

# For Work-Family Balance, Give Policy a Personal Touch

April 29, 2020



The need to balance the competing demands of work and family is nothing new, but with schools and daycare centers closed due to COVID-19, and many employees taking on the added challenge of working remotely for the first time, this balancing act has certainly become more precarious. Research in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* suggests that while formal workplace policies can help employees manage these roles successfully, informal social support remains essential if individuals are to take advantage of these programs without facing professional consequences.

“It is important to recognize that informal and formal supports are interconnected,” write authors Kimberly A. French (Georgia Institute of Technology) and Kristen M. Shockley (University of Georgia). “We posit that the presence of formal supports may condone or promote supportive [informal] behaviors.”

The path to work-family balance is a two-way street, the researchers note. Informal support, or lack thereof, from supervisors, who often have some discretion over how the employees who report to them navigate workplace policies, can significantly alter how this balance plays out at home. Similarly, support offered by spouses and other family members at home can also influence the workday.

In a meta-analysis of 1,021 effect sizes from studies in 46 countries, French, Shockley, and colleagues

found that the informal support offered by these relationships is consistently associated with reduced work-family conflict.

It's important to note, the researchers add, that this support is only useful when it's needed—and the needs of individuals in seemingly similar situations can vary based on cultural differences, economic conditions, and individual preferences. In the workplace, this may mean that employees who prefer to keep work and family separate may perceive a family-supportive manager as intrusive rather than helpful. At home, meanwhile, this could mean that someone whose spouse is a terrible cook may prefer not to receive support with meal prep after a long day on the job.

Formal policies, on the other hand, can take a variety of forms, from remote-work options to child-care subsidies and, in some areas, labor laws that limit work hours and promise paid parental, sick, and family leave. The specifics of these policies can vary significantly between countries, however, making it difficult to compare their effects on a national level, the researchers note.

Use and availability of flextime and dependent-care options have been found to reduce the extent to which workplace demands contribute to family conflict at home—for example, when an employee is required to work late, which may interfere with family time—but not the extent to which family responsibilities, such as a child being sick, may interfere with the workday. This suggests that providing greater flexibility to workers does not necessarily lighten the load of family responsibilities. One potential explanation for this, French and Shockley suggest, is that increased flexibility may increase family demands.

“For example, the spouse with the more flexible job may be the one who takes responsibility for picking up children or doing more housework,” the authors offer.

More flexible work arrangements such as working remotely may also require greater self-regulation in the face of distractions, the researchers write, while employees who make full use of flexible work options may experience negative career repercussions due to the perception that they are wrongly prioritizing their personal lives over productivity.

It's also possible that the correlation between formal work policies and work-family balance appears artificially low because their biggest users are people with more stressful family circumstances, which may lead the policies to appear less effective overall.

“Informal and formal supports are interconnected,” French and Shockley conclude. “The weak associations between formal supports and work-family management may be due to formal supports being distal, impacting work-family management through a chain of support processes.”

## Reference

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