



Why Spousal Attitudes Matter **An Interview with Julie Wayne and Russell Matthews**

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There is a robust body of academic literature documenting the connection between perceptions of employer work-life support and employee commitment. But what effect, if any, do spousal attitudes have on how committed employees feel to their employers?

Julie Wayne of Wake Forest University wanted to find out. Locating an employer (an engineering consulting firm with approximately 1500 employees across the U.S.) that was interested in exploring spousal perceptions, she designed a research study using data from 408 married or cohabitating couples to explore the topic; 72% were in dual earner situations. Wayne collaborated with a team of researchers, WFRN members Russell Matthews at Bowling Green University, Wendy Casper at the University of Texas at Arlington and Tammy Allen at the University of South Florida. (Go to [Member Directory](#) for more information about the authors)

The Research Spark

Wayne's interest in exploring spousal attitudes was catalyzed by a personal experience. While pregnant with her third child, she discovered her husband's employer was beginning to offer paid paternity leave. She found that the experience of her husband spending several weeks at home helping care for their two preschoolers and newborn child engendered *in her* positive feelings and a heightened sense of commitment to her husband's employer.

Research Findings

The major findings of the [study](#) answered the following research questions:

- Do spouses develop attitudes toward their partner's employer? Based on the results, the answer was a resounding yes.
- Do employees' perceptions of a family supportive organization affect their commitment to their employers; what is the process of interactions? When employees perceive their employer as family supportive, they experience less work-to-family conflict which was associated with their



spouses having more positive attitudes toward the employee's job and employer. In turn, the spouses' attitudes influence how committed employees feel toward their employer.

The research model powerfully captured what might be seen as intuitive. If an employee experiences reduced work-life conflict, their spouse will surely pick up on that sentiment. The spouse's more positive attitude toward the employer then serves to reinforce the employee's commitment.

Implications for Employers

The research drives home that work-life integration is a family NOT an individual issue. Employers may think life outside of work is a separate sphere but this is not the case. Based on the research, the attitudes and experiences of family members matters greatly to how employees experience work. According to the researchers, spouses' comments on the survey underscored - in vivid detail- why it benefits organizations to understand the impact of work on their employees' lives outside the office. If a spouse is not happy, then the employee won't be happy either. The big message for employers is *don't ignore the spouse*.

The engineering firm suspected the importance of spousal perceptions from the outset. Based on anecdotal evidence, they frequently saw the influence of spouses on employee decision making -- whether to accept a promotion or consider relocation. Perhaps there is no better example of the impact of spousal attitudes than the military. Consider that a key factor predicting if a military employee will reenlist is the prior experience of their spouse (and family).

There are many ways in which employers can positively influence spousal attitudes. One approach is encouraging employees to talk with their spouses about work-life supports available at the organization. Employers might even consider communicating with spouses directly about the organization's array of work-life programs and policies. Given the prevalence of email connection at home - and the resultant work-family conflict - a work policy encouraging email-free vacations and limited email access during non-work hours is a sure way to build spousal support. Involving spouses directly, such as having a husband or wife participate in an employer-sponsored stress seminar, increases the potential impact of an organization's investment in work-life supports.

Implications for Individuals

In addition to its value for employers, the research also has great relevance for individuals and couples. It underscores the importance of couples communicating openly about their work-life priorities and of considering how work and home influence one another. There is great value for couples to be in sync about their shared work-life vision and to create a forum for ongoing discussion about work-life



priorities and tradeoffs. Career planning decisions need to encompass work-life fit in addition to other important job factors such as compensation and growth potential. The results can be far reaching for family harmony and well-being.

The research also invites individuals to consider how they communicate about their work to their spouse, and their family more generally. It's easy to focus on the challenges but equally important to share *what's right about work*. Wayne shared an anecdote about her doing just that. In response to her school-age daughter's inquiry as to why she was going to work on a weekend for a special event, she emphasized the many benefits of her work including helping to provide for the family and bringing her deep personal satisfaction.

Potential Research Questions to Explore

The researchers shared several ideas for additional exploration:

- Investigating what, in addition to work-life support/conflict, impacts spousal attitudes (e.g. advancement opportunities, perceived fairness)
- Refining the understanding of what influences the perception of work-life support (e.g. direct supervisor versus top leadership support, availability of work-life programs versus actual use)
- Assessing the influence of work-life supportive employers on the desirability of the larger community (e.g. is there a relationship between the best places to live and the quality of employers in those geographies)
- Studying other professions and industries, particularly those with a preponderance of women in the employee role to replicate and extend study findings

Research Links

The list below highlights practical application and related academic research information on the importance of one's spouse in work-life management.

Application:

- Behson, Scott, [*Taking My Own Advice on Fatherhood, Work and Family \(or helping my wife lean in\)*](#)
- Levey, Lisa, [*Why the 'Less Ambitious' Man Is the Secret To Better Work-Life Balance for All*](#)
- Valcour, Monique, [*One Couple, Two Careers: A Singular Focus on Making It Work*](#)



Academic Research:

- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Dollard, M. F. (2008). How job demands affect partners' experience of exhaustion: Integrating work-family conflict and crossover theory. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 93*, 901-911.
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2005). Crossover of burnout and work engagement among working couples. *Human Relations, 58*, 661-689.
- Bakker, A. B., Westman, M., & van Emmerik, I. J. H. (2009). Advancements in crossover theory. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 24*, 206-219.
- Green, S. G., Bull Schaefer, R. A., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2011). Partner reactions to work-to-family conflict: Cognitive appraisal and indirect crossover in couples. *Journal of Management, 37*, 744-769.
- Matthews, R. A., Del Priore, R. E., Acitelli, L. K., & Barnes-Farrell, J. L. (2006). Work-to-relationship conflict: Crossover effects in dual-earner couples. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 11*, 228-240.