

# **The conflict between work and family roles: the effects on managers' reliance on information sources in dealing with significant workplace events**

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## **Abstract**

Decisions made by managers in response to common workplace events often have important consequences. These decisions can include dealing with issues related to personnel, resources or procedures. A logic-based decision-making process requiring substantial information search and analysis can be very complex and time consuming. Managers frequently face conflicting demands for time and cognitive resources from their family and their occupational roles that adversely affect their ability to perform both roles effectively. Adverse effects of these conflicting roles that impede the decision-making processes can result from reduced time, energy and attention available to properly gather and analyze information for each major business or family decision and by increasing the number of major decisions to be made. This study assessed the effect of conflict between family and work roles on the information search behavior in a sample of credit union executives. The study found evidence of significant relationships between the amount of work-family and family-work conflict and the effect certain personal and impersonal information sources had on the actions these executives took in dealing with events that were both important and commonly encountered in the workplace. The significant relationships were primarily positive, contrary to expectations and were more frequently related to impersonal information sources.

Keywords: Work-Family Conflict, Decision-making, Information Source Usage, Organizational Culture

## **Introduction**

Many managers strive to simultaneously perform two demanding roles. One role frequently involves a sole or shared responsibility for managing a family. The other role involves successfully performing managerial tasks on the job. Both roles usually require substantial time and the use of the manager's physical and mental resources. These roles can frequently result in conflicting demands for these personal resources. This reduction in available resources potentially impairs the performance of both roles. If this role conflict constrains the decision-making process, important decisions related to important workplace events may be made quickly and intuitively rather than made after an appropriate amount of input from other information sources. As a result, decisions that are made more intuitively may tend to be less accurate.

A manager makes numerous decisions dealing with events in his or her area of responsibility. These can include dealing with personnel issues, resources issues and procedural issues. For example, a manager may encounter subordinate performance that either fails to meet expectations or far exceeds them, experience a lack of support from other areas of the organization, or face implementation issues when the organization changes established operational procedures. In many of these events, it would be appropriate for a manager to consult many sources of guidance within the organization for assistance in interpreting them and evaluating alternative approaches in responding to them. This study investigates the effect that the conflict between work and family roles has on how managers utilize informational sources in obtaining guidance in interpreting and acting upon these commonly encountered workplace events.

## **Literature review and hypotheses**

Many recent descriptive decision-making models are based on two distinct systems of reasoning (Sloman 1996). Although the terminology used to describe these two systems varies, the characteristics of the two systems are described in a similar manner. Epstein (1994) described the two systems as experiential and rational. Sloman (2002) characterized them as associative and rule-based. Stanovich and West (2000) and Kahneman (2003) have labeled them as System 1 and System 2. The System 1 or the experiential system describes a fast, effortless, intuitive process that is subject to emotional influences and is utilized to make many decisions in a near simultaneous manner. The System 2 or the rational system describes a slow, effortful, rational process that results in decisions that are made sequentially rather than simultaneously. The underlying assumptions regarding System 2 reasoning is that it requires the use of appropriate information and analysis (Kahneman, 2003) and that a greater use of System 2 or logic-based reasoning by the decision maker will result in better solutions to more complex problems than a greater use of intuitive reasoning (Stanovich & West, 2002).

The decision-making research related to the dual processes of reasoning suggests that time pressure and concurrent involvement in multiple cognitive tasks inhibits the use of System 2 reasoning (Kahneman 2003). These two factors can inhibit the process of information search and other aspects of System 2 reasoning in a number of ways. Ordonez and Benson (1997) note decision makers often expedite the decision process under time pressures. Consequently, expediting the decision-making process can result in behavior that includes switching to simpler

decision strategies, relying more heavily on negative information and reducing the input of information.

Gilbert (2002) provides evidence of the negative effect of concurrent cognitive involvement of decision-making behavior. He based his research on the premise that “conscious attention is a scant resource” (p. 169). As a result, concurrent involvement in multiple cognitive tasks reduces the ability of an individual to use information in decision-making. In addition to demonstrating the effect of concurrent cognitive activity on initial decision-making, he also offers evidence that effect may be even more significant on subsequent decisions necessary to correct prior erroneous ones. His research has shown information relevant to the correction of an initial categorization is often noticed but not used. He has found evidence that self-regulation by the individual involved in routine everyday tasks can create enough cognitive busyness to severely limit the amount of information used to correct initial categorizations. Thus, the manager that experiences cognitive busyness from sources such as significant role conflict not only has more difficulty making initial logic-based initial decisions, but will also likely face greater impediments to correcting prior incorrect decisions. The premise of the current study is that conflict between work and family roles induces an increased state of cognitive busyness and higher level of time pressure that may persist over time and may likely affect managerial decision-making performance. The focus of the study is an investigation of the effect of this conflict on decision-making performance. This performance is assessed by investigating the degree managers utilize information sources in their decision-making process related to dealing with common and important workplace events.

### **Work-family conflict**

The performance of an individual’s family role can create a state of cognitive busyness and consume time both on and off the job. Activities such as providing care to elderly parents, infant children, or family members with special needs, dealing with domestic relations issues with spouses or domestic partners, maintenance of social relationships outside the family or even routine household maintenance activities frequently require the manager’s time and attention while on the job. Often seasonal fluctuations in job requirements, *ad hoc* projects and countless other requirements of the employer can require the time and attention of managers during off duty hours. As a result, the manager’s family and work roles overlap during both work and non-work periods.

One can envision the limitations on elements of logic-based reasoning, such as information search, that might result when the manager is subject to time pressures and is immersed in a multitude of activities related to managing his or her area of responsibility within the organization. Additional involvement in matters other than those pertaining to the business, such as those pertaining to the family, could also enhance a state of cognitive busyness or sense of time pressure that further limits the ability of the manager to engage in logic-based reasoning when making important decisions.

Numerous researchers have developed work-family and family-work conflict scales to measure this conflict. While work-family construct was initially conceptualized as bidirectional, later research proved evidence to support the conceptualization that work-family and family-work conflict were separate constructs (Ford, Heinen & Langkamer, 2007). Work-family conflict

(WFC) addresses the impact of work on the family. Family-work conflict (FWC) addresses the impact of the family on the work activities of the family member.

## **Event Management**

The criterion variable in this study is the extent various information sources are utilized to interpret and sometimes act upon important events commonly encountered by managers in the workplace (Peterson & Smith, 2000). Prior research (Smith, Peterson & Schwartz, 2002) has identified the individual, organizational and cultural sources of guidance commonly accessed in dealing with these events. At the individual level, expertise is developed through experience and training. At the organizational level, persons providing guidance include superiors, subordinates specialists and coworkers. Impersonal sources at the organizational level include formal rules or informal organizational norms. In addition, beliefs that are grounded in aspects of culture such as ideology or religion provide additional interpretive guidance.

The effect of culture on which sources of guidance are used in event management has been a common focus of this research stream. For example, Smith, Peterson and Wang (1996) compared the sources of guidance British and Chinese managers used in interpreting managerial events. Their data supported the finding that British managers relied heavily on their experience and training, while the Chinese managers relied more heavily on written rules and procedures. In a comparative study of work teams from Japan, Britain and the United States, Smith, Peterson and Misumi (1994) found evidence that the most frequently used source by Japanese teams in dealing with work events were coworkers, while in Britain and the United States team members relied on their own experience and prior training. These studies support the notion that cultural-level values, "... can predict substantial variance in use of some of the most widespread sources of guidance" (Smith, Peterson & Schwartz, 2002, p. 205).

Therefore, the utility of this methodology in assessing managerial information seeking behavior in the context of realistic workplace situations has been demonstrated in several published studies that focused on identifying how cultural affiliation results in differences in that behavior. This methodology should similarly be useful in assessing what effect cognitive influences such time pressure or cognitive busyness resulting from a conflict between the family and work roles have on informational source usage. Information source usage is important in many aspects of entrepreneurial activity, such as opportunity recognition, where information asymmetry (Hayek, 1948) gained from collaborative activity provides a competitive advantage.

Anticipating the negative effects that the conflict between family and work roles have on the levels of cognitive busyness and time pressure and the effect of these factors have on the information-seeking portion of the decision-making process, we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. There is will be a significant negative relationship between work-family conflict and the effect information sources have on a manager's actions taken in dealing with workplace events.

Hypothesis 2. There is will be a significant negative relationship between family-work conflict and the effect information sources have on a manager's actions taken in dealing with workplace events.

## Methods

This study sampled participants in multiple sessions of a Credit Union executive training program conducted in the Southeastern United States. The attendees were asked to complete the written instrument in advance of attending the training sessions. Attendees that had not completed the instrument by the completion of the sessions were contacted and reminded to return the completed surveys. Participants that returned a completed survey were paid \$5. A total of 143 instruments were provided to attendees and 109 usable surveys were returned. A 76% response rate was achieved using this protocol.

The majority of the respondents were early to mid career females. Specifically, 61% of the respondents were female and 73% were between the ages of 26 and 46. Over 70% of the respondents had been with their employer greater than 7 years. The respondents were well educated with 67% having achieved a bachelors or masters degree.

## Measures

The predictor variables in this study were work-family and family-work conflict. Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian (1996) have developed scales to measure these conflicts. These two five item scales have demonstrated Cronbach alphas that range from .82 to .90. The scales in the present study achieved alphas of .93 for work-family conflict and .88 for family-work conflict. They utilized five-point Likert scale items with “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” as anchor points. The scales seeks the respondent’s degree of agreement with statements such as “the demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” illustrating work-family conflict, and “the demands of my family interfere with work-related activity” illustrating family-work conflict.

The criterion variable in this study was measured using a portion of the Event Management Questionnaire (Smith, Peterson & Schwartz, 2002). This questionnaire measures the extent that an executive’s actions related to specific events are affected by the use of specific sources of guidance. The eight workplace events in the scale are:

- When a vacancy arises that requires the appointment of a subordinate in your department.
- When one of your subordinates does consistently good work.
- When one of your subordinates does consistently poor work.
- When some of the equipment or machinery in your department seems to need replacement.
- When another department does not provide the resources or support you require.
- When there are differing opinions within your department.
- When you see the need to introduce new work procedures into your department.
- When the time comes to evaluate the success of new work procedures.

The guidance source alternatives that were assessed included formal rules and procedures, unwritten rules as to “how things are usually done around here”, my subordinates, specialists outside my department, other people at my level, my superior(s), opinions based on my experience and beliefs in my country as to what is right. The extent to which the respondent’s actions were affected by each source of guidance was measured with a five item Likert-type scale with “to a very small extent” and “to a very large extent” as anchor points. The Cronbach’s

alpha for Event Management Questionnaire was .96 in the multinational Smith, Peterson and Schwartz (2002) study. The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .88 in the present study. This level of reliability is considered acceptable, particularly for early stage research (Nunnally, 1978; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

## **Results**

The focus of this study was to assess whether significant negative relationships between degree of work-family conflict and family-work conflict and individual source importance would emerge for each of the workplace events. This assessment tested hypotheses that predicted cognitive busyness and time pressure caused by role conflict between the family and the workplace would result in negative relationships between work-family and family-work conflict and the effect information sources have on a manager's actions taken in dealing with workplace events. The results of the assessment are shown in Figures 1 & 2.

Figure 1. Patterns of Significant Relationships - Work-Family Conflict

| <b>Work-Family Conflict</b>  | Formal Rules and Procedures | Unwritten rules as to "how things are usually done around here" | My subordinates | Specialists outside my department | Other people at my level | My superior(s) | Opinions based on my own experience | Beliefs that are widely accepted in my country as to what is right |
|--|-----------------------------|---|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Only significant correlations are shown.   |                             |   |                 |                                   |                          |                |                                     |  |
| When a vacancy arises that requires the appointment of a subordinate in your department. | .34**                       |   |                 |                                   | .25*                     |                |                                     |  |
| When one of your subordinates does consistently good work.                               | .25*                        | .22*  |                 |                                   |                          |                |                                     |  |
| When one of your subordinates does consistently poor work.                               | .26**                       |   |                 |                                   |                          |                |                                     |  |
| When some of the equipment or machinery in your department seems to need replacement.    | .20*                        |   | .20*            |                                   |                          |                |                                     |  |
| When another department does not provide the resources or support you require.           | .20*                        |   | .27**           | .20*                              |                          |                |                                     |  |
| When there are differing opinions within your department.                                | .25*                        |   | .21*            |                                   |                          | .24*           |                                     |  |
| When you see the need to introduce new work procedures into your department.             | .28**                       |   |                 | .20*                              | .30**                    | .20*           |                                     |  |
| When the time comes to evaluate the success of new work procedures.                      | .20*                        |   |                 | .22*                              | .23*                     |                |                                     |  |

Pair-wise correlations N = 99-103 \*<.05 \*\*<.01

Figure 2. Patterns of Significant Relationships - Family-Work Conflict

| <b>Family Work</b> | Formal Rules and | Unwritten rules as to | My subordinates | Specialists outside | Other people | My superior(s) | Opinions based on | Beliefs that are |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|

| <b>Conflict</b>  | Procedures | “how things are usually done around here” |      | my department | at my level |       | my own experience | widely accepted in my country as to what is right |
|--|------------|---|------|---------------|-------------|-------|-------------------|---|
| Only significant correlations are shown.   |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When a vacancy arises that requires the appointment of a subordinate in your department. |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When one of your subordinates does consistently good work.                               |            |   |      |               | -.23*       | -.23* |                   |   |
| When one of your subordinates does consistently poor work.                               |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When some of the equipment or machinery in your department seems to need replacement.    | .22*       |   | .23* |               |             |       | .25*              |   |
| When another department does not provide the resources or support you require.           |            |   | .25* |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When there are differing opinions within your department.                                |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When you see the need to introduce new work procedures into your department.             |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |
| When the time comes to evaluate the success of new work procedures.                      |            |   |      |               |             |       |                   |   |

Pair-wise correlations N = 99-103 \*<.05 \*\*<.01

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the significance of the relationships between the conflict of the work-family roles and the utilization of various sources decision-making process related to addressing common workplace events. The related hypotheses were based on a theoretic framework of decision-making that describes reasoning as the result of one of two possible distinct processes. One process is intuitive and the other process is logic-based (Epstein, 1994; Sloman, 2002; Stanovich & West, 2000; Kahneman, 2003). Prior experimental research stemming from this framework suggested that time pressure and concurrent cognitive activity were two of several predictors of a predominant use of intuitive reasoning processes rather than reasoning processes that are more logic-based. Since both time pressure and concurrent cognitive activity are likely results of WFC & FWC, these conflicts could reasonably be expected to impair logic-based reasoning in the processes of making important decisions in dealing with workplace events.

The first finding was the degree that effect of WFC differed substantially from the effect of FWC in the degree that various information sources affected decision-making. This finding was expected. For many individuals, the importance of the family role exceeds that of the work role (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Several previous studies have found evidence to suggest that there are differences between these two types of conflicts in their effect on individuals. Gutek, Searle & Klepa (1991) found WFC scores were higher than FWC scores in two different samples, one sample consisted of psychologists and another of senior executives. Judge, Boudreau & Bretz (1994) also found evidence to support the higher relative effect of WFC compared to FWC in a sample of male business executives. The present study found evidence to support a finding that differences between these two types of conflict extend to differences in decision-making behaviors such as information source utilization.

The second finding was that most of the relationships were positive and not negative as expected and, in addition, there was lack of uniformity in the degree the decisions relating to workplace events were affected by the use of the various alternative sources except for a uniformly significant positive relationship between WFC and the use of formal rules and procedures. Some prior work-family conflict research has provided at least partial explanations for these findings in the present study. These explanations stem from two different objectives of individuals coping with this role conflict.

One objective is to protect positive relationships with the family and at work in order to preserve a sense of belonging in both domains (Powell & Greenhaus, 2006). Ilies et al. (2007) found evidence of increased negative affect and role conflict during periods of increased workload activity such as the workplace events utilized as the information seeking criterion in the present study. The desire to preserve positive relationships at work could also manifest itself as a desire to reduce contact with superiors, peers and subordinates during high periods of role conflict and resulting increased levels of negative affect. For example, an individual may be reluctant to share family related problems with individuals in the workplace because sharing these problems may put the work relationships at risk because of the strain high levels of negative affect might put on these relationships. These individuals may instead adopt a strategy of reducing contact with those individuals when levels of family related stress are increased and

instead opt for obtaining guidance from formal rules and procedures, a source that is impersonal and substantially less likely to put positive workplace relationships at risk.

Another objective is to reduce to the number of stressors, particularly at work (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003). These stressors have been conceptualized as being either time-based, strain-based or behavior based (Dierdorff & Ellington, 2008; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based sources of stress relate to instances when the time requirements of one role interfere with the proper performance of the other role. Strain-based sources of stress describe instances where mental or physical stemming from one role impedes the performance of the other role. Behavior-based sources of stress result from certain characteristics of a particular occupation such as the degrees of interdependence, interpersonal conflict and responsibility for others that each role requires. The uniform positive relationship between work-family conflict and the importance of formal rules and procedures support the notion that the use of that particular information source has tremendous utility in reducing the stress experienced by respondents in one or more of these three stress generating areas. The use of this source may the necessary guidance to successfully deal resolve workplace events without creating additional stress resulting from interacting with other individuals at the workplace who may have differing views.

The existence of the other positive relationships between work-family conflict and the use of individuals at the various hierarchical levels of the organization as sources of guidance when dealing with a portion of the workplace events assessed in the present study suggest the possibility that increased interactions with empathetic and supportive persons of varying hierarchical rank at the workplace may serve to reduce stress experienced in the family role.

Work and family role conflicts may be an unavoidable consequence for many managers. However, organizational cultures that stress the importance of seeking advice from multiple sources and involving more than one individual in the decision-making process relating to major workplace events would tend to reduce the effects of role conflict on the decision-making process, since not every individual simultaneously is under the influence of that conflict. In addition, organizational cultures that promote team building and participative management processes allow the manager to have increased flexibility to spend more time addressing occasional increased demands related to the family role which should reduce role conflict for all managers in the organization (Shelton, 2006; Miller, Fitzgerald, Winter & Paul, 1999). Consequently, these types of organizational characteristics would reduce adverse impacts of work-family conflict on decision-making. Making better decisions in dealing with important workplace events should result in increased performance by both the manager and their area of organizational responsibility.

### **Limitations and implications for future research**

Collecting cognitively based data from managers related to decision-making behavior often requires the use of self-report measures and reliance on the recollection of past behaviors or attitudes. Busy individuals are often reluctant to participate in survey-based data collection efforts (Newby, Watson, & Woodliff 2003; Markman, Balkin, & Baron 2002). Consequently, the length and scope of survey instruments are limited as is the ability to assess the relationship of large numbers of variables. These limitations often preclude the desirable use of multiple measures of a single construct.

The lack of field research relating to dual systems of reasoning theories of decision-making raises the issue of content validity for measures that purport to be reflective of the extent individuals used System 1 or System 2 reasoning in decision-making. The role conflict measure (Netemeyer et al. 1996) was intended to encompass time pressure and involvement in concurrent cognitive activity both of which were identified by Kahneman (2003) as predicting intuitive reasoning. The reliabilities of these established measures were satisfactory. However, further refinement of assessment methodology is likely as additional field studies examine the dual processes of reasoning theory. While limiting this study to participants in a single industry reduces industry effects, it also reduces the generalizability of the results. Similar studies of participants in other industries will increase this generalizability.

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