999; Walsh, 1999), and are primarily responsible for the emotional and organizational labor of the family (McGoldrick, 1999). Schwartz and Zimmerman (1992) reported that men have begun to do slightly more household and childcare tasks than they did in the past as women have taken on breadwinning responsibilities, yet an equitable redistribution of responsibility for family work has yet to take place and workplace practices continue to contribute to this inequity for many families.

### *Benefits of Family-Friendly Policies and Practices*

It is clear that work and families are linked—each can affect the other in both positive and negative ways (see Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000, for a review of work and family research in the 1990s, including a discussion of the reciprocal effects of family and work and Voydanoff, 1989 for an earlier review). For instance, people who value both family and work are more likely to reach upper level positions at work than those who do not value both (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000) and workplace flexibility may positively influence parenting (see Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). Employers who respond to the family needs of employees through implementing *family-friendly* policies; that is, policies that support women and men as caretakers and employees, will benefit along with their employees.

The most commonly cited family-friendly policy is workplace flexibility (e.g. Christensen & Staines, 1990; Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Galambos & Walters, 1992; Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996; Gerson & Jacobs, 2001; Holt & Thaulow, 1996; Kropf, 1997; Marshall & Barnett, 1994; Pleck, 1993; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Flexibility may include flextime, or the ability to have flexible starting and ending work times (Christensen & Staines, 1990), schedule control (Galinsky et al., 1996), or the flexibility to respond to non-work (i.e. family) situations (Marshall & Barnett, 1994). Flexibility has been positively linked to job satisfaction, decreased work-family interference, and increased time with family (Christensen & Staines, 1990; Marshall & Barnett, 1994).

The other major area of family friendliness in the workplace involves a *work culture* that supports work-family balance (see Bowen,

1998; Galinsky et al., 1996; Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neill, & Payne, 1989; Pleck, 1993; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Warren & Johnson, 1995). Support may be informal or formal, and these may have different influences on family life. For example, Greenberger et al. (1989) noted that "nearly 48% of married women's organizational commitment was accounted for by...support in the workplace," (p. 755) and that informal support was particularly important for men's well-being, while formal policies affected women's role strain. Thomas and Ganster (1995) found that supportive supervisors had direct positive effects on employee perceptions of control over both work and family, while Warren and Johnson found that work environment support and supervisor flexibility were related to lower work-family role strain.

### *Barriers to Family-Friendly Policies and Practices*

Despite the clear benefits, there remain barriers which inhibit organizations from implementing family-friendly policies. One of the primary barriers continues to be beliefs about gender. For instance, increased sex segregation is associated with decreased provision of family benefits (Deitch & Huffman, 2001). Family-friendly policies are also often seen as of benefit to women; they are not seen as "work and family issues but working *mothers* issues" (Pleck, 1993, p. 218, emphasis in original). However, Pleck made the argument that work and family issues are increasingly issues of men and fathers, not just of working mothers. Unfortunately, the notion that work and family issues do not include men is still pervasive in many workplaces (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). As an example, Gerson and Jacobs (2001) cited evidence that professional men are most likely to be able to set their own working hours, but have the least ability to change their hours daily or as needed. Similarly, Lewis and Lewis (1996) demonstrated that where formal family-friendly policies are developed, men frequently do not make use of them. Further, Gerson and Jacobs noted that it is common for family-friendly policies to "reinforce and reproduce both public and private gender inequality by penalizing employed mothers and excluding fathers altogether" (p. 222).

## **Methods**

The data for this study were part of a larger data set that examined the general adaptive strategies of dual-earner couples who

successfully balance family and work. Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba, and Current (2001), reported on 10 adaptive strategies central to these couples successful work-family balance. While the previous paper examined individual strategies that increased families' success, the present investigation focuses on how their workplaces served as resources for the participants. The methodologies for recruitment, interviewing, and qualitative data analysis are detailed in Haddock et al. (2001); a brief summary of these methods is provided below.

Couples were recruited from three urban areas of Colorado through multiple means, including the distribution of flyers and electronic mail through schools, agencies, and businesses; and media coverage in newspapers and television. Participating couples were considered eligible if: (a) they were married, (b) each spouse completed at least 35 hours per week of paid employment, (c) the couple had at least one child 12 years of age or younger who resided with them at least half of the time, and (d) both partners were informed about and wanted to participate in the study. A final criterion for participation was agreement by couples on five statements defining "success" at managing the realms of family and work: (a) my spouse and I experience more positives than negatives from the opportunity to fill both work and family responsibilities; (b) my spouse and I believe that we are skilled in balancing the many responsibilities in our lives (e.g. spouse, parent, employee); (c) my spouse and I have found and continue to find creative ways for balancing work and family; (d) my spouse and I would be described as skilled in balancing work and family; (e) my spouse and I believe we have quality and quantity time with each other and our children, and are mostly satisfied with our performance at work and home. One hundred and thirteen couples originally expressed interest in the study, of which 50 were found to not meet screening criteria primarily because of demographic considerations (e.g. not married, children older than 12), 11 withdrew prior to screening, and five couples withdrew from the study following successful screening.

Forty-seven couples participated in the study. The mean age was 40 for men and 38 for women. Couples had an average of two children, who ranged in age from 6 months to 23 years. The mean age for the youngest and oldest child was 5 and 9, respectively. Couples were married an average of 12.75 years. Combined incomes ranged from \$34,000 to \$220,000 with a median income of \$105,000 ( $M=\$105,022$ , excluding two atypically high incomes). Women on average made 16.6% less than their husbands with a median income of \$45,000 ( $M=\$54,400$ ) compared to husband's median income of \$54,000 ( $M=\$63,320$ ). While the median combined incomes of participants was

unusually high, their occupations included baker, billing clerk, construction worker, engineer, firefighter, grocery clerk, housekeeper, lawyer, machine operator, minister, musician, nurse, teacher, truck driver, and professor. The average hours worked in a week were 45 for men and 40 for women. The sample included 77 participants who identified as Caucasian, 8 as Hispanic-American, 4 as African-American, 1 as Asian-American, 1 as Caucasian-Native American, and 1 as "Other." The participants reflected a high level of education; all participants had completed high school, 13 had some post-secondary education, 27 completed undergraduate degrees, seven had attended graduate classes, and 40 had earned graduate degrees.

### *Procedure*

Participants were required to complete a questionnaire as an individual, and participate in a conjoint interview, which lasted approximately 90 minutes and was typically conducted in their homes. The decision was made to conduct only conjoint interviews after piloting several interviews comprised of both individual and conjoint portions; individual interviews produced no additional benefit. The interview was comprised of semi-structured open-ended questions regarding the strategies that contributed to their success in balancing family and work. For example, the following questions were asked: (a) what are the primary factors that contribute to your successful balance of family and work? (b) do you have philosophies that are central to the way in which you manage family and work responsibilities, and if so, what are they? (c) what are some of the strategies that you use at work that contribute to successful balance of family and work? Participants were asked in separate questions specifically about qualities of and strategies used in their workplaces that contributed to their perceptions of success. Only those strategies that related to the workplace are reported in this manuscript. As an incentive, all couples received \$30 for their participation.

### *Quantitative Measures*

The questionnaire included basic demographic information and assessments of work, family, marital, and personal variables. Five measures are relevant to the present study: control over schedule, job autonomy, supervisor support, co-worker relationships, and workplace culture. These measures were used in the 1997 National Study of the

Changing Workforce (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). This study is part of a research program of the Families and Work Institute that surveys representative samples of the national workforce every 5 years. The study examines many workplace and family variables.

*Control over schedule.* The participants' control over their work schedule was measured with one item ("How much control do you typically have over your work schedule?"). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1=None" to "5=Complete Control."

*Job autonomy.* The job autonomy scale included three items: "I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job;" "It is basically my responsibility to decide how my job gets done;" and "I have a lot of say about what happens on my job." Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "1=Strongly Disagree" to "4=Strongly Agree;" therefore, higher scores indicate more job autonomy. For this sample, Cronbach's alpha was .72 for wives ( $N=47$ ) and .70 for husbands ( $N=47$ ).

*Supervisor support.* This measure included five items; example questions were: "My supervisor is fair and does not show favoritism in responding to employees' personal and family needs;" "My supervisor is understanding when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work;" and "My supervisor accommodates me when I have family or personal business to take care of—for example, medical appointments, meeting with the child's teacher, etc." Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "1=Strongly Disagree" to "4=Strongly Agree;" therefore, higher scores indicate more perceived supervisor support. For this sample, Cronbach's alpha was .88 for wives ( $N=39$ ) and .85 for husbands ( $N=40$ ). Those participants who were self-employed did not respond to the questions on supervisor support.

*Co-worker relationship.* This measure included two items: "I feel I am really a part of the group of people I work with;" and "I look forward to being with the people I work with each day." Participants responded on the same 4-point Likert as above; therefore, higher scores indicate more perceived collegiality with co-workers. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha was .90 for wives ( $N=42$ ) and .51 for husbands ( $N=43$ ).

*Workplace culture.* This included four items; example items were: "At my place of employment, employees who put their family or personal needs ahead of their jobs are not looked upon favorably;" "If you

have a problem managing your work and family responsibilities, the attitude at my place of employment is: 'You made your bed, now lie in it!'" "At my place of employment, employees have to choose between advancing in their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives." Participants responded on the same 4-point Likert as above; therefore, higher scores indicate *less* perceived workplace support. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha was .73 for wives ( $N=41$ ) and .85 for husbands ( $N=42$ ).

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative analysis was completed prior to analyzing quantitative data to avoid bias during the coding process. Additionally, the primary coder was not one of the principal investigators. A qualitative data analysis program, Atlas/ti (Muhr, 1997) was used to analyze the interview data. Atlas/ti assists in uncovering complex phenomenon hidden in data. It provides means for extracting, managing, comparing, exploring, and reassembling meaningful pieces (i.e. information fragment, or a phrase containing a unique, salient point) from a dataset. Using a process commonly referred to as first-level coding, each information fragment was identified. Using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), these first-level codes were organizing around emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. This approach allowed newly collected data to be compared to previously generated hypotheses. Data categories were collapsed and clarified after reaching theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), achieved through constant comparison between new data and previously created categories, when a common lexicon of terms was created, category modification was diminished, and relationships between concepts crystallized from analysis of the data. To insure the validity of the emerging code structure, we adopted a team approach to data analysis. Each interview was conducted by one member of the research team, reviewed by another, and systematically analyzed by two others. This process allowed each member of the research team to achieve high levels of familiarity with the data. The team met regularly to discuss the emergent themes.

In addition to using a team approach in data analysis, four strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 1998): prior clarification of biases, perspectives, and orientations of the researchers; the use of Atlas/ti to create an on-line audit trail, allowing for re-examination of units of data; description of

findings in a rich, detailed manner; and triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings.

Quantitative methods were used for several purposes. First, the use of multiple methods allows for triangulation of results. Second, quantitative measures provide more molar, broad-stroked findings, whereas qualitative data yields a more fine-tuned or molecular analysis of participants' perceptions of behaviors, which complement and add depth to the more molar or broad-stroked quantitative findings. Means and standard deviations for each measure were calculated. Paired sample *t*-tests were used to determine if husbands' and wives' scores significantly differed.

## Results

Qualitative analysis revealed that participants' descriptions of how their workplaces supported them in balancing work and family clustered into seven predominant themes and two less predominant themes. Predominant themes were flexible work scheduling, non-traditional schedules, professional/job autonomy, working at home, supportive supervisors, and firm boundaries around work and companies that understand that need. These themes were mentioned in more than 60% of the interviews. Two less dominant themes (mentioned in half of the interviews) were family-friendly company policies and supportive co-workers or supervisees. Another theme emerged that was predominant and relevant, but did not reflect how the participants' workplaces supported them in balancing family and work; this theme involved participants' efforts to seek out workplaces or situations that offered family-friendly alternatives.

Many, but not all, of these themes overlapped with the quantitative variables measured (the themes that did not directly overlap with quantitative variables were *working at home*, *firm boundaries around work*, and *accepting positions that support family and work balance*). Therefore, in this section, each of the nine themes will be addressed; relevant qualitative and quantitative findings will be discussed for each theme. A summary of the quantitative findings is provided in Table 1, which provides the means and standard deviations for each variable, as well as results from the paired sample *t*-tests.

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Paired-Sample t-test Results for Wives and Husbands on Workplace Variables

Variable	Wives			Husbands			T
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	
Control over schedule <sup>a</sup>	3.73	.85	47	3.23	.96	47	2.61**
Job autonomy <sup>b</sup>	3.41	.52	47	3.27	.62	47	1.20
Supervisor support <sup>b</sup>	3.42	.57	41	3.19	.65	42	1.65
Co-worker relationship <sup>b</sup>	3.24	.70	45	3.33	.56	43	-.60
Workplace culture <sup>c</sup>	1.75	.59	43	1.85	.70	44	-.70

Note. <sup>a</sup>Scale ranges from 1 (None) to 5 (Complete).

<sup>b</sup>Scale ranges from 1 to 4; higher scores indicate more autonomy, supervisor support, and collegiality.

<sup>c</sup>Scale ranges from 1 to 4; higher scores indicate less supportive culture.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

### *Flexible Work Scheduling*

As indicated in Table 1, both wives and husbands reported enjoying relatively high levels of control over their schedule. A paired sample *t*-test revealed that wives had significantly more control over the schedule than did men. Qualitative findings were consistent with the quantitative findings; flexible scheduling emerged as the most salient work factor contributing to work-family balance. Scheduling flexibility describes the degree to which participants structured their time devoted to work, rather than having scheduling practices explicitly endorsed by company policies. However, even without the formal support of company policy, the results indicate that most participants were employed in occupations that at least facilitated the possibility of flexible scheduling.

As one example of flexibility, many participants reported completing work tasks during the early morning hours, in the evening, or on the weekends, either from home or at the office, allowing additional work to be accomplished without sacrificing valuable family time or disrupting the family routine. Capitalizing on these times allowed participants to keep pace at work, without detracting from time together as a family or compromising their role as parents.

Some participants altered their work schedules on a daily basis, working different hours each day of the week, trading off consistency in schedule for flexibility. These schedule changes were at times made on a permanent basis, or simply modified on a short-term or one-time

basis to allow for temporary changes in life circumstances. The following quotes illustrate different aspects of flexible scheduling:

F (Female Participant): ...if Rich and I have to work overtime, we do it in the morning. That way it does not interfere with the afternoon and the different activities the kids have going on.

M (Male Participant): I mean, she works too, so it is not her responsibility to do everything around the house. So, I pretty much try to cut loose as close to 5:00 as I can, get home, help out, do all that stuff, and then the work that I need to do at home, I do at 9:00 at night after everybody else has gone to bed.

### *Non-Traditional Schedules*

Interviews revealed that many participants also worked schedules that fell outside of the 8-hour per day, 40-hours per week tradition. Three sub-themes emerged describing the non-traditional schedules worked by participants in this sample.

First, *long work shifts*, often extending as long as 10 or 12 hours, were quite common among participants. While extending the work day often limited free time available on those days, many participants reported benefiting by having a third day off during the week to spend with family or accomplish other tasks necessary for family-work balance. In addition, some participants reported irregular work schedules, or non-traditional workweeks. Again, these couples were engaging in trade-offs where they work long shifts on some days in order to have time for family on other days. These arrangements required them to communicate on a regular basis and to have developed effective and efficient strategies for co-managing family-work balance.

F: ...I would start out by saying our biggest strategy is finding out what Larry and my workdays look like and communicating about it. Because the unique thing about my job is that it can change every day... Some people, when they hear that they think, "Oh my gosh, how can you and Larry juggle that, because every day your schedule changes?" And actually, we think it is better...as long as Larry and I are communicating about who's picking who up and who's dropping who off.

Second, many participants were employed in occupations that involved *evening or overnight shifts*, allowing at least one partner to be at home during all hours of the day. While such arrangements often limited the quantity of time for spouses to spend with one another, different work shifts allowed one partner to be available for the children and completing household responsibilities at all times.

M: ...at night, when it is 11:30 p.m., like last night, the alarm went off and Christine was still up and I had to get up and go to work. I guess I am a morning person to the extreme when I work the hours that I do, but I like being up that time of day because everybody else is asleep and I am getting stuff done!

Finally, participants who were employed in academics at either the elementary, high school, or university level enjoyed time off when their children had time off from school. Teachers reported that one of the most important benefits of their occupation was working on an academic calendar that allowed for summers off, generous vacation time (i.e. spring break, winter break), and periodic sabbatical leaves. Each of these benefits served to limit the amount of work required in the course of a year and allowed ample opportunities for participants to enjoy time with their children.

M: I used to teach in another school district, and when the kids got to be near school age I knew that if I was in another school district that we would never have vacations at the same time. Their spring break would be different than mine would be and summer break would come at a different time too. So I gave up basically 12 years of seniority in my job and started over again in a new school district so that we could have the same vacations. That was something that was more important to me.

### *Professional/Job Autonomy*

As shown in Table 1, quantitative data indicated that both wives and husbands enjoyed relatively high levels of professional/job autonomy, with no significant difference between the autonomy enjoyed by wives and husbands. Qualitative findings were consistent with these quantitative findings. This theme illustrates the manner by which participants' occupations created a sense of professional independence and control allowing them opportunities to exercise personal influence over the structure and course of their work. Participant's descriptions of professional/job autonomy clustered into three sub-themes.

Seven female and six male participants reported that they were *self-employed*. This allowed participants to experience high overall levels of professional/job autonomy that allowed significant control over their work to shape schedules and to remain actively involved in the lives of their children. The trade-off for being self employed for some is that there is not the job security involved in having a job in a company, but the autonomy was seen as worth the opportunity cost.

M: I used to have a regular job. You can go to an office for 8 hours a day and do 2 hours worth of work and twiddle your thumbs and push paper the rest of the day. But now I work for myself at home, so when he [our son] takes his nap, I do lots and lots of work in that 2 hour period.

A large number of participants were employed in occupations at a *management or supervisory level*. Positions such as these offered benefits, such as the ability to create company work schedules around personal needs. Additionally, several participants reported working for employers who allowed employees to work independently without a great deal of close supervision, which offered opportunities to determine the manner by which work time was utilized and to enjoy professional independence. Along with this, interviews also indicated that many participants enjoyed the freedom to take personal time away from work. Often, this time was used for such activities as attending parent-teacher conferences, taking time off to care for children who are ill, and planning time with spouses and children.

F: ...for instance, I know Steven has a teacher's conference coming up. Marty signed up for a conference next week and I am pretty sure I am working. So, what I am going to do is...punch out for a half hour, 45 minutes and go to the conference and then come back to work.

Many participants found employment in occupations that allowed *freedom to dictate the nature of the workload* involved. This freedom emerged in two primary forms, as participants reported the ability to determine the overall amount of responsibility and type of duties involved with their jobs, and by determining the manner by which work responsibilities could be completed.

M: With my real estate business, if the clients do not like Peter [son] coming along sometimes when I show property, then I would not keep them as clients. It is not worth that.

F: Well, I have the ability to determine the times that I want to teach my classes. So, I try to think about what types of things will be going on and so I try to pick times that will fit my schedule.

### *Working at Home*

Interviews revealed that a significant number of participants completed at least a portion of their weekly workload at home. Working at home clearly emerged as a vital factor for participants who described

themselves as self-employed. Many self-employed participants would periodically bring work home, while others had home offices or workspaces that allowed full-time work at home. Additionally, working at home provided participants the opportunity to consistently leave the office on time by completing work not accomplished during the workday at home. Doing so allowed participants to remain actively involved in family life and avoid feeling trapped at work. Also, working at home allowed participants to determine the timing of task completion. Many chose to work at times when their children would be busy with homework or already asleep for the evening. Structuring work at home in this fashion allowed participants to complete greater amounts of work without having professional obligations distract from precious family time. In this sense, working at home often appeared closely linked to participants' overall level of autonomy.

M: I do a lot of my office work during the day when the kids are at school. There are a lot of opportunities, because it is quiet, that I can get a lot of things done.

F: One thing that makes it really easy is that any given day, if I have to, I can work from home. I have remote access set up, I just plug my PC in and I can work at home or I can call in for meetings. If they are [child] sick, I can work while they are sleeping or whatever and I can get my hours in however I want...

M: I basically do some of the management part here, schedules and things like that, but my supervisors count that as time in on the clock.

### *Supportive Supervisors*

As shown in Table 1, quantitative data indicated that both wives and husbands enjoyed relatively high levels of supervisor support, with no significant difference between the support perceived by wives or husbands. Qualitative findings were consistent with these quantitative findings. Interviews indicated that support from supervisors made a significant contribution to participants' feelings of success in achieving family and work balance. Generally, participants recognized that supervisory support enhanced overall feelings of work satisfaction and promoted a generalized sense of success in balancing the responsibilities of life.

Many participants reported working under supervisors who understood that family was the first priority of their employees while also having a high level of involvement in their own families. As a result, participants often reported that supervisors recognized and

respected the need for setting limits on the number of hours at the office and involvement in the lives of their children. Participants also expressed appreciation for supervisors who were approachable, easy to communicate with, open to considering new ideas, expressed interest in the personal lives of employees, and generally demonstrated a high level of respect for employees. Participants reported that this trait often produced higher levels of professional commitment. Overall, supportive supervisors appeared to communicate respect through the value placed on employees' work and also through a willingness to accommodate to the employees' individual needs.

M: But I think that my work realizes that if they let me leave for an hour during the day, so I can watch the kids swim at school, that I am more productive when I come back.

F: I have always been a very committed employee, and yet because my company cares about my personal life, it makes me even more committed to them. I think that is one of the best things a company can do for their employees.

### *Firm Boundaries Around Work and Companies that Understand that Need*

The relationship between employee and employer proved instrumental in allowing participants to protect the importance of life outside of work without the fear of consequences or detrimental effects in the workplace. Overall, two sub-themes emerged from interviews that captured the meaning of this important work theme.

First, several participants took steps to *communicate the importance of family* to supervisors and co-workers. It was not uncommon for participants to explicitly state that family stood as the top priority of life, ultimately taking precedence over work in situations requiring participants to choose between the two. Furthermore, participants who made such statements in the workplace often found that the desire to maintain the importance of family was generally well received and understood by superiors at work.

M: I think that if you let people know that you are family oriented, and you have let them know that is one of your main philosophies, they are more lenient toward you, they are more flexible to let you do things.

Second, participants indicated that establishing firm boundaries at work also included the ability to *place limits on their workloads* and

the number of hours spent at the office. Participants often commented that the amount of work involved with their occupations could well be infinite without setting acceptable limits of their professional responsibilities. These participants were sometimes sacrificing advancement at work in order to balance work and family, representing another trade-off. Participants made efforts to protect time with their families and to prevent their occupations from monopolizing their lives.

M: ...I think what the biggest strategy has been and will be after I change jobs is setting work boundaries. So it is important to say, "OK, this is where my line's going."

F: I have to control how much I work because I could work a lot more than I do. I explain to my clients, "I have more than you as my customer." I will give you this amount of time." Most of them have been very good about understanding that.

### *Supportive Co-Workers or Supervisees*

As shown in Table 1, both husbands and wives reported relatively high levels of collegiality and support from co-workers, with no significant gender differences. This theme emerged from interview data, but was less dominant theme than those listed above. The theme captured a sense of support from others at work that often applied to both the personal and professional domains, communicating a sense of teamwork, respect, and concern.

Participant interviews indicated that co-worker and supervisee support often emerged in the form of *assistance covering time away* from work or by helping to distribute and share the workload during stressful times. Specifically, this coverage was beneficial by allowing participants the opportunity to participate in family or child-oriented activities or to have a break from work during particularly busy times of the year. Whether it was from scheduling appointments at convenient times of the day or helping with childcare, participants reported that supervisees were often prepared to make adjustments in the name of offering support.

Also, participants expressed appreciation for the emotional support provided by others in the workplace. Specifically, it appears that participants saw co-workers and supervisors as resources for coping with work-related stressors and also with difficult family circumstances. In particular, this area of support appeared to transcend the bounds of personal and professional relationships and emerged as a

genuine connection between professional colleagues. Finally, participants reported that support from co-workers and supervisees often found its root in strong feelings of loyalty to peers, supervisors, and the company. These feelings of loyalty were most often bi-directional between supervisors and supervisees, creating a relationship in which either would put forth the effort necessary to assist the other.

F: ...if there is a situation, for example, where I might have to get away for a baseball game or something like that... they would come in and take my place for that period of time, where I might not be able to otherwise do that...so, if you have, not just family-oriented organizations or places of employment, but you also have family-oriented employees or cohorts, that is been key to talking about schedule trades...

M: Well, for me, it is with my staff again...my approach and ethic at work is allegiance to my staff and because of that I get it in return. There is incredible mutual allegiance and loyalty to each other and that right there helps to give me the balance I need.

### *Family Friendly Company Policies*

Quantitative findings reveal that both wives and husbands perceive their workplace culture as generally supportive, and again there was no significant gender difference in this perception. This theme emerged in qualitative data, but was relatively less dominant. The quantitative measure only captures participants' perceptions of the culture of their workplace.

In interviews, participants also described formal company policies that were helpful to them in balancing family and work. Across interviews, a large number of company policies emerged as vital to the success of participants. Yet, given the diversity of policies, extracting common themes proved difficult. As a result, the following quotations were drawn from among the available data to provide examples of specific company policies, but are not intended to be generalizable among the entire sample of participants.

Many companies offered employees an extended sick leave policy designed to cover accident or illness for either themselves or their children.

M: ...my job will let me take personal leave, up to a week and not count it as vacation, if one of our kids are pretty sick. So, we get a week of pay if...there was an accident or one of the kids was just really sick and had to be at home.

Some companies made computer technology available to employees in an effort to limit the amount of time necessary at the office. Such policies enhanced participants' job flexibility and autonomy by allowing work to be completed from virtually any location at any time.

M: I am working in the same industry as I was before, but now this company, they want me in the office once a week for sure and then two other times if I can pop in. But they also provide me with a company laptop and Internet access so I can ... work remotely.

The following participant worked for a company that provided employees with educational materials on family-work balance. Making such material available clearly placed this particular company as a supportive innovator in the domain of family-work balance.

F: ...eldercare kits, babysitter kits, stay-at-home kits. I have access to all types of free educational material; tapes on balancing work and family, time management, and all those brochures are free to me...for just being an employee.

The following participant was employed at a small law firm where children were welcome in the office on teacher planning days as employees often struggled to find childcare. This quote indicates that having children at the office did influence overall productivity, but was still a worthwhile sacrifice in the name of maintaining a family-friendly company atmosphere.

F: I have a law partner and there are six people who work in our office; there are two partners and the rest of the people are our staff. But, it is a family friendly office... we let people bring in their kids for the day...they can come and they can read books and hang out. It is a little bit disruptive, but we cope.

Finally, the following participant described an innovative policy at his or her company referred to as the "buddy system." This policy attempted to reduce the stress and worry often associated with employee vacations or personal leave time by asking colleagues to cover for co-workers who were away from the office.

M: A part of my company's culture, is the concept of the "buddy system"....this is for short absences and long absences, including vacations, where you basically have to sign up...and get the agreement of somebody who will be a buddy and cover for you while you are out.

*Accepting Positions that Support Family and Work Balance*

Evidence from participant interviews suggests that many spouses actively sought out occupations that enhanced overall feelings of family-work balance. In describing this theme, participants often discussed recent job changes and the decision-making process that influenced their selection of occupations. As reasons why they chose one job in favor of another, participants most often mentioned the following five sub-themes.

First, participants reported selecting occupations with a desire to *limit the amount of responsibility and stress* associated with work. In fact, many participants discussed stepping down from higher positions at work, cutting work duties, or placing personal and family happiness above career advancement. Participants indicated that taking such steps was ultimately beneficial, as increased feelings of balance led to an enhanced quality of life. Giving up these higher positions was a necessary trade-off for personal and family happiness.

F: ...at the beginning, when I had my first son I was the store manager, so I had a lot more responsibility. And after I had Luke [second son], I stepped down from my title, which I was totally fine with, and it is actually made my life at home a lot less crazy because, when I leave work now, I do not even think about it.

Second, *job flexibility* emerged as an important prerequisite upon which many participants based career decisions. Participants reported valuing occupational flexibility and gravitating toward careers that offered higher levels of flexibility than those experienced in previous jobs.

M: ...I keep shifting into areas in which I have more and more autonomy and more and more flexibility. And those have been deliberate choices that have been good for our family, not just for my career.

Third, participants indicated that an additional sub-theme in enhancing family-work balance hinged upon the *commute time* to and from work. Participants often selected occupations located close to home in order to limit the overall duration of the workday and allow an increased amount of time for family activities and domestic responsibilities.

F: Before I worked at this store, I worked downtown and spent at least 45 minutes in the car everyday. When I stepped down and changed stores, I thought, "Oh my gosh, it is going to be worth it because there

is going to be 10 hours a week that I am not going to be driving.” That was a huge factor because the store I work at now is only 3–5 minutes away from home.

Fourth, selecting jobs that *limited the amount of work-related travel* also emerged as a key component in participants’ professional decisions making. Many participants found that traveling created family challenges, such as feelings of disconnection from spouses and children, leaving one spouse with an unequal burden of household and family duties during business trips, and feelings that finding a sense of balance was extremely difficult. For some participants, selection of an occupation without work-related travel limited career options and advancement, yet participants repeatedly stated it as a worthwhile sacrifice for family well-being, again reflecting well thought consideration of opportunity costs.

M: I had a job where I traveled a lot... we kind of looked at each other and said, “This is not working out really well.” Career-wise it worked out OK for me, but at the expense of a lot of other things. So, I decided to have a change and that is probably been the best thing for me...

Finally, some participants reported selecting career paths on the basis of *non-financial benefits* associated with a given job. Specifically, participants reported choosing occupations that may have offered less pay, but included other attractive benefits, such as community location, generous amounts of time off, medical insurance, and retirement planning.

M: ...that is one reason I am with the government...I do not make as much money as I could, but they have a great benefit package. I get lots of times off, lots of holidays, and it is flexible.

## Discussion

Consistent with previous research on balancing work and family, we found that flexible work scheduling was the most prominent theme among these families who reported successfully balancing work and family. For many in this study, they were able to structure when they worked so that they could have more time to devote to family, either accomplishing work during non-traditional hours (e.g. early morning), or altering work schedules on both permanent and short-term bases. We found that many participants were able to adjust work schedules

whether employers were supportive or not, though workplace flexibility made this an easier task. Political debates concerning work-family balance often center around the expense associated with employers offering support to employees. In this study, flexibility in scheduling was the most important support method. Flexibility in scheduling may be one of the least costly responses workplaces could consider for supporting balancing family and work. These findings are particularly interesting in that this is one of the few studies that investigate couples where both the husband and the wife report being successful at managing both work and family.

The only gender difference in the study was in the area of control over schedule. Women in our study perceived significantly more control of their schedules than did men. This finding could be due to workplace norms that hold it is necessary for women to arrange their schedules around family—norms of domesticity hold that women are the caretakers of the family. Workplaces may covertly or overtly be more accepting of women arranging their schedules around family life, thus women may perceive that they have more control over their schedules. In addition, even men and women who successfully balance work and family may be personally influenced by these norms, resulting in perceptions of flexibility that support gender stereotypes. The women and men in this study did not differ on perceived job autonomy, supervisor support, co-worker support, or on perceived supportiveness of workplace culture. Given past research which indicates the importance of supportive workplace culture and supervisors, it is not surprising that these families, who report success in balancing family and work, were working in such organizations.

These families reported that a supportive workplace was important to balancing family and work. Autonomy was a key for this success, especially for a substantial number of families who had self-employed members. In addition, for those who were not self-employed, the support of supervisors, co-workers, and the organization was clearly also important. Family-friendly policies were a significant part of this workplace support, and many of these policies are reflected in the literature on work and family (e.g. child care or support for having children in the office, flextime) (Ezra & Deckham, 1996; Warren & Johnson, 1995). Yet, it is important to note that policies that may be associated with employer expense were not reported as being as important as flextime and support which may be less expensive.

What we see in these families is that there is not simply one key to successfully balancing work and family. Instead, what we see is that policies, workplace norms and support, flexibility, and autonomy are

all, to some degree, required for negotiating this successful balance. In fact, these families did not discuss workplace or family strategies more often; that is, they were equally important for their success. So, successfully balancing family and work may require what Levner (2000) refers to as the *third career*—that families have “reconceptualized the ‘two-career family’ as a family with ‘three careers’ (the third being family life)” (p. 29). Levner (2000) describes this as a dramatic shift from seeing work as more important than family to seeing both work and family as important. Significantly, Levner (2000) notes that this shift eliminates the tendency to see women’s careers as secondary. As the families in this study are balancing work and family, they are certainly considering three careers as important and finding ways with each career to support and benefit the others.

It is important to note that these couples are also actively considering the opportunity costs and trade-offs as they make these strategic decisions to balance family and work. Many of these couples reported that one or both of them were giving up aspects of successful work in order to gain personal satisfaction and family balance. Clearly, for these couples the benefits of balancing work and family outweighed the potential costs of not giving in to the gendered roles of work and family where the male works to the exclusion of the family and the female takes care of the family to the exclusion of work. As more and more couples struggle to balance dual careers, these trade-off considerations will become more and more important.

### **Implications**

In order to successfully balance work and family life, both employers and employees have significant tasks (see also Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; MacDermid & Targ, 1995), and both employers and families benefit from family-friendly policies. This study shows that workplace and organizational support, supervisor support, job/professional autonomy, and workplace flexibility are the most important variables among workplace strategies. The families in this study (in part due to social class and educational levels) were able to seek out employers who have these characteristics, leading the way for other families wishing to balance family and work. Employers, too, can learn from these successful families about what works in supporting this balance. It is imperative that organizations overcome these barriers and begin viewing family-supportive policies as human capital investment. Hall (1990) clearly linked corporate success with

employers demonstrably valuing their employees. This includes a re-frame from seeing family-responsive benefits as merely corporate welfare to being seen as a tool for competitive advantage (Gonyea & Googins, 1996). While Kingston (1989) stated that many of the policy implications stated in the work-family literature have not been based in research, this research can provide specific guidance for employers and policy makers wishing to support dual-career couples.

There is extensive evidence in the literature demonstrating the benefits to employers offering family-supportive policies: higher retention of employees, employees advancing in career within the same company; reduced turnover, reduced absenteeism, higher morale and increased productivity, and reduction in training costs of newly hired employees (Deitch & Huffman, 2001; Friedman & Galinsky, 1992; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Gonyea & Googins, 1996; Schwartz & Zimmerman, 1992; Swiss & Walker, 1993). Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) noted that:

Those of us in family-friendly firms do spend less time on work and more on life outside work—but our job performance is no different from that of people in non-supportive organizations, and we are more committed to our organizations (p. 5–6).

### *Conclusions*

Most importantly, workers can proactively seek workplaces that are family friendly, as many of our participants did. This creates a competitiveness issue for employers as they compete for workers who are showing that they can be successful in both spheres. In addition, there is much that workers can do to structure their lives to balance work and family. These workers found jobs that limited the amount of stress that was associated with work, that had significant job flexibility, that were close to home in order to limit commuting time, and that limited work-related travel that stole time from family life, and that had a range of benefits that would help in their endeavor to balance their lives.

This study extends and confirms the work-family balance literature by exploring the workplace practices experienced by couples successfully balancing work and family and shows that employers and policy makers can make significant contributions to family success. To date, such successful families have lacked a voice in shaping workplace policy. As family researchers, it is imperative that we include family

voices in assessing what is beneficial and what barriers remain in the workplace in balancing work and family.

The final, but perhaps most important, implication of this study is that, at least for these participants, there were limited gender differences. The commonly held belief that workplaces are less supportive of men's desires to be involved in family life (see Pleck, 1993) and that men do not want to be involved in family life did not prevail in this study. These families, for the most part, were able to overcome societal messages that men are "naturally" suited for employment and women for caretaking and homemaking. These couples indeed were balancing work and family by actively, and to a degree equally, being involved in both earning and caring. Indeed, these couples actively sought out workplaces that supported these critical endeavors.

### *Limitations*

This sample predominantly represented relatively highly educated, middle-class couples in career positions. While these results cannot be generalized to all dual earner families, these results offer a model for success that may be applicable to many families. It is impossible to predict how these workplace strategies for success would be similar or different among couples with lower incomes but it is likely that those in working class and service positions, which may offer less flexibility and autonomy, might have difficulty finding these characteristics in their current jobs. It is likely that a contributor to the success of the couples in this study was their income. Evidence exists that higher income levels and career positions (that typically offer more autonomy and flexibility, for instance) may contribute positively to work and family balance. It is our hope that this study will be replicated with families from lower-income families that do not include dual-career couples. Only a few of the members of these couples were self-employed, and while self-employment was one of the sub-themes of autonomy, future research should further compare those who are self-employed with those who are employed in more traditional pursuits.

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