

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE WORK COMMITMENTS OF CHILDLESS EMPLOYEES VS. EMPLOYEES WITH CHILDREN

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Abstract

This document reports on a research project to study and compare the work commitments of childless employees versus employees with children. Data were collected using an anonymous electronic survey.

Two hypotheses were posed for the persons responding to the survey:

H1: Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.

H2: Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.

This project represented the final capstone project for the primary author while completing a graduate degree in Engineering Management at the University of Colorado.

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between work commitments of U.S. employees and their dependent obligations. To isolate the incremental impact of dependent obligations, other pertinent factors were included in the study including: spousal employment status, highest earned degree, management responsibilities, personality type, industry type, and urban/rural setting. Specifically, two hypotheses were posed for the persons responding to the survey:

H1: Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.

H2: Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.

The H1 hypothesis was tested by examining two measures: (1) reported work hours, and (2) whether the employee reports using all available vacation time.

The H2 hypothesis was tested by examining two measures: (1) whether the employee is often or always asked to work when there is extra work to be done, and (2) whether the employee is often or always asked to come in early or stay late.

Many companies are introducing “family friendly” policies and practices – perhaps in response to the growing number of women in the workforce. Since 1963 the number of full-time working mothers increased from 17 percent to 39 percent (Schmidt and Duenas, 2002). An unintended consequence of “family

friendly” policies and practices is that some employees without dependent responsibilities have begun to feel left out, uncomfortable, and even discriminated against. “Researcher Mary B. Young of Boston University’s School of Management says single childless employees are perceived as having more time and, therefore, needing less time by supervisors, colleagues, and even more family members (Parkinson and Edelman, 1997).”

Background

American society and the childless vs. children dilemma. In *The Childless Revolution*, author Madelyn Cain (2001) suggests several factors that might explain why more and more Americans are remaining childless: indifference to children, inconvenience, infertility, wider range of birth control options, and new emergency contraceptives. However, despite the increasing number of people who do not have children, many feel that the American society considers childless people to be “second class citizens.” “Our society is set up to reward its members for getting married and having children. There are tax breaks for children. There is insurance for being married. The process is known as ‘settling down,’ implying that if marriage and kids aren’t in a person’s future, obviously it’s due to a lack of maturity (Flynn, 1996).”

Is there a stigma against the childless? “Individuals who possess a stigmatized identity are faced with the ongoing tasks of accepting it themselves and negotiating it in interactions with others who may view their character and behavior as incomprehensible, strange, or immoral (Park, 2001).” One way in which individuals are stereotyped is family size and whether or not they are childless. Veever observed that the deviance of the voluntarily childless lies primarily in the fact that they do not *want* children, in addition to the simple fact that they do not *have* them (Veever, 1980). After interviewing 200 young women in the United States, Orenstein (2000) concluded that most of the childless interviewees were full of fears of social isolation, and felt that they needed to constantly justify their childless choice. “Women’s lives, in particular, are [perceived as] meaningless if they have not, in author Danielle Crittenden’s words, ‘brought into this

world life that will outlast us.’ Without kids, she suggests, a life’s work amounts to a mere ‘pile of pay stubs’ (Postrel, 2000).”

In another study of family size stereotypes it was found that “compared to parents, the voluntarily childless were seen as less socially desirable, less well adjusted, less nurturant, and more autonomous, and respondents expressed a desire for more social distance from them (Polit, 1978).” Similarly, it is suggested that parents view the voluntarily childless as ‘threatening’ because their lifestyle (perhaps a bit carefree and self-centered) challenges parents’ sense that marriage and a family are the best ways to personal satisfaction and happiness (Veevers, 1972).

Do employees with children really get more benefits? In addition to work expectations (number of hours worked, extra projects, etc.) appearing to be higher for childless employees, some childless employees also feel that parent-employees also receive preferential treatment when it is time for promotions and raises. Diversity Central (2000) ran a survey about childless vs. parent employees to determine if “family-friendly policies cheat the childless. Of the respondents, 91 percent were single and childless and 27 percent had children. Some of the response statistics are listed below:

- *If a company has a daycare center for its employees, should it allow childless employees to send their relative or give that daycare-center slot to charity? - 45 percent said yes, 55 percent said no*
- *If parents are being guaranteed flex time or leave to spend time with their children, should the company offer comparable personal leave time to the childless for things like travel, education, or volunteer work? - 82 percent said yes, 18 percent said no*
- *If employers tend to hire employees with whom they are more comfortable, are childless people less likely to get hired because many hiring managers still think that childless people are suspicious, odd, or sick, particularly single women over 30? - 36 percent said yes, 64 percent said no*
- *If a childless employee is more willing to come in on weekends and take the last-minute business trips than a parent, should the childless person’s efforts be considered for advancement even though that puts the parents at a disadvantage? - 64 percent said yes, 36 percent said no (Diversity Central, 2000).*

Dr. Mary Young, a specialist in work/family programs, says that organizations’ attempts to accommodate the needs of parents have inadvertently caused a separation in the workplace: a group of “haves” (employees who have children) and a group of

“have-nots” (employees who do not have children). Those employees that are in the “haves” group receive certain benefits in order for them to better balance their family and work obligations (Wood, 1998). Young says, “companies should be doing this, but the problem is the way they are making these accommodations. Business decisions are being based on criteria that formerly had no place in the professional arena. Value judgments of whose needs and personal life are more important have entered the equations. And family always wins (Wood, 1998).”

Examples of benefits that favor employees with children. In doing the literature survey and research, several benefits or “perks” offered by organizations were found that favor the parent employees. Several are listed below:

Health insurance. Health insurance is often thought of as discriminatory to childless employees because usually insurance benefit plans end up being worth far less for them as compared to an employee with children.

Breast-feeding rooms at the workplace. Several companies have recently begun providing breast-feeding rooms for female employees who are nursing. These organizations view this offering as a ‘progressive and innovative’ benefit that will lead to overall positive outcomes.

Maternity and paternity leave. Some organizations offer paid paternity and maternity leave. For example, “Patagonia offers maternity and paternity leave with pay for eight weeks, which you can split up as you choose (Kirkpatrick, 1997).” NationsBank employees are given six weeks of paid maternity and paternity leave, and when they return to work they have the option of reduced schedules (Burkett, 2000).

Flextime for parents only. As the name suggests, flextime is an option some companies provide in order for their employees to “flexibly” shift their work hours, within reason. It is the most widespread and time-tested “perk” in family/work policies (Glass and Estes, 1997). According to Rogers, employees with children ranked flexibility fourth out of 16 factors in their decision of whether or not to stay with the organization (Rogers, 1992).

Childcare. Assisting employees identify quality childcare facilities in their area is one cost-effective way for employers to aid in the childcare issue. In most cases, this service is provided free of charge to the employee. Another way companies help their employees with children is by providing discounted childcare, sometimes even on-site so parents can see their children at lunch or on breaks.

Bringing children to work. Some companies allow their parent employees to bring their children to work, and often even offer some sort of “play room” to keep the children occupied while their parents work. Parent employees also sometimes bring sick children to work because often daycares will not allow sick children to be brought in because of the possibilities of infecting the other children. Co-workers (childless and parent employees) often feel distracted due to the children at work, though they understand the bind that the parent is in.

Time off for children’s illnesses or activities. In addition to regular paid vacation days, some companies have made accommodations for parents with sick children. Other companies offer parents two paid hours off each week for child-related purposes such as attending school plays, meeting with teachers, or taking a child to the doctor (Burkett, 2000).

Higher wages. The Employment Policy Foundation, a Washington think tank, reports that workers with children (37.5 percent of the workforce) fare better economically than childless workers (62.5 percent of the workforce (Fletcher, 2001). Median earnings for age 30 parent and non-parent employees with at least a bachelor’s degree favored childless employees by 1.2 percent. However, by age 39, median earnings for parents increased to approximately \$55,000, more than 53 percent, while earnings for non-parents employees grew only 9.4 percent, to about \$40,000 over the same time interval (Fletcher, 2001).

Do childless employees really have a reason to complain? Despite the increasing voices of childless workers who claim they work more than their co-workers and claim that companies tend to send childless employees on the unwanted business trips, a survey conducted in 1998 by Mary Young indicated that employees with and without children both work approximately 42.5 hours per week (Leonard, 2000). Lena Lundgren, Director of Boston University’s Center on Work and Family reports that she knows of no research that shows that parents are less-productive than their childless counterparts (Bredemeier, 2001). In 1997, The Conference Board, a New York-based organization of corporate heads, conducted a survey of singles (e.g. employees who were not married) from 78 companies and found that although the single and childless employees do have concerns, that they do not have a consensus as to what their concerns entail. According to the survey, the respondents...

- “Felt that reports of backlash from childless employees exaggerated the situation (74 percent),

- Resented employees with children (56 percent, including married and unmarried employees),
- Felt they carried more of the workload (25 percent) (Poe, 2000).”

Deborah Parkinson and Karen Edelman compiled some statistics from recent reports and conferences of *The Conference Board* and found that perhaps some of the “childless backlash” is exaggerated. According to their work/family respondents, about two-thirds of them observed that childless employees happily and readily volunteer to pick up extra duties when parent employees have family emergencies. Also, about 57 percent of their respondents said that they feel their companies are satisfactorily addressing the needs of the childless employees (Parkinson and Edelman, 1997).

The number of childless employees is growing. The Society of Human Resource Management reports that single, childless employees are the fastest growing segment of the American work force (Wood, 1998). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are currently 60 percent of employees who do *not* have a child 18 or younger living at home, and as of 1996, there were 20 million adults 35 or older who do not have children (Wood, 1998). Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that after 2005, couples without children and single individuals will make up the most common types of U.S. households (HR Briefing). For example, the number of childless couples is expected to increase almost 50 percent between 1996 and 2010 (Minehan, 1996).

Survey

Procedure. Data was collected using an anonymous electronic survey (www.zoomerang.com). 420 persons were invited to participate in the survey using a “snowball survey process” rather than a random process. Invitees were acquaintances of the principal author of the paper or persons identified by earlier invitees. The sample (N=278) represented a 66 percent response rate. The survey consisted of 30 questions in four categories: 1) Personal/demographic (questions 1-8), 2) Professional (questions 9-17), 3) Dependents (questions 18-22), and 4) Organization (questions 23-29). Question 30 allowed survey respondents to share any additional comments they had about the subject or the survey. Appendix A lists the survey questions.

Respondents. Respondents were all currently working, or formerly had been employed. They were asked to respond based on their current or most recent employment. See Exhibit 1 below for the survey respondents’ demographics compared to the American population’s demographics:

Exhibit 1. Survey Percentages Compared to U.S. Census Percentages.

	Survey (%)	American Population (%)
AGE		
Median Age	36.5	35.3
GENDER		
Females	45	51
Males	45	49
DEPENDENTS		
WITH Children	36	33
WITHOUT Children	64	67
Caring for Dependent Adults	5	unknown
EDUCATION		
Less Than Bachelor's Degree	10	75.6
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	50	24.4
Master's Degree or Higher	40	6.9
ETHNICITY/RACE		
Caucasian	82	75.1
Non Caucasian	15.1	22.4
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)		

Additional information concerning the survey respondents includes the following:

- 70% were either married or in a committed relationship.
- 70% were married or in a committed relationship. 80% of the other persons in these relationships were employed and 20% were not.
- Of the 36% of the respondents who had children; 14% had one child; 17% had two children; and 5% had three or more children.

Significant Results

The analysis was carried out using an alpha level of .05 (Type I risk), multiple regression methods, and dummy variables for categorical responses.

H1: Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations. The H1 hypothesis was tested by examining two measures: (1) reported work hours and (2) whether the employee reports using all available vacation time.

Reported work hours. Unfortunately, the hours worked was reported not as a continuous variable, but in categories – “Less than 30”, “Between 30 and 40”,

“Between 40 and 50”, and “More than 50.” For ease of presentation, the convention is adopted that each higher categorical response will be interpreted as corresponding to 10 additional hours of work per week (e.g. a response of “Between 30 and 40” equates to 10 additional hours of work as compared to a response of “Less than 30”).

There was a statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable of “hours worked” and five independent variables. The five significant independent variables, their coefficients, and their interpretation are:

- “Type A” personality – regression coefficient of +.36. Respondents with a self-reported “Type A” personality worked an additional 3.6 hours per week as compared to self-reported “Type B” respondents.
- Management – regression coefficient of +.27. Respondents who reported management responsibilities worked an additional 2.7 hours per week as compared to respondents who were not managers.
- Spouse or significant other not employed – regression coefficient of +.27. Respondents with a non-working spouse or significant other worked an additional 2.7 hours per week as compared to respondents who were not married or in a committed relationship.
- Males – regression coefficient of +.21. Males worked an average of 2.1 hours more per week than females.
- Number of children – regression coefficient of -.11. Respondents worked an average of 1.1 hour less per week for each additional dependent child.

The analysis of reported work hours does not support the H1 hypothesis that for the respondents to this survey “Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.” On average reported work hours increase by an estimated 1.1 hours per week for each one-child reduction in the number of dependent children. For example, a typical childless employee in this survey would work an additional 2.2 hours per week as compared to an employee with 2 dependent children.

Reported use of all available vacation time. There was a statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable of “whether the employee reports using all available vacation time” and two independent variables. The two significant independent variables, their coefficients, and their interpretation are:

- Spouse or significant other not employed – regression coefficient of -.23. Respondents with a non-working spouse or significant other reported using all available vacation time 23% less often

than respondents who were not married or in a committed relationship

- Management – regression coefficient of $-.13$. Respondents who reported management responsibilities reported using all available vacation time 13% less often than respondents who were not managers.

Since the dependent situation of respondents did not enter into any of the models tested, the analysis of reported use of all available vacation time supports the H1 hypothesis that for the respondents of this survey “Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.”

Hence, the H1 hypothesis that “Childless employees make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations” is:

- Rejected as tested by reported hours worked. For the respondents to this survey, reported hours worked increased as the number of dependent children decreased.
- Accepted as tested by reported use of all available vacation time.

H2: Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations. The H2 hypothesis was tested by looking at two measures: (1) whether the employee is often or always asked to work when there is extra work to be done and (2) whether the employee is often or always asked to come in early or stay late.

Often or always asked when there is extra work. There was a statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable of “whether the employee is often or always asked to work when there is extra work to be done” and three independent variables. The three significant independent variables, their coefficients, and their interpretations are:

- Management – regression coefficient of $+.23$. Respondents who reported management responsibilities reported being “often or always” asked to work when there is extra work 23% more often than respondents who were not managers.
- Type A personality – regression coefficient of $+.14$. Respondents with a self-reported type A personality (competitive, high level of motivation, often impatient) reported being “often or always” asked to work when there is extra work 14% more often than respondents who self-reported having a type B personality (patient, relaxed, enjoy leisure activities and try not to let them interfere with work).

- Number of children – regression coefficient of $-.07$. Respondent reports that they were “often or always” asked to work when there is extra work increased by 7% with each one-child reduction.

The analysis of requests to assist when there is extra work does not support the H2 hypothesis that for the respondents of this survey “Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.” On average, requests to “always or often” assist when there is extra work increased by 7% for each one-child reduction in the number of dependents. For example, on average childless respondents reported being asked always or often to help with extra work 14% more often than respondents with two dependent children.

Often or always asked to come in early or stay late. There was a statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable of “whether the employee is often or always asked to come in early or stay late” and two independent variables. The two significant independent variables, their coefficients, and their interpretation are:

- Management – regression coefficient of $+.20$. Respondents who reported management responsibilities reported being “often or always” asked to come in early or stay late 20% more often than respondents who were not managers.
- Spouse or significant other not employed – regression coefficient of $+.16$. Respondents with a non-working spouse or significant other reported being “often or always” asked to come in early or stay late 16% more often than respondents who were not married or in a committed relationship.

Since the dependent situation of respondents did not enter into any of the models tested, the analysis of requests to come in early or stay late supports the H2 hypothesis that for the respondents to this survey “Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations.”

Hence, the H2 hypothesis that “Childless employees are expected by their employers to make a similar work commitment as employees with dependent obligations” is:

- Rejected as tested by reports of “often or always” being asked to help when there is extra work. For the respondents of this survey, requests to help out with extra work increased as the number of dependent children decreased.
- Accepted as tested by reports of “often or always” being asked to come in early or stay late.

Summary/Conclusion

For the 277 survey respondents with usable data there is statistical evidence that employees with dependent children work fewer hours and are asked less frequently to help out when there is extra work than childless employees.

There is no statistical evidence that dependent children have any differential impact on the frequency with which these employees use all of their available vacation time or how often then are asked to come in early or stay late.

While the number of dependent children entered into two of the four commitment models, the number of dependent adults (i.e. an aging or disabled parent) was never statistically significant.

The variable in this study that entered at a statistically significant level in all four of the commitment models was management responsibilities. As compared to non-managers, managers in this survey reported working more hours, using all available vacation time less often, being asked more frequently to help out on extra work, and being asked more frequently to come in early or stay late.

Another variable of special note is ethnicity - it was never a statistically significant factor in any of the commitment models.

By a solid majority, the companies and organizations that employ the respondents of this survey are reported to be "family-friendly" (82% somewhat or very) and "life-friendly" (79% somewhat or very). These results suggest that most employees in this survey feel that their employers are treating them fairly with regard to family and life issues. This positive attitude among survey respondents is especially encouraging since the survey was conducted in the fall of 2003, an especially turbulent time for the American economy and employers.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

PERSONAL/DEMOGRAPHIC (#1-8)

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
3. I am:
 - a. African American or Black, not of Hispanic Origin
 - b. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - c. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - d. Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican American, Latino
 - e. Multicultural
 - f. Caucasian, not of Hispanic Origin
 - g. I do not wish to provide this information
 - h. Other, please specify
4. What is your level of education?
 - a. Less than Bachelor's Degree
 - b. Bachelor's Degree
 - c. Masters Degree or higher
5. What is your marital status?
 - a. Currently married (or in a committed relationship) to someone employed
 - b. Currently married (or in a committed relationship) to someone not employed
 - c. Not currently married or in a committed relationship
6. Please indicate the number of children, 18 years or younger, living at your home. (If you do not have any children, enter 0.)
7. Please indicate the number of senior citizens or handicapped adults for whom you are primary care giver. (If you are not a primary care giver, please enter 0.)
8. How would you classify your personality type?
 - a. Type A (competitive, high level of motivation, often impatient and/or in a hurry)
 - b. Type B (patient, relaxed, enjoy leisure activities and try not to let them interfere with work)

PROFESSIONAL (#9-17)

9. In what type of industry are you employed?
 - a. Government (Federal, State or Local)

- b. Non -Profit
 - c. For- Profit (High Tech)
 - d. For -Profit (Not High Tech)
 - e. Other, please specify
10. About how many people are employed at your company?
 - a. Less than 100
 - b. Between 100 and 1,000
 - c. More than 1,000
11. Which best describes your company's location in the United States?
 - a. Metropolitan area
 - b. Rural area
 - c. Not applicable (I do not live in the United States)
12. Are you a manager of other people?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No.
13. Approximately how many hours a week on average do you work?
 - a. Less than 40
 - b. Between 40 and 50
 - c. Between 50 and 60
 - d. More than 60
14. Where do you perform most of your work duties?
 - a. Always at the office
 - b. Always at home
 - c. Mostly at the office
 - d. Mostly at home
15. When there are extra or special projects to be done, how often are you asked to participate?
 - a. Always
 - b. Often
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
 - f. Not applicable
16. When there is a need for someone to come in early or stay late, how often are you asked?
 - a. Always
 - b. Often
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
 - f. Not applicable
17. Do you usually utilize all of your authorized vacation days per year?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

CHILDREN VS. CHILDLESS (#18-22)

18. If you are an employee WITH children: How often are you at a disadvantage because the childless employees are able to devote more time to work?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
 - Not applicable (because I do not have children)
19. If you are an employee WITH children: How often are you passed up for business travel opportunities as compared to your childless co-workers?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
 - Not applicable (because I do not have children)
20. If you are an employee WITHOUT children: How often do you work longer hours as compared to your co-workers with children?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
 - Not applicable (because I have children)
21. If you are an employee WITHOUT children: How often do you have to work more because your co-workers with children work less?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
 - Not applicable (because I have children)
22. If you are an employee WITHOUT children: How often do you volunteer to work more compared to employees with children?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
 - Not applicable (because I have children)

YOUR ORGANIZATION (#23-30)

23. How “family friendly” is your organization?
- Very
 - Somewhat
 - Slightly
 - Not at all
 - Unsure
24. How “life friendly” is your organization?
- Very
 - Somewhat
 - Slightly
 - Not at all
 - Unsure
25. Does your company offer flextime?
- No, not offered
 - Yes, offered to parents with children
 - Yes, offered to primary care givers
 - Yes, offered to everyone
 - Unsure
26. Does your company offer the option to telecommute (work at home) for at least part of the week?
- No, not offered
 - Yes, offered to parents with children
 - Yes, offered to primary care givers
 - Yes, offered to everyone
 - Unsure
27. Does your company offer PAID time off for personal days?
- No, not offered
 - Yes, offered to parents with children
 - Yes, offered to primary care givers
 - Yes, offered to everyone
 - Unsure
28. Which of the following is offered by your company? Please check all that apply.
- Paid maternity leave
 - Paid paternity leave
 - Paid time off for children’s illnesses
 - Unsure
 - Other, please specify
29. Does your company provide free or discounted or subsidized childcare facilities for children of employees?
- Yes, facilities onsite

- b. Yes, facilities nearby the workplace
 - c. Yes, facilities not nearby the workplace
 - d. No
 - e. Unsure
30. Please use this area to add any additional comments you have on this subject matter.

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About The Authors

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