

## **WORK-FAMILY BENEFITS: WHAT WOMEN WANT AND NEGOTIATORS SHOULD KNOW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As the number of women in the labor force has increased dramatically in recent years, so has the significance of work-family issues as subjects of contract negotiations. Although public employers increasingly offer work-family benefits, there is little research examining the determinants of employee preferences for such perquisites. To help fill this void, our article has two objectives. First, it analyzes the extent to which preferences for different work-family benefits among women employees at a public university in the lower Midwest are related to sociodemographic and job-related factors. Second, we discuss the implications of these findings for union and management negotiators.

Over the last 30 years, as collective bargaining in the public sector has become the norm rather than the exception, virtually all aspects of the bargaining process have been studied in considerable detail [1]. However, with a few exceptions, little research has been done to evaluate the process by which union and management negotiators develop the list of proposals they submit to the other side, which becomes the issues discussed in negotiations [2, 3]. Most discussions of bargaining assume that the union is trying to maximize the size of the total package, or

the dollar value of all of the proposals under discussion. Conversely, the employer is believed to be almost exclusively interested in minimizing the size of this total package. This view of the bargaining process, however, is both simplistic and misleading.

In fact, negotiators for both sides should be interested in much more than how much particular benefits cost. They should be equally concerned with how employees perceive the value to be derived from each of the proposals. In his role as a mediator in numerous public sector negotiations, one of the authors always attempts to determine the benefit-to-cost ratio for each of the proposals under discussion. Clearly, any proposal that is perceived as having considerable benefit to employees, but is relatively low-cost, should be agreed upon with relative ease. This approach can only work, however, if the parties have a good knowledge of which proposals are most valued. Some negotiators have a good understanding of the pulse of bargaining unit members; others do not.

Since 1970, the proportion of women in the U.S. labor force has significantly increased and is expected to reach 47.5 percent by 2008 [4]. A concomitant effect of this increased participation of women in paid employment has been a significant increase in the number of dual-earner households, currently representing about 50 percent of all workers in the United States. Another major change in the U.S. labor market has been the significant increase in the number of working single parents. These changes in the composition of the U.S. labor market have created competing pressures for workers as they try to balance the demands of work and their families [5, 6].

In recent years, organizations have increasingly adopted work-family benefits, such as child-care assistance programs or flextime, to help workers balance work and family demands [7, 8]. Organizations have offered such work-family benefits because they have a positive impact on employee attitudes and performance [9, 10]. Osterman demonstrated that the increased provision of such benefits by employers is also related to the use of employee involvement and quality programs [11].

Although organizations increasingly offer work-family benefits, there is little research that examines the determinants of employee preferences for such perquisites. However, determining which work-family benefits employees value most should be very useful information for negotiators who are attempting to decide on a bargaining strategy. In addition, it would help negotiators to know the relative preferences of subgroups of the bargaining unit for different work-family benefits. Female police officers, for example, might not be interested in on-site child care, but this could be extremely important to 911 operators in the same bargaining unit.

From a union perspective, effective representation should depend more on the perceived value to members of the concessions granted by management in negotiations rather than the cost of these proposals to the employer. If providing on-site child care is very expensive, for example, but not highly valued by most

employees, it would not be strategically wise to devote too much effort to achieve this benefit in negotiations. Since the goal of most union negotiators should be to maximize the satisfaction of their members with the outcome of negotiations, it would be unwise to try to negotiate for a management subsidy of a child-care facility that might cost 35 cents for each hour worked by bargaining unit members, if this same expenditure would produce greater satisfaction if it were spent in alternate ways. It is possible that providing four extra personal days, a list of child-care providers, the ability to take unpaid leave for family and medical care, and more flexible work hours might result in greater satisfaction for employees and cost less than 35 cents an hour. It should also be noted that, of course, bargaining will be more difficult when the parties find that employees value most those proposals that are most costly for their employer.

From a management perspective, it is equally important to know which benefits are most highly valued by employees. Management may want to offer union negotiators a highly valued, albeit inexpensive benefit, if the union were willing to drop an expensive demand that is not highly valued by the membership. This knowledge of employee preferences should, therefore, aid both union and management negotiators in resolving their differences.

This approach can only work, however, if the parties have a good understanding of which proposals are most valued. For example, both union and management negotiators may believe that because the bargaining unit does not include a large number of women with pre-school-age children, they do not highly value an on-site childcare facility. It is possible, however, that women who anticipate having children in the future, and those who remember their own difficulties with arranging child care when they were younger, will also strongly support such a benefit.

The objective of this article is to examine the preferences of women employees at a public university for different work-family benefits. Put differently, it is an attempt to determine whether what are generally perceived to be supportive work-family benefits for women employees really address the needs of these women. More specifically, we examine the extent to which the preferences of women employees for work-family benefits are related to sociodemographic and job-related characteristics. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the data and methods are described. Second, the findings are presented. Third, the limitations of our study are examined. Fourth, implications for both union and management negotiators are discussed.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### **Characteristics of Respondents**

In the fall of 2001, we sent a questionnaire to 850 women employees at a medium-size university in the lower Midwest. The response rate was 42 percent

with 355 questionnaires returned. About 22 percent of respondents were under 35 years of age, 28 percent were between 35 and 44, and 50 percent were 45 and older. Most respondents were caucasian (91 percent). While 66.4 percent of respondents were married or living with a partner, the remaining 33.6 percent were either single and never married, divorced, or widowed. Approximately 20 percent of the respondents had children under the age of 11 in the household, and roughly 60 percent of the respondents had an annual household income greater than \$50,000. About 30 percent of respondents reported caring for aging relatives more than one hour per week. The respondents were employed in three job categories: faculty (32.1 percent), office/clerical (37.8 percent), and professional/technical (30.1 percent), and 88 percent of respondents reported working 30 hours or more per week.

## Variables

### *Dependent Variables*

We asked respondents to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all important and 5 = extremely important) how important they personally consider each of the six following programs:

1. Unpaid family and medical leave beyond what is legally required<sup>1</sup>
2. On-site or near-site child care<sup>2</sup>
3. Child care subsidy
4. Paid maternity leave
5. Lists of child-care providers
6. Lists of elder-care services

The employee preferences for these six programs constitute the dependent variables in our study. The six dependent variables were dichotomized<sup>3</sup> as follows: respondents who gave high importance ratings (4 and 5) were recoded as 1 (strong preferences), while respondents who did not give high importance ratings (1, 2, or 3) were recoded as 0 (not strong preferences).

### *Independent Variables*

Potential predictors of preferences for the various work-family benefits examined in our study included:<sup>4</sup> age, race/ethnicity, marital status, parental

<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, we refer to “unpaid family and medical leave beyond what is legally required” as “unpaid family and medical leave.”

<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, we refer to “on-site or near-site child care” as “child care.”

<sup>3</sup> We dichotomized the dependent variables to be able to use logistic regression models. More details about the reasons for this choice are provided in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> More details about the specific predictors included in the different logistic regression models are provided in the next section.

status, household income, caring for aging relatives, occupation, and number of hours worked. Three age groups were considered: under 35, between 35 and 44, and 45 and older (reference category). Race/ethnicity was measured by a dichotomous variable: nonwhite and white (reference category). We dichotomized “race/ethnicity” into nonwhite and white because of the small number of respondents who were minority employees. Marital status was also measured by a dichotomous variable: single (single never married, divorced, or widowed) and not single (married or living with partner). The reference category is not single. Parental status was measured by whether the respondent had children under 11 in the household<sup>5</sup> (yes or no). Respondents who had children both under and over 11 in the household were included in the category “children under 11.” Annual household income was measured by a dichotomous variable: less than \$50,000 and greater than \$50,000 (reference category). Caring for aging relatives was measured by whether the respondent cared more than one hour per week (yes or no). Three occupational categories were considered: support staff (office and clerical), professional staff, and faculty (reference category). Number of hours worked was measured by whether the respondent works 30 hours or more per week (yes or no).

### Analyses

We estimated the independent effects of sociodemographic and job-related factors on each dependent variable using binary logistic regressions. The logistic regression analyses were performed using the statistical software SPSS. In the context of our study, logistic regression models have several advantages over linear regression models. First, the dependent variables are based on importance ratings, which are ordinal in nature, rather than continuous, as assumed by linear regressions. Logistic regressions are much better suited to analyze ordinal data than are linear regressions [12]. Second, binary logistic regression models make it easier to interpret findings through the use of odds-ratios. An odds-ratio, which is the exponentiated regression coefficient, indicates the change in the odds of having strong preferences for a particular work-family benefit compared to the reference category (not having strong preferences for this particular work-family benefit) that is associated with a one-unit change in a given independent variable.

For instance, suppose we attempt to measure the independent effect of marital status on the likelihood of having strong preferences for childcare programs. Further assume that the independent variable marital status is measured by whether the respondent is single (the reference category is not single). In such a case, an odds-ratio greater than one would indicate that the likelihood of having strong preferences for child-care programs is greater for respondents who are single than for those who are not single. An odds-ratio of three would indicate that

<sup>5</sup> For simplicity, we refer to “children under the age 11 in the household” as “children under 11.”

respondents are three times more likely to have strong preferences than the reference group. Conversely, an odds-ratio less than one would indicate that respondents who are single have lower odds of having strong preferences for child-care programs compared to respondents who are not single.

Three different logistic regression models were specified to analyze the different dependent variables. First, we developed a model to analyze the preferences for unpaid family and medical leave. The potential predictors of preferences for unpaid family and medical leave included age, race/ethnicity, occupation, marital status, parental status, household income, caring for aging relatives, and number of hours worked. To predict preferences for unpaid family and medical leave, we could also have included in the model the following predictors: single parents, lower-income parents (less than \$50,000) with children under 11, parents with children under 11 caring for aging relatives, and lower-income individuals caring for aging relatives. Stated differently, we could have included the following interaction terms: parental status by marital status, parental status by income, parental status by caring for aging relatives, and caring for aging relatives by income. We did not include the first three interaction terms in the model because the number of respondents in the different categories was too small to yield reliable and accurate estimates. In a first specification of the model, we included the interaction term caring for aging relatives by income to examine whether lower-income respondents caring for aging relatives are more likely to have strong preferences for unpaid family and medical leave than higher-income respondents who reported not caring for aging relatives. Since this interaction term was not found to be significant, it was dropped from the analysis. As a result, only main-effect variables were entered in the logistic regression model predicting preferences for unpaid family and medical leave.

Second, we specified a logistic regression model of the preferences for the different child-care-related benefits (child care, child-care subsidy, paid maternity leave, and lists of child-care providers). The same set of predictors was used to analyze preferences for child care, a child-care subsidy, paid maternity leave, and lists of child-care providers because all of these programs deal with child-care-related issues. The potential predictors of preferences for the various child-care-related benefits included age, race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, income, occupation, and number of hours worked. We could also have analyzed whether preferences for child-care-related programs were related to whether respondents are single parents with children under 11 and whether respondents were lower-income parents (less than \$50,000) with children under 11. Put differently, we could have included the following two interaction terms: parental status by marital status and parental status by income. We did not include these two interaction terms in the model because, as previously mentioned, the number of respondents in the different categories was too small to yield reliable and accurate estimates. As a result, only main-effect variables

were entered in the logistic regression model predicting preferences for the various child-care-related programs.

Finally, we developed a model to predict the preferences for lists of elder-care services. In a first specification of the model, we included only the following main-effect variables: age, race/ethnicity, marital status, household income, occupation, caring for aging relatives, and number of hours worked. After finding that the variables household income and caring for aging relatives were significantly related to the preferences for lists of elder-care services, we included in the analysis the interaction term “household income by caring for aging relatives.” Since this interaction term was found to be significant, it was also included in the model.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Results

Descriptive results for the six dependent variables are displayed in Table 1. For each dependent variable, we indicated the percentage of respondents who have strong preferences (ratings of 4 and 5) and the percentage of those who do not have strong preferences (ratings of 1, 2, and 3). Unpaid family and medical leave and paid maternity leave are the two most-preferred work-family programs. About 64 percent of respondents reported strong preferences for unpaid family and medical leave, and 63.1 percent of them reported strong preferences for paid maternity leave. More respondents have strong preferences for unpaid family and medical leave and paid maternity leave than they do for child care (51.8 percent) or for a child-care subsidy (32.4 percent).

This finding suggests that providing on-site child care and subsidizing employees who use off-site child-care providers are not equally valued. A likely explanation for this difference is that individuals are not only concerned with the monetary cost of child care but also its quality and convenience. Providing child-care subsidies addresses only the cost issue; it remains the responsibility of the parents to find child-care arrangements that are both convenient and of high quality.

Lists of child-care providers and lists of elder-care services are the least-preferred work-family programs, with 27.9 percent and 26.5 percent of respondents, respectively reporting strong preferences for such programs. Intuitively, this is not surprising, particularly in a university setting, since access to good information is readily available.

### Logistic Regression Results

Logistic regression results are displayed in Tables 2a and 2b. As indicated in Table 2a, the overall model predicting preferences for unpaid family and medical leave was not statistically significant. Put differently, none of the potential predictors—age, race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, household income,

Table 1. Frequencies for Dependent Variables (*N* = 355)

Dependent variables	<i>n</i>	Percent
On-site or near-site child care		
Not strong preferences	171	48.2
Strong preferences	184	51.8
Child-care subsidy		
Not strong preferences	240	67.6
Strong preferences	115	32.4
Unpaid family and medical leave beyond what is legally required		
Not strong preferences	127	35.8
Strong preferences	228	64.2
Paid maternity leave		
Not strong preferences	131	36.9
Strong preferences	224	63.1
Lists of child-care providers		
Not strong preferences	256	72.1
Strong preferences	99	27.9
Lists of elder-care services		
Not strong preferences	261	73.5
Strong preferences	94	26.5

occupation, caring for aging relatives, and number of hours worked—was significantly related to preferences for unpaid family and medical leave. This finding is consistent with the fact that unpaid family and medical leave is highly valued by most respondents. That is, rather than being disproportionately preferred by certain subgroups of women, additional unpaid medical and family leave is a benefit that is highly valued by most respondents.

Whether a woman has children and her family income are both significantly related to strong preferences for both child care and a child-care subsidy. Having children under 11 compared to not having children under 11 increases the odds of having strong preferences for child care by a factor 2.37, and the odds of having strong preferences for child-care subsidy by a factor 2.33. Having an income of less than \$50,000 compared to having an income greater than \$50,000, increases the odds of having strong preferences for childcare and a childcare subsidy, respectively by a factor 1.86 and 3.22. Family income is more strongly and significantly related to preferences for a child-care subsidy than to preferences for



Table 2a. Results from Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Preferences for Unpaid Family and Medical Leave, Child Care, and Child-Care Subsidy

Predictors	Unpaid family and medical leave (Odds ratio)	On-site or near-site child care (Odds ratio)	Child-care subsidy (Odds ratio)
Less than 35	1.20	.87	1.36
Between 35 and 44	2.18	1.41	2.00*
45 and older (Referent)			
Non-white	.61	1.06	1.66
White (Referent)			
Single, divorced, or widowed	.89	.89	.71
Married or living with partner (Referent)			
Children under 11	1.19	2.37**	2.33**
No children under 11 (Referent)			
Less than \$50,000 in household income	.92	1.86*	3.22***
More than \$50,000 in household income (Referent)			
Office, clerical, support staff	.81	.60	.78
Professional, technical staff	.90	.76	1.14
Faculty (Referent)			
Work 30 hours or more per week	1.38	1.30	.85
Work less than 30 hours per week (Referent)			
Model Chi-square <sup>a</sup>	13.27	22.10**	40.64***
Nagelkerke $R^2$ <sup>b</sup>	.051	.082	.154
Number of respondents	349	349	349

<sup>a</sup>The model chi-square, which is equivalent to the overall  $F$  test in linear regression, tests the null hypothesis that the coefficients for all of the independent variables in each model are zero. <sup>b</sup>The Nagelkerke  $R^2$  used in logistic regression models is similar to  $R^2$  in linear regression models. The Nagelkerke  $R^2$  measures the strength of the relationship between the dependent variable and the predictors. It varies between 0 and 1. The closer to one the Nagelkerke  $R^2$ , the stronger the relationship between the dependent variable and the predictors.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

child care. This finding simply suggests that individuals with lower income are more “money-sensitive” than individuals with higher income. Higher-income individuals may be more concerned about the quality and convenience of childcare than about its cost. In a result that appears counterintuitive, respondents between 35 and 44 years of age have the strongest preferences for both child care and a child-care subsidy, although this difference is statistically significant only in the case of a child-care subsidy.

For respondents who are younger, the odds of having strong preferences for paid maternity leave is about 3.7 times greater than it is for respondents who are 45 and older. This finding is expected since the age group “less than 35” coincides with the child-rearing/child-bearing years of most women. Respondents with children under 11 are about three times more likely than respondents with no children under 11 to have strong preferences for paid maternity leave.

Compared to faculty, office and clerical staff have about 60 percent lower odds of having strong preferences for paid maternity leave. The fact that faculty express stronger preferences for paid maternity leave may be due to the fact that, at the university surveyed, paid maternity leave is available for office and clerical staff and not for faculty. As a result, the generalizability of this finding is questionable. It is quite possible that no differences between support staff and faculty would be found if paid maternity leave were also available for faculty.

The presence of children under 11 and family income are also significantly related to preferences for lists of child-care providers. Compared to respondents with no children under 11, respondents with children under 11 are about twice as likely to have strong preferences for lists of child-care providers. Respondents with a family income less than \$50,000 are 2.4 times more likely to have strong preferences for lists of child-care providers than are those with a family income greater than \$50,000.

A respondent’s age is significantly related to her preferences for lists of elder-care services. Respondents who are less than 35 of age have 66 percent lower odds of having strong preferences for lists of elder-care services compared to respondents who are 45 and older. Respondents who are between 35 and 44 have about 50 percent lower odds of having strong preferences for lists of elder-care services compared to the reference category. Intuitively this makes sense, since women under 35, and to a lesser extent those who are between 35 and 44, are less likely to have parents in need of elder care. Respondents with a family income less than \$50,000 who must care for aging relatives are three times more likely to have strong preferences for lists of elder-care services than respondents with a family income of more than \$50,000 who must not care for aging relatives.

## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations in our study should be pointed out. First, the different logistic regression models yielded relatively small Nagelkerke  $R^2$ , indicating that

Table 2b. Results from Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Preferences for Paid Maternity Leave, Lists of Child-Care Providers, and Lists of Elder-Care Services

Predictors	Paid maternity leave (Odds ratio)	Lists of child-care providers (Odds ratio)	List of elder-care services (Odds ratio)
Less than 35	3.68***	.69	.34**
Between 35 and 44	1.59	.85	.52*
45 and older (Referent)			
Non-white	.96	1.88	1.10
White (Referent)			
Single, divorced, or widowed	.80	.66	1.11
Married or living with partner (Referent)			
Children under 11	3.23**	2.20*	/
No children under 11 (Referent)			/
Less than \$50,000 in household income	1.17	2.38**	1.65
More than \$50,000 in household income (Referent)			
Office, clerical, support staff	.37**	.76	.75
Professional, technical staff	.65	.82	1.03
Faculty (Referent)			
Work 30 hours or more per week	.70	.74	.81
Work less than 30 hours per week (Referent)			
Caring for aging relatives	/	/	1.24
Not caring for aging relatives (Referent)	/	/	
Caring for aging relatives × Less than \$50,000 in income	/	/	3.02*
Not caring for aging relatives × More than \$50,000 in income (Referent)	/	/	
Model Chi-square <sup>a</sup>	48.73***	18.54*	27.68***
Nagelkerke R <sup>2b</sup>	.178	.075	.111
Number of respondents	349	349	349

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

overall the different independent variables had a relatively low explanatory power. However, this relatively low explanatory power of the different logistic regression models is not too problematic in the context of our article. Indeed, our objective here is not to find the best-fitted models to predict preferences for the different work-family benefits examined but, more modestly, to analyze the extent to which sociodemographic and job-related variables are related to preferences for work-family benefits.

Second, since the data used in this article are from a single organization, the generalizability of the findings is unknown. As a result, the findings reported here should be interpreted in the context of the university surveyed. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data set clearly limits our ability to make causal inferences regarding the different models developed in our study. Fourth, it is possible that the use of dichotomous predictors contributed to the lack of significance of some predictors. Finally, the relatively small size of the data set prevented us from examining the effect of other relevant employee characteristics. For instance, the small number of respondents who are single parents made it impossible to examine whether single parents are more likely to have strong preferences for child-care-related programs compared to married parents.

## IMPLICATIONS

Before discussing the implications of our study for negotiators, it should be noted that the university surveyed provides a rather family-friendly environment. It provides on-site child care, flextime, unpaid family and medical leave beyond what is legally required, paid maternity leave, use of employee sick days to care for dependents, job sharing, part-time employment, the option of a compressed work week, and the possibility of working at home for exempt employees.

Although informative, some findings are clearly not surprising. Respondents who are younger than 35 years of age and have children under 11 are more likely to value paid maternity leave than are older respondents with no children under 11. Respondents with children under 11 and lower family incomes are more likely to have strong preferences for on-site child care and a child-care subsidy than those with no children under 11 and higher income. Such findings are consistent with previous studies about employee preferences for child-care assistance programs [13, 14].

Our study has two important implications for negotiators. First, negotiators should assess employee needs for work-family benefits. Neither union nor management negotiators can accurately predict the preferences of women employees with respect to work-family benefits by relying only on their intuition. Most union and management negotiators, we believe, would be surprised by our finding that a greater percentage of women employees prefer unpaid family and medical leave than prefer child care. Providing work-family benefits that respond to the real

needs of women employees requires a better understanding of what these women really want.

The finding that unpaid family and medical leave and paid maternity leave are more preferred than on-site child care and much more preferred than a child-care subsidy is insightful in this regard. From a negotiating standpoint, such a work-family benefit has the potential to create a win-win bargaining situation. It is both highly valued by most women employees, and relatively less costly for organizations than other “family-friendly” benefits, such as paid maternity leave and child-care programs. Another insight from this finding is that union and management negotiators should not assume that because a benefit is more costly for employers, it will provide greater satisfaction to employees.

The information regarding benefits that are not as highly valued may also be of use to negotiators. Although providing lists of child-care providers and elder-care services were less important than on-site child care, a child-care subsidy, paid maternity leave, and unpaid family and medical leave, they are valued by employees. Because the cost of providing these two benefits is minimal, they might be welcome as something to “help sweeten the pot.” Furthermore, child-care information is related to organizational commitment for people who had small children [15]. It is also helpful to note that these lists are more highly valued by lower-income respondents, a group that many universities have been criticized for ignoring.

A second important implication of our study is that a “one-size-fits-all” approach when developing the list of proposals may not be appropriate. Our analyses show that at the surveyed university, employee background and job-related variables are related to preferences for work-family benefits. This finding suggests that if negotiators have better information about what employees perceive as valuable work-family benefits, the bargaining outcomes should be improved. In probably most instances, negotiators base their proposals on the benefits already in place in comparable jurisdictions. Thus, if instructional aides in seven of the nine county public school systems already enjoy paid maternity leave, a union staff negotiator from the state affiliate of the National Education Association is likely to argue that this benefit should also be provided in the remaining two districts. It is possible, however, that because the instructional aides in one of these districts are significantly older, and from a dual wage-earner family with a highly paid spouse, they may be much more interested in a flexible schedule that would afford them increased travel opportunities.

In sum, as the number of women in the labor force has increased in recent years, so has the significance of work-family issues as subjects of contract negotiations. Clearly, we cannot generalize from a single case study regarding the preferences of all women who work in the public sector. However, what does appear to be unambiguous is that negotiators cannot rely on intuition to inform them of the needs of women employees regarding work-family issues. Knowing the

preferences of women employees would enable these employees' needs to be met in the most cost-effective manner.

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