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# Use of Formal and Informal Work–Family Policies on the Digital Assembly Line

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This study compares work–family policy use among low wage, predominately female call center workers and their more highly paid managers. Both formal policies and the informal work–family arrangements that employees negotiate with their supervisors were examined. Consistent with the work devotion perspective, it was found that formal work–family policies are more widely used among hourly workers than managers, and those with better performance evaluations are less likely than their otherwise similar coworkers to use formal work–family policies. The ability to negotiate informal work–family arrangements and use them as a supplement to formal policies is also important to workers in this study, especially women with children and those providing care to people with special needs. Access to informal arrangements may be limited to the high performers, however. Overall, this research suggests that the work devotion framework, which derives from studies of elite workers, may be more broadly applicable than previously assumed.

**Keywords:** *work–family policy; call center; managers; gender*

There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on work–family policies (e.g., Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Harrington & James, 2006; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Kossek & Friede, 2006; Moen & Rohling, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Much of this research focuses on those most valued in the labor market—managers and professionals. Compared with other employees, these workers have more resources, such as advanced education and skills, high incomes, and strong

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work attachment (e.g., Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001; Secret, 2000; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). They are also more likely than other workers to have access to work–family benefits (Haley, Perry-Jenkins, & Armenia, 2001; Lambert, 1999). The widespread adoption of work–family policies by large companies during the tight labor markets of the 1990s was in part aimed at recruiting and retaining these desirable workers.

Research on managers and professionals has shown that many more employees have access to work–family policies than actually use them (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001; Hochschild, 1997). Some scholars have attributed this gap between access and use to firms' cultural expectations of those holding professional and managerial jobs. Employers define elite jobs as requiring the demonstration of undivided work devotion and organizational commitment (Blair-Loy, 2003). Elite employees avoid using officially available work–family policies because they take for granted the firm's demand for single-minded commitment, personally embrace a work-devoted identity (Blair-Loy, 2003; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002, 2004), and/or fear that policy use may have negative career consequences (Blair-Loy, 2003; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002, 2004; Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1999; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Williams, 1999).

Work devotion offers a powerful explanation of elite employees' work–family views and behavior. However, important implications of this argument remain unexplored. For example, the commitment expectations that bind professionals and managers to their work are presumed to be less salient for working-class employees, as are the negative career consequences associated with using work–family policies. But systematic comparisons between high- and low-paid workers are necessary to confirm these differences and gauge the distinctiveness of elite employees' work–family policy use. In addition, although studies suggest that managers and professionals fear negative consequences for using work–family policies, the connections between policy use and performance evaluation have not received much attention, nor do we know whether these connections are stronger among elite employees, as the work devotion approach assumes.

Another limitation of most previous studies is their exclusive emphasis on formal work–family policies. Formal policies make up only one part of the ecology of work–family accommodations that employees may rely on, however. Many employees depend solely or in part on informal work–family arrangements (Christensen, 1989). In contrast to formal policies, informal work–family arrangements are not official, written down, or public (Eaton, 2003), but instead represent individually negotiated, private agreements between an employee and his or her supervisor. Whether these more private

arrangements are more accessible to some groups of workers than others is an empirical question. More generally, issues such as which workers are most likely to rely on these types of accommodations, the conditions under which they are likely to do so, and their relationship to formal work–family policy use are poorly understood (Lambert & Kossek, 2005). An analysis of these issues would provide clues about the accessibility, desirability, and legitimacy of formal policies and yield a fuller picture of the ways that employees in different occupational locations navigate work–family demands.

In contrast to most previous studies, which have looked only at formal work–family policy use or have focused exclusively on one type of employee, this research examines the use of formal policies and informal arrangements in one company, paying particular attention to differences in use among hourly workers and their managers. We also look at the relations between different patterns of policy use and supervisors' ratings of employees' performance. We collected our data from two U.S.-based call centers, both of which are part of a multinational financial service corporation that we call International Finance (a pseudonym).

International Finance offers a generous array of formal work–family benefits that are officially available to all employees. The firm is regularly ranked by the business press as among the best companies for working mothers, largely because of its official work–family policies. For example, employees have the option of formally requesting dependent care leave, flextime, or a compressed work week.<sup>2</sup> But these policies' existence on paper neither ensures that employees will be motivated and will be able to use them nor does it reveal anything about the factors that facilitate or impede workers' ability to make informal work–family arrangements.

This research is important for several reasons. The article holds constant access to formal corporate work–family policies, which is the same for all respondents, to analyze the understudied variable of policy use. Our detailed data on formal policies, informal arrangements, and employee performance ratings provide a fuller picture of the range of accommodations workers seek at their workplace and the relationships between these accommodations and supervisors' evaluations of employees. In addition, a comparison of hourly workers and managers in the same firm can tell us more about the factors that shape people's work–family policy use than can studies focused on a single occupational group or on multiple occupational groups with different employers.

Finally, call centers are important to study because of their dramatic growth in the past two decades. Estimates suggest that call centers grew at 20% annually in the 1990s and that they now employ at least 3% of the

workforce in the United States (Batt, Hunter, & Wilk, 2003). Although earlier research has explored the implications of call center growth for job quality and mobility opportunities among low-wage service workers (Batt et al., 2003), we compare work–family policy use among hourly workers and managers. As in other studies of call centers (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000), our sample is predominately females. Because women tend to have more responsibility than men for caregiving work, they face particular challenges balancing family obligations with the demands of call center labor.

### **The Demands of Call Center Work**

Call centers have been called the digital assembly line, as a reference to the factorylike organization of the low-wage, hourly service jobs that make up the bulk of the call center work force (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000; Head, 2003). An onsite visit by two of the authors to a call center run by International Finance revealed the stressful, demanding, and insecure conditions that workers face on a daily basis. This nonunionized call center is in a remote area and separated from other firm functions, which geographically limits workers' internal promotion opportunities and ensures dead-end jobs. Moreover, the flow of telephone traffic could easily be directed to another call center, perhaps in a country with lower wages. This competition keeps wages low and makes call centers vulnerable to closings (see also Batt et al., 2003).

Meeting International Finance's high productivity demands means that workers must take between 100 and 150 calls per shift to fulfill daily quotas. Workers are under constant surveillance, as all calls are recorded. Their interactions with customers are monitored and precisely measured quantitatively in terms of the number of calls dealt with, the speed of answer, the average length of calls, and the proportion of callers who hang up while on hold. Qualitatively, supervisors monitor employees to evaluate their courtesy with customers, knowledge and accuracy of service plans, and compliance with government regulations.

As call centers have expanded, so too has the demand for call center managers. Although these workers have received relatively little attention from call center researchers, much is known about managers' work and family lives more generally (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2003; Moen & Roehling, 2005; Perlow, 1997). For example, studies show that managers have seen increased working hours over the past 25 years; many of these workers would prefer to work less (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). The financial services industry demands particularly long hours, as it faces competitive pressures from globalization, consolidation, and new technologies (Blair-Loy & Jacobs, 2003).

In addition to long work hours, managers employed by large corporations report increasing stress associated with deteriorating job conditions, declining job security, and greater pressures to perform (Fraser, 2001). These working conditions are especially troublesome for working parents, who must balance demanding jobs with responsibilities to children and family. As dual-earner households become the modal family arrangement, more managers and professionals confront these work–family challenges (Moen & Roehling, 2005).

In prior research in a different area of the company, we found that managers (and professionals) at International Finance experienced many of the same conditions chronicled in the literature more generally (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002, 2004; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002). For instance, International Finance expects its managers and professionals to put in long work hours and exhibit high levels of dedication; working conditions thus are stressful for these employees. In addition, following the trend of other global banks, International Finance completed a huge merger in the late 1990s, followed by a massive layoff. Precarious job security and deteriorating pension rewards have contributed to a high pressure work environment for managers and professionals at the firm.

### **The Work Devotion Perspective on Work–Family Policy Use**

Research on access to work–family policies has found that these policies are generally more available to privileged employees, such as professionals and other highly educated workers (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Deitch & Huffman, 2001; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005). For example, data from Employee Benefits Surveys conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that professionals, those in larger organizations and in the public sector, have more access to work–family benefits than other workers (Secret, 2000).

Compared with research on benefit availability, studies of work–family policy use are far fewer and the results are more equivocal. For example, Lambert (1999) found a positive association between occupational status and family income and workers' use of work–family benefits in a large manufacturing firm. Secret (2000) found that salary (but not occupational status) was positively associated with workers' use of alternative work arrangements. Neither salary nor occupational status was related to use of paid leave benefits, however.

One stream of research on managers and professionals offers a different vantage point from which to consider the factors that shape work–family policy use. In a qualitative study of the finance industry, Blair-Loy (2003) found that many U.S. firms operate according to a “work devotion schema,” which mandates that elite employees view work as a calling deserving single-minded focus and allegiance. The work devotion schema is a socially constructed cultural model, embedded in organizational “practices of evaluation, compensation, and advancement,” which “has become semi-autonomous from purely economic considerations and acquired its own normative impact” (Blair-Loy, 2003, p. 21).

This schema has several dimensions, each of which may be more or less salient for different employees. These dimensions include a taken-for-granted acceptance of the legitimacy (or intractability) of firms’ intensive work expectations, fear of the consequences of not outwardly signaling work devotion, and, for some, a moral and emotional embrace of single-minded professional identity that includes inspiration from the projects and relationships that work provides. Blair-Loy finds that the most highly valued and highly rewarded employees are the most likely to internalize work devotion and avoid manifesting commitment to competing life domains. Yet even those who do not personally embrace this mandate are expected by the firm to act as if they have, by working long hours and by avoiding publicly signaling a preoccupation with family responsibilities.

These results are consistent with research on other samples of elite employees. A quantitative study of managers and professionals in financial services found that the most work-devoted employees—those with more supervisory responsibility, more organizational commitment, longer work hours, and higher pay—were also those most likely to say they had no need or no interest in formal work–family policies (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; see also Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002). Similar findings are also seen in studies of corporate managers (Fried, 1998; Hochschild, 1997) and attorneys (Epstein, Saute, Oglensky, & Gever, 1995; Epstein et al., 1999).

## Hypotheses

We draw from the work devotion framework to develop a series of hypotheses. These hypotheses involve predictions about call center managers’ and workers’ use of work–family policies, and they refer to the expected relations between policy use and employee performance ratings. First, however, we describe the four different types of accommodations that employees in our sample may seek. Formal work–family policies are available

to all sample members, regardless of their occupation. Some employees may rely exclusively on these formal policies. A second possibility is exclusive use of informal work–family arrangements. A third alternative is reliance on both formal work–family policies and informal arrangements. Finally, some employees may use neither type of accommodation. Our hypotheses address the likelihood that an employee will be in one of these categories relative to another, and they address the relationships between type of policy use and employee performance rating.

According to the work devotion perspective, the cultural mandate demanding single-minded allegiance to work is presumed to be more intense at the top of the occupational hierarchy than at lower levels, and among those with most to gain from adherence to this cultural schema. By this logic, higher-status employees should have a greater aversion to using work–family policies than lower-status workers. Elite employees are assumed to avoid using work–family policies because of an acquiescence to the firm’s expectations for intensive work commitment, a work-devoted identity, and/or fear that a public acknowledgement of family obligations would jeopardize their career prospects.

Hourly workers’ ability to use work–family policies should be less constrained and any negative career consequences of policy use less severe. Employers have less need for visible signals of dedication from employees who are tightly controlled and whose performance is closely monitored and easily assessed. Furthermore, those whose opportunities for promotion are minimal to begin with have fewer reasons to embrace a work-devoted identity or to fear diminished advancement opportunities should they want to use work–family policies.

Our hypotheses are based on this reasoning and summarized in Table 1. Managers should be less likely than hourly employees to use formal work–family policies or a combination of formal and informal policies. Performance rating should be negatively associated with use of formal work–family policies or a combination of formal and informal policies for both managers and hourly workers, but these relationships should be stronger among managers.

The work devotion perspective assumes that managers’ avoidance of formal work–family policies stems more from normative pressures and fear of career consequences than from a lack of need for these accommodations. Although it is difficult to disentangle these motivations, a consideration of informal work–family arrangements offers one way to examine this issue. Informal arrangements differ from formal work policies in three important respects. Because informal arrangements are individually negotiated with

**Table 1**  
**Hypothesized Effect of Managerial Occupation on Likelihood of Using Each Policy Type (Relative to Using No Policies) and Predicted Relationship Between Policy Use and Performance Rating**

	Formal Only	Informal Only	Both Formal and Informal
Manager (versus hourly workers) Performance Rating	Lower Negative	Higher Positive	Lower Negative

supervisors, use of these accommodations may be more discreet than use of formal policies. Employees' special arrangements with supervisors thus may never appear on their personnel records. Second, unlike formal policies, to which all workers have access by virtue of their status as employees, use of informal work–family arrangements is at the discretion of supervisors. Finally, because they are customized for individuals, informal work–family arrangements may also provide more flexibility than formal policies, whose use may be more rule bound.

These characteristics provide clues as to which employees might be expected to use informal work–family arrangements and how use may be related to employee performance ratings. Managers are expected to avoid using formal work–family policies. However, if family demands make some sort of accommodation necessary, managers should prefer to quietly set up informal arrangements over the more visible and possibly stigmatizing use of formal policies. Furthermore, managers should have more access to informal work–family arrangements than hourly workers. Not only should supervisors be more willing to negotiate with higher-level employees than those in more routine jobs, but their higher levels of job autonomy should give managers more flexibility than hourly workers to create customized work–family arrangements. We thus expect that managers will be more likely to rely on informal work–family arrangements than formal policies or both formal and informal policies and that they will rely on informal arrangements to a greater extent than hourly workers. Because informal arrangements must be negotiated with supervisors, higher performing employees should have more access to informal work–family arrangements than those regarded less favorably by employers. Performance rating should be positively associated with use of informal arrangements for both managers and hourly workers.

## Data and Variables

### Data

The present sample is primarily based on a questionnaire we administered in 2001 to managers and hourly workers at two separate International Finance call center establishments, Southeastern and Midwestern (pseudonyms). The construction of the survey instrument was informed by a call center visit, in which we conducted interviews with 13 employees and talked informally with several more in their cubicles, in the cafeteria, and in the company gym. We also rely on personnel records provided directly to us by the company at the time our survey was distributed. Both sites included in the study are located in medium-sized cities noted for their growth in the financial services sector. International Finance is among both cities' largest employers. The hourly jobs in each site are primarily collectors and customer representatives; the managers work in a variety of positions. The Southeastern site hosts an onsite day care center and the Midwestern site does not.

Response rates for both sites were similar; at the Midwestern site, 59% of those surveyed completed and returned the questionnaire, whereas the response rate at the Southeastern location was 55.8%.<sup>3</sup> Overall, we received 1,412 completed surveys. In this article, we analyze the 1,224 questionnaires that provided complete data for all the variables used in our analyses; 772 of our respondents were hourly workers and 452 were managers. We use multinomial regression to examine which variables are associated with the likelihood that employees use no policies, informal policies only, formal policies only, and both formal and informal policies.

### Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable, policy use, is based on four exclusive categories, consistent with the descriptions in Table 1: use of formal policies only, use of informal policies only, use of both formal and informal policies, and no policy use (the omitted category in our analyses). We constructed our indicators of policy use from survey questions, which asked respondents about their use of official International Finance policies and informal arrangements with supervisors.

The formal policy category of our dependent variable measures both family care and flexibility policies and is based on a multiple item-in-a-series question, which asked respondents to indicate if they are using or have ever

used any of several formal family-friendly policies.<sup>4</sup> If respondents indicated that they had used a policy, they were asked to report the month(s) and year(s) they used the policy. Respondents were coded as formal users if they reported recent use (in 2000 or 2001) of at least one of these formal policies: dependent care leave, flextime, or compressed work week.<sup>5</sup>

These three formal policies have much in common: they are all official corporate policies designed to help employees with work-life balance and their use may be stigmatized by coworkers and supervisors (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Yet unlike flextime and compressed work week, dependent care leave after a birth, adoption, or family emergency is federally mandated by the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act.<sup>6</sup> However, as Gerstel and McGonagle (1999, p. 527) show, even though it is federally mandated, workplaces differ in how they implement this legislation, with some employers discouraging family leaves—"especially for lower level employees." This suggests that family leave is similar to flexibility policies in that workers' ability to use the policy can be constrained or enabled by factors operating in the workplace.

To measure the informal dimension of policy use, respondents were asked if "At any time during the past 6 months have you had an informal arrangement with your supervisor that enabled you to balance your work and family life?" Respondents who reported that they had made an informal arrangement with their supervisor were coded as informal users. In addition, if respondents indicated that they had had an informal arrangement, they were asked in an open-ended question to describe it. This gave us the opportunity to examine what types of informal arrangements are viewed as informal policies. For example, one respondent commented that she had an informal arrangement with her supervisor that allowed her to come in early and leave early to care for her autistic child. Other employees made use of informal arrangements to accommodate issues, such as persistent health problems, ongoing medical appointments for family members, and children's school schedules. The majority of these arrangements consisted of working late or coming in early to make up lost work time. Many users of informal policies commented that their supervisors allowed or arranged for them to make adjustments without written approval and did so with understanding and support.

Respondents who reported no recent use of any formal policy and no informal arrangement with their supervisor were coded as not having used any policies (none). Respondents who reported recent use of at least one formal policy and having made an informal arrangement with their supervisor were coded as having used both formal and informal policies. Table 2

**Table 2**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for Variables**  
**Used in the Analysis**

	Full Sample ( <i>N</i> = 1,224)	Managers ( <i>N</i> = 452)	Hourly ( <i>N</i> = 772)
Use of work-family policies			
Both formal and informal*	.22	.18	.25
Formal only*	.33	.14	.44
Informal only*	.12	.21	.07
No use*	.32	.47	.24
Performance rating	3.44	3.44	3.45
Controls			
Woman*	.66	.54	.71
Has children	.43	.46	.41
Woman with children*	.27	.20	.31
Provides special care*	.27	.22	.30
Age*	4.8	38.9	32.2
Organizational tenure*	4.02	5.48	3.62
Married/partnered*	.66	.76	.61

\* $p < .05$  (statistically significant differences between managers and hourly workers).

presents descriptive statistics for the entire sample and separately for managers and hourly workers.

## Independent Variables

Using personnel records, we created a dichotomous variable indicating whether the worker is hourly or managerial (1 = *manager*).<sup>7</sup> A second independent variable is a measure of employees' recent performance rating. These ratings, obtained from personnel records provided by the company, range from 1 to 5, with high scores indicating more favorable ratings. Because policy use and performance rating are measured contemporaneously in our data, we cannot sort out the causal relations between these two variables. We treat performance rating as an independent variable in our analyses, however, because this enables us to examine its relationship to policy use net of other effects on this outcome.

Previous studies suggest that personal and family characteristics may increase or decrease the desirability of, or need for, a particular kind of policy, so we include these characteristics as important control variables. They include four dichotomous variables: gender of employee (1 = *female*),

the presence of at least 1 child under age 16 in the household (1 = *has child*), married or living with partner (1 = *married/partnered*), and whether the respondent provides special care to an elderly parent or other relative (1 = *provides special care*). Because the effect of children on work–family policy use is likely to differ between women and men, we also include an interaction between gender and presence of children. Other controls include respondent’s age and organizational tenure, both measured in years.<sup>8</sup>

Prior research has found higher levels of work–family conflict (Galinsky & Bond, 1998) and more policy use (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002) among parents than nonparents, among people who provide special care to an elderly or disabled relative, and among those in early adulthood at the beginning stages of their work life. We expect that parents here will be more likely than nonparents to draw on work–family policies, married people and those providing special care to another will be more likely to use these policies than those without these family responsibilities, and younger workers will be more likely to use them than older workers. Differences in policy use between women and men may occur because women generally bear more responsibility for domestic work and child care (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). These differences should be observed among both managers and hourly workers.

## Descriptive Results

The characteristics of the hourly workers in our sample are consistent with other research on call centers described earlier. As shown in the last column of Table 2, almost three quarters of these workers are women, a finding that is consistent with other call center studies, which find that the proportion of women ranges from 58% to 81% (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000). These respondents’ average age is 32 years. Just over 40% have at least one child under age 16 living at home, and close to one third are providing special care to a disabled or elderly relative. In contrast, managers are older and have longer average organizational tenure (Table 2, column 2). Just half of all managers are women. Compared with hourly workers, a significantly higher percentage of managers are married, and they are slightly more likely to have children.

Work–family policies are popular among both groups of respondents, and there are significant differences between managers’ and hourly workers’ patterns of policy use. Slightly more than three quarters of the hourly workers in our sample report using at least one type or combination of policies, whereas just over 50% of managers reported such use. Sixty-nine percent

of hourly workers use formal policies (alone or in combination with informal ones) whereas relatively few rely exclusively on informal arrangements. Among managers who use work–family policies, informal work–family arrangements are selected most often. Managers were twice as likely as hourly workers to report no policy use. There was no significant difference between managers' and workers' average performance ratings.

## Multinomial Logistic Regression Results

Table 3 presents the exponentiated coefficients from a multinomial logistic regression analysis that uses our four-category dependent variable: no policy use, formal use only, informal use only, or both formal and informal policy use. Respondents who use neither formal nor informal policies constitute the reference category. Odds ratios less than one indicate that the independent variable increases the odds of using no policies (the reference category), whereas odds ratios greater than one indicate that the variable increases the odds of a particular type of policy use.

The coefficients in Table 3 indicate the relative likelihood that managers and hourly workers will use different kinds of work–family policies compared with the reference category of no policies, controlling for the other variables in the model. Three models (Columns A, B, and C) are examined, each containing slightly different independent variables. Regardless of which model is considered, however, one clear pattern stands out: Hourly workers are significantly more likely than managers to use formal work–family policies and to use both formal and informal policies (versus using no policies). In contrast, managers are much more likely than hourly workers to rely exclusively on informal work–family arrangements.

These results are consistent with our predictions. Although having work–family policies on the books may help a company recruit managers, these employees are much less likely to use these policies than hourly workers, whose investment in and relative value to the firm may be much weaker. Informal work–family arrangements, on the other hand, are more likely to be used by managers than by hourly workers. Use of informal work–family arrangements, which are negotiated off the books, may pose fewer threats to professional identity and career advancement for managers than would the use of formal policies.

Several control variables are also related to work–family policy use. As the reports shown in Column A reveal, women are significantly more likely than men to use formal work–family policies and to use both formal and informal

**Table 3**  
**Multinomial Logistic Regression of Individual and Occupational Characteristics**  
**on Call Center Employees' Use of Work-Family Policies<sup>a</sup>**

	Formal Only			Informal Only			Both Formal and Informal		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
	Manager	.199*	.201*	.198*	1.611*	1.605*	1.639*	.487*	.503*
Performance rating	—	—	.829*	—	—	1.327*	—	—	1.128
Controls									
Woman	1.428*	1.319	1.358	1.231	1.338	1.257	1.353**	1.257	.976
Has children	1.071	.957	.972*	1.471**	1.594	1.610	1.319	.816	.824
Provides special care	1.255	1.262	1.231	1.289	1.283	1.338	2.140*	2.188*	2.221*
Age	.972*	.972*	.972*	.990	.990	.991	.972*	.973*	.973*
Organizational tenure	1.019	1.019	1.021	.991	1.011	1.010	.987	.988	.987
Married/partnered	1.087	1.099	1.133	1.129	1.121	1.056	1.052	1.010	1.080
Woman children*	—	1.215	1.200	—	.890	.918	—	2.042*	2.059*
Pseudo $R^2$	.172	.176	.187						
-2 log likelihood	2845.5	2387.4	2903.1						
Chi square	231.44*	236.57*	253.32*						

a. Estimates shown reflect contrast with respondents who used no policies. Exponentiated coefficients are reported. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .10$ .

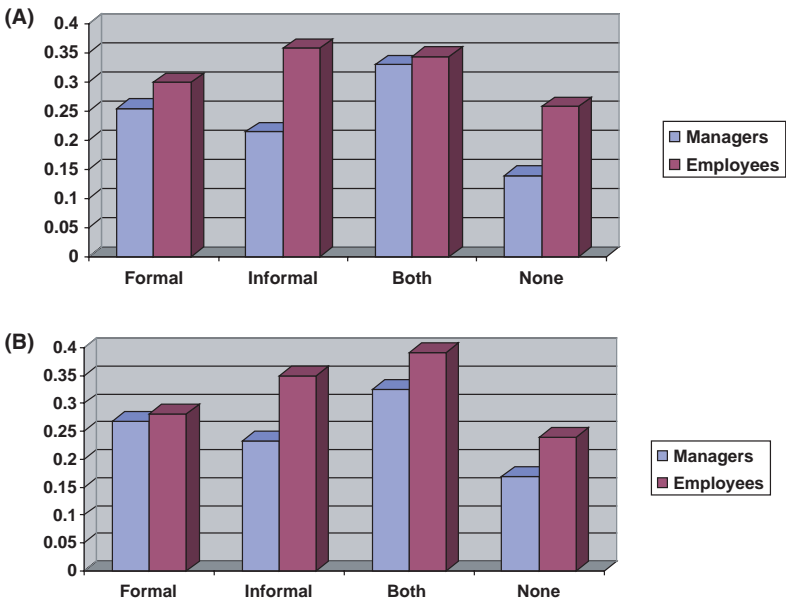
arrangements. Younger respondents are more likely than older employees to use formal policies or to use both formal and informal work–family arrangements. Those providing special care to a disabled or elderly person are also more likely to use both formal and informal accommodations. Having children increases the probability that an employee will rely exclusively on informal work–family arrangements. The addition of an interaction for women with children (Column B) alters these results, eliminating the main effects for gender and having children on workers' use of formal policies and informal arrangements. Instead, we find that women with children are significantly more likely to use both formal and informal policies than to use no policies. Neither marital status nor organizational tenure is associated with use of work–family policies.

Figure 1a and b provides a more graphic illustration of work–family policy use for employees who are mothers or who are providing special care to someone elderly, disabled, or ill. Hourly workers in particular are more likely to turn to informal work–family accommodations or rely on a combination of both informal and formal policies than to use formal policies by themselves. Reliance on both formal policies and informal accommodations is also the most common use pattern for managers who are women with children or caring for someone with special needs.

These results concur with previous studies showing that women with children and people with responsibilities for providing care to others are important constituencies for work–family policies. Our results go beyond previous research however, as they suggest that a focus on formal policies alone does not capture the full range of accommodations that these workers seek. Formal work–family policies may not sufficiently accommodate those with caregiving responsibilities for children or those with special needs, and this is the case for managers as well as hourly employees. Instead, both groups of workers are more likely than others to supplement use of formal policies with a reliance on informal work–family arrangements.

The third column of each panel in Table 3 shows the relations between use of work–family policies and employee performance ratings. The inclusion of performance rating does not change any of the other effects in the model, but performance rating is associated with work–family policy use. Better-rated employees are significantly less likely to use formal work–family policies and significantly more likely to use informal arrangements than they are to use no policies. There was no significant difference between those using no policies and those using both formal and informal policies, however. Although we expected that the associations between performance rating and policy use would be stronger among managers than hourly workers, this was

**Figure 1**  
**(A) Proportion of Women With Children Using Each Policy Type by Occupational Category, and (B) Proportion of People Providing Special Care Using Each Policy Type by Occupational Category**

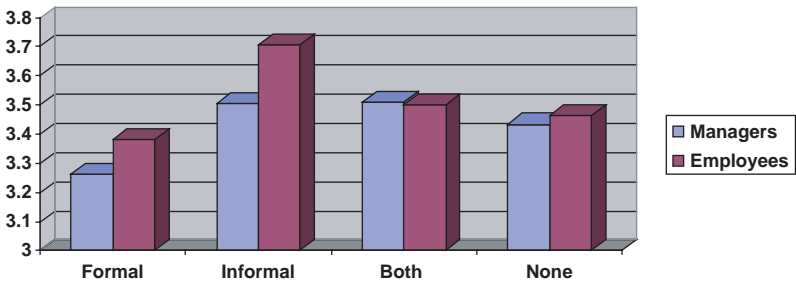


Note: Analysis of variance results. Differences between use of policies are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

not supported. As Figure 2 shows, the average performance rating for both managers and hourly employees is lowest among formal policy users.

Using the results reported in Table 3 to estimate the probabilities of using different types of policies allows us to see these results from a somewhat different vantage point. We report the results separately for managers (Figure 3a) and hourly workers (Figure 3b). In both groups, the best-performing employees are less likely to use formal policies and more likely to use informal arrangements than employees with poorer ratings. Among managers, the most favorably rated employees are more than twice as likely

**Figure 2**  
**Average Performance Rating by Type of Policy Use**  
**and Occupational Category**

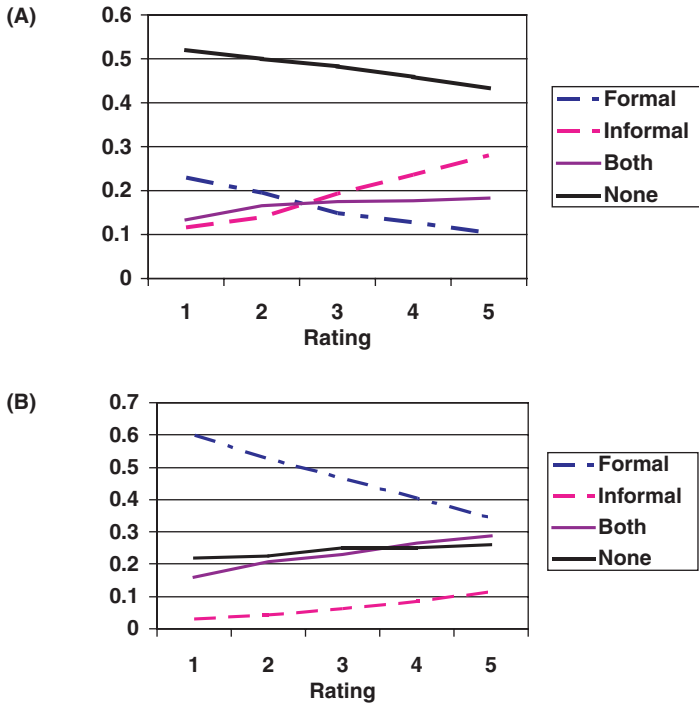


Note: Analysis of variance results. Differences between use of policies are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

to use informal policies alone than to rely exclusively on formal policies; this pattern is reversed among their coworkers with the lowest ratings (Figure 3a). Among hourly workers, formal policy use is common and informal use is rare overall, but the chances of using formal policies are lowest among those evaluated most favorably and highest among those with the poorest performance ratings (Figure 3b).

These results are broadly consistent with our expectations. From a work devotion perspective, high-performing employees would be more likely than others to avoid using formal work–family policies, because use could be interpreted as a lack of work devotion. Informal arrangements, which provide some employees an opportunity to craft a personalized and more private solution to a work–family need, require supervisor endorsement. The findings support our belief that supervisors would be more likely to negotiate customized work–family arrangements with high performers than those performing less well. Our data do not allow us to determine causality or to understand all the processes underlying these relationships. For example, we do not know whether high-performing employees are more likely than others to avoid using formal work–family policies or whether formal policy use causes workers to be evaluated more negatively by employers. We suspect that both processes are operating.

**Figure 3**  
**Estimated Probabilities for Categories of Work–Family Policy Use**  
**by Rating for (A) Managers and (B) Hourly Workers**



## Discussion

Work–family policy use is understudied among hourly employees. Moreover, the use of informal arrangements among all types of workers is poorly understood. We approach these gaps in the literature by conducting an intraorganizational study of policy use by managers and hourly workers, who all have official access to the same menu of formal policies. We find distinct patterns of policy use among different employee types.

Formal work–family policies are more widely used among hourly workers, despite their relatively low levels of pay, autonomy, and seniority. More powerful employees, such as managers and professionals, are more likely

to embrace a single-minded professional identity. Moreover, they have more to lose and so may fear the career consequences of publicly signaling nonwork commitments. These fears may be realistic. Use of formal policies among both managers and hourly workers was most common among employees receiving the poorest evaluations. This suggests that workers at multiple levels in an organization, not just high-ranking managers, may be penalized for using work–family policies.

The work devotion framework, which derives from studies of elite workers, thus may be more broadly applicable than previously assumed. Although this perspective suggests that managers' use of formal work–family policies will be seen as a deficit of work devotion, hourly employees' use of these policies may also be interpreted negatively, as a signal of weak job commitment or poor performance. This interpretation is consistent with Glass's (2004) longitudinal study, which found that mothers who did not change firms after using work–family policies saw a slower wage growth compared with mothers who avoided policy use or who moved to another company after using policies. However, because our measures of policy use and performance rating are roughly contemporaneous, we cannot sort out the causality here. We hope that future longitudinal research will shed more light on this issue.

Whatever these precise causal relationships may be, our results suggest that formal policy use in organizations has symbolic power with real consequences for employees. Managerial respondents tend to steer clear of formal policies and thus reinforce the firm's cultural definition of the ideal worker as having undivided career commitment. Some of these managers, imbued with the work devotion ideology, are the supervisors of the hourly workers in the sample and providing the higher performance ratings to workers who also avoid formal policies. Although hourly workers are the most likely to rely on formal work–family policies, their coworkers with the best ratings tend to avoid using them. These actions by managers and hourly workers alike undercut the full institutionalization and legitimacy of using formal work–family policies while helping to institutionalize a firm culture of work devotion. Thus, our respondents are, in Hochschild's (1997) phrase, both architects and prisoners of the time bind.

Informal work–family arrangements are simultaneously related to yet distinct from formal policies. In contrast to the stigma of formal work–family policies, we found a positive association between use of informal arrangements and performance rating and no relationship between performance rating and use of both formal and informal work–family accommodations. High-performing employees, regardless of whether they are hourly or managerial,

may have more ability to negotiate informal work–family arrangements than those whose performance is less well regarded. In addition, we find that both hourly workers and managers use informal work–family arrangements to supplement use of formal policies. Although family responsibilities did not predict exclusive formal policy use, women with children and those caring for an elderly or disabled relative were likely to rely on both formal and informal policies. Hence, even in a firm with generous formal work–family programs, the ability to negotiate informal agreements remains important. Yet unlike formal policies these agreements are not accessible to everyone and seem to be restricted to those deemed high performers.

## Conclusion

Our results suggest the value of continuing to systematically examine the work devotion framework. We cannot determine which dimensions of work devotion—taken-for-granted acceptance of organizational expectations, fear of not signaling compliance, or personal embrace of a single-minded professional identity—motivate the avoidance of formal work–family policies that we found here. Past research on elite populations suggest that all three facets are likely present in varying degrees, depending on the worker. We hope that future qualitative research will explore how these dimensions are imposed on or embraced by nonelite workers and how the work devotion schema's meanings vary with their job characteristics and family obligations.

A limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which prevents us from documenting causal relations. We hope that future quantitative research will investigate these issues longitudinally. Whatever the precise causal relationships between policy use and work performance may be, however, our findings suggest that policy use in organizations is laden with symbolic meaning generating real consequences. Formal work–family policies are not like other benefits that routinely accrue to more privileged and powerful workers. Because firms define the ideal worker as owing full allegiance to the firm, the use of formal work–family policies signals a violation of this allegiance and is penalized.

In terms of policy implications, our results underscore the importance of work–family policies for the growing call center industry. The popularity of these policies in this female-dominated, young work force suggests there is a strong need for them. Compared with several other industrialized nations, U.S. workers enjoy very little state support for family caregiving. For the hourly workers in our sample, who cannot buy their way out of work–family

conflict and whose workplaces are marked by constant surveillance and little autonomy, this form of corporate welfare is vitally important.

However, not all companies offer such policies to their call center workers. According to the business press, International Finance offers an unusually generous array of formal work–family policies. The managers of the call center site we visited explained that the center began offering more formal work–family policies to continue attracting the most desirable employees in a city where call centers were mushrooming. If call centers continue following this trajectory of rapid growth in the United States more firms may adopt generous policies in an attempt to pick from the top of the job application pile.

Another scenario is that management would see increasing competition from overseas call centers as a reason to trim costs and cut work–family benefits. Yet it makes good business sense to keep them. At the site we visited, flextime, compressed work week, and other flexible options had been adopted to try to stem the rates of tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover among their employees, many of whom are young mothers. Management told us that subsequently absenteeism and turnover rates indeed declined and that the work force has become more productive. Their experience is consistent with research on this topic (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2001; Rothausen, Gonzales, Clarke, & O’Dell, 1998). Call centers employ at least 3% of the workforce in the United States. We hope that these employers compete on the basis of being an employer of choice rather than on the basis of investing as little as possible in their workers.

## Notes

1. Some policy makers use the term *work–life policy* rather than *work–family policy* to be inclusive of employees who do not live with family members. We do not use the term *work–life* because it strikes us as corporate euphemism and implies that work is not also part of life. We acknowledge that employees not living with a family may still have a need for work–family (or work–life) policies to care for kin or close friends or otherwise juggle their professional and personal obligations.

2. In the organization we study, dependent care leave consists of paid or unpaid leave lasting more than 2 weeks to care for a dependent. Flextime refers to employees determining the hours at which they start and stop working. Compressed work week consists of employees compressing a full-time work schedule into fewer than 5 days.

3. We have fairly limited information about the nonrespondents to our survey. However, a comparison of respondents to nonrespondents with respect to sex and performance rating shows that our respondents are very similar to the total population of officers and employees who were surveyed. Fifty-four percent of officers in the population were women, equal to the percentage of women in our sample. The average performance rating among officers in the

population was 3.40, compared with a rating of 3.44 in our sample. Approximately 69% of hourly employees in the population were women, compared with 71% in our sample. The average performance rating of employees in the surveyed population was 3.31, slightly lower than the average rating of 3.45 for hourly workers in our sample.

4. The survey did not ask whether supervisor approval was necessary to use formal policies. However, the human resource personnel we interviewed stressed that the formal policies included in our study were available to all workers and that supervisors' role in granting or restricting use was limited.

5. The survey was administered in 2001. In some cases, respondents reported yes to having used a formal policy, but failed to report the dates they began and ended policy use. In these cases, respondents were coded as having recently used a policy if they had worked for the company for less than a year.

6. We experimented with a measure of formal policy use that excluded family leave. This measure moved nine respondents who exclusively used dependent care leave and not another formal policy into the category of nonusers. Removing these nine individuals from the formal policy category did not affect our results. Therefore, we continue to define the formal policy category of our dependent variable as encompassing users of parental leave, flextime, and/or compressed work week.

7. More than 80% of the hourly workers in our sample work on the phone handling automated calls—either as collectors (26%) or representatives (62%); the remainder are clerks and administrative assistants (9%) or fall into a residual category (2%).

8. Approximately 21% of our sample is nonwhite, so we also estimated models that included a control for race ( $1 = \text{nonwhite}$ ). However, because this variable was not statistically significant and its inclusion did not alter any of the other effects, we did not include this measure in our final model.

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