

Ideal Organizations for the New Ideal Workers: Exploring the Role of Life-Friendly Work Practices



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Abstract The increased interest of modern employees to balance competing demands between work and life has driven organizations to rethink the profile of the ideal worker. Life-friendly work practices (LFWP), which commonly include flexible work arrangements, compressed work weeks, teleworking, job sharing, family leave programs, organizational support for dependent care, and other life-related benefits, have evolved as a means to create workplaces which appeals to this new breed of workers. With limited resources at their disposal, it is important for organizations to be intentional about the selection and offering of LFWP. This interview study with 16 HR executives and 16 post-secondary university students as future employees, explores the organizational reasoning behind LFWP and future employee attraction criteria in relation to LFWP. The findings reveal that most organizations are genuinely interested in creating an ideal organization for their ideal employees. It may be beneficial for organizations to be more expressive of the organizational LFWP initiatives in their employer branding message to create awareness and attract the future ideal workers. The multi-perspective examination of LFWP provided useful insights for practical applications, and directions for further research.

1 Introduction

The increased interest of modern employees to balance competing demands between work and life has driven organizations to rethink the profile of the ideal worker (Williams 2000). There is also pressure on organizations to appear as ideal workplaces to attract and retain this new breed of employees who value both work, and life outside work. Life-friendly work practices (LFWP), which commonly include flexible work arrangements, compressed work weeks, teleworking, job sharing, family leave programs, organizational support for dependent care, and other

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life-related benefits, have evolved as a means to create a workplace which appeals to this new breed of workers (Firfiray and Mayo 2016). Signaling theory (Ehrhart and Ziegert 2005) suggests that the presence of LFWP could signal to job seekers attributes about the organization which go beyond the obvious benefits, possibly enhancing the attraction factor. From an organization's point of view, being considered an ideal workplace brings in the benefit of attracting and being able to select the best employees to suit their needs. Since all organizations have limited resources to be distributed towards various employee initiatives, including LFWP, it is important for organizations to be intentional about the selection and offering of LFWP.

While there are many studies focusing on the employee benefits of LFWP (e.g., Kossek and Nichol 1992; Kossek et al. 2011, 2012; Lambert 2000; Roehling et al. 2001) there is limited research on specific benefits to organizations. Also, there is limited knowledge about which LFWP are highly valued by potential employees, and why these practices are considered highly valued.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore,

1. What are the motivation for organizations to offer LFWP? What are the mechanisms through which organizations currently assess the effectiveness of such practices?
2. What perceptions and value propositions do potential employees hold towards LFWP?
3. How well-aligned are organizational and future employee perceptions of LFWP?

2 Literature Review

The traditional ideal worker is defined by their devotion to work, prioritizing work over everything else, including family and personal needs (Reid 2015). However, the norm of the ideal worker is evolving today. The social norms are changing, and both men and women try to manage the realms of work and life activities simultaneously (Blair-Loy 2009; Williams 2010). In addition, the multi-generational workforce, especially with the millennials replacing the baby boomers, bring in the need for different approaches to attracting, managing and motivating this new wave of employees (Deal et al. 2010; Ehrhart et al. 2012; Hershatter and Epstein 2010; Twenge 2010).

Many studies have examined these generational differences, specifically towards work attitude. Summarizing the generational differences in work values, Twenge (2010) reported that over the three generations of Boomers, GenX and Millenials, work centrality and work ethics have shown a reduction, while leisure values have shown an increase. Twenge (2010) also reported that altruistic values (e.g., helping and volunteering) and intrinsic values (e.g., meaning and using talent) were similar across generations. Others scholars supported the notion that there are, indeed, generational differences, but some could be more complex than simple visible trends (Kowske et al. 2010; Meriac et al. 2010). Today's workplaces comprising of individuals from five generations working together, are challenged when creating an ideal workplace that attracts and retains the best talent from diverse groups of

individuals. LFWP can be considered as a tool that organizations use in their attempt to create this ideal workplace.

Resource-based view of the firm (Barney 1991; Barney et al. 2011) provides a rationale for firms to provide LFWP to their employees. An organization's adoption of LFWP provides employees with unique value, which in turn could positively contribute towards workforce performance, productivity, and workplace citizenship behavior (Lambert 2000). Such a group of policies combined with a positive work-life culture and managerial support can be considered a unique internal resource that is difficult to imitate by a competing firm. Therefore, according to the resources based view (Barney 1991; Barney et al. 2011), such a resource can be considered a source of sustained competitive advantage that can lead to higher levels of firm performance.

In some instances organizations are driven to introduce such policies due to external pressures and institutionalized norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Possible reasons are the conformity to industry standards to attract and retain talent in a booming economy (Sweet et al. 2014), and/or the need to be recognized as one of the best (Kossek et al. 2014). For example, most organizations topping the lists of "ideal workplaces" usually have an abundance of LFWP, adding pressure on others to follow the best practices (Jermyn 2014). Thus, while implementing LFWP provides an advantage for employers to be considered "ideal employers," these competitions and perceived benchmarking exercises put added pressure on organizations to adopt such practices and conform to industry norms.

Studies from diverse academic disciplines have examined different aspects of implementing LFWP (see reviews in Beauregard and Henry 2009; Kelly et al. 2008; Lambert 2000). The majority have focused on individual-level analysis exploring the relationship between LFWP and individual outcomes (e.g., Kossek and Nichol 1992; Kossek et al. 2011; 2012; Lambert 2000; Roehling et al. 2001). However, considerably a few have examined organizational-level outcomes such as perceived organizational performance and the impact on firm's market value (Arthur and Cook 2003, 2004; Perry-Smith and Blum 2000).

While many organizations believe in the value of LFWP, there is little hard evidence to support and guide the decision makers in selecting and implementing LFWP (Kelly et al. 2008). For example, different flexible work arrangements have been incorporated into strategic human resource models (Huselid 1995; Van Dyne et al. 2007), but there have been limited attempts to investigate which are the best strategies to impact business profitability and shareholder value. Summarizing the current state of knowledge in the field, multiple scholars call for studies to better scrutinize the formal managerial rationale for adoption of LFWP (Beauregard and Henry 2009; Kossek and Friede 2006). They argue that the business case needs to be modified to reflect multiple routes by which work-life policies can influence organizational performance.

This paper helps in building the business case by examining LFWP from both employer and potential employee perspective. By understanding organizational reasoning for LFWP, and what potential employees seek in LFWP, the paper

explores the effectiveness of the current strategies by organizations, and offer suggestions for improvement.

3 Data and Method

The unique multi-source data comprise of two sets of interviews (32 in total) with participants from Calgary. Calgary, Alberta is an economic hub of Canada. At the start of data collection in late 2014, Calgary had the lowest unemployment rates and highest wages and salaries per employee in Canada (Calgary Economic Development 2015b).¹

Initial participants were selected based on personal contacts, followed by a snowballing technique (Martins et al. 2002), whereby earlier respondents suggested additional participants for the study. Participants were first contacted through e-mail describing the purpose of the study. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and were held at a location chosen by the interviewees. A semi-structured interview guide provided structure, while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore unique characteristics of individuals and organizations. The two-way face-to-face communication approach allowed a rich flow of ideas.

Sixteen interviews were with senior HR managers from diverse organizations. The questions inquired about organizational LFWP, focusing on areas such as reasoning for offering LFWP, utilization patterns, and measures of return on investment regarding LFWP, organizational cultural norms, and other employee characteristics of the organization. The participating organizations included seven private sector, three government, four nonprofits, and two education institutions. The industries represented included the energy sector, banking, insurance, airlines, education, social welfare, and recreational services. The employee base ranged from around 100 in the smallest nonprofit to 17,000 employees in the largest government organization. All the organizational personnel interviewed held senior positions with decision making authority in human resources management in their organizations.

The 16 student participants, as future employees, were mostly millennials currently enrolled in post-secondary programs of three leading post-secondary institutions in Calgary. There were six males and 10 females, who were in various post-secondary programs, including supply chain management, human resources management, health and physical education, and engineering. The interview questions focused on their future job search plans, characteristics sought after in an employer, knowledge, planned utilization and value placed on LFWP. The student interviews were conducted by two student research assistants while the senior HR manager

¹This was the situation when most of the interviews were conducted. However, the low oil prices have affected the Calgary economy tremendously and the labor force statistics have shown dramatic changes since 2015. The economic outlook has improved over the years 2017/2018.

interviews were done by the principal investigator. Each interview lasted about an hour and was recorded, and later transcribed. Principal investigator and the research assistants individually reviewed and coded transcript data using standard techniques of thematic qualitative analysis. Consistent with previous qualitative studies, analysis of the data moved from the particular (a detailed analysis of language in each transcript) to the general (a comparison of patterns and themes across all the transcripts).

4 Results

In this section, the results are presented from the lenses of organizational point of view and future employee perspective. In the discussion section, these findings are analyzed for the interrelatedness and the fulfillment of the requirements of both parties.

4.1 Creating the Ideal Organization: Organizational Reasons for Offering LFWP

4.1.1 Keeping up with the Competition

At the time of data collection in 2014, Calgary boasted some of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada (Calgary Economic Development 2015a) creating a labour market favourable to job seekers. While many organizations genuinely cared for the wellbeing of the employees, for some organizations, the primary motivator for offering LFWP was to remain competitive in attracting and retaining talent. All employers stressed the need to remain competitive in the labour market, and this was specifically mentioned by one energy sector employer, who prided themselves as an organization with lean operating expenditure compared to their counterparts.

Our principal shareholders believe in lean operations and strategic cost savings. Therefore, as the HR team we had to make a strong case to offer some of the family-friendly practices. One of the main arguments was that we cannot attract or keep the best employees if we don't offer what others are offering in this Calgary market.

Thus, it is evident that some have been driven by the need to “keep up with the Joneses” or follow the institutional norms of the industry (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

4.1.2 Recognizing that the Ideal Worker Comes from a Diverse Workforce

Most employers were intentional about not only recognizing the diverse workforce, but also catering to their diverse needs. This was done by appreciating different needs and creating policies and practices to address them. For example,

We have taken the approach that it is not our judgment to how [employees] choose their benefits from our flexible options. What's suitable for one employee could be very different for another employee.

Benefit packages, including the LFWP, offered by the participating organizations varied in their spread, depth and customizability. Some had fixed plans where all employees were offered the same set of benefits, while others offered extremely flexible plans where employees had the option of taking the whole benefit allocation as cash; many organizations ranged in between these extremes. A senior manager from the energy sector explained their benefit plan, highlighting its ability to cater to multiple demands of a diverse workforce.

With the 18% of salary in the benefit bucket, people can use that pretty much anyway they want. It is in dollars. We allow people to buy equipment if they want. They can use it for skiing or golf memberships, or to pay for daycare. Therefore, the plan appeals to all levels of employees in diverse ages, life stages, and personal needs.

Even when there are no formal policies governing specific LFWP, for example, flexible work arrangements or working from home, many employers indicated that they work with individual employees to meet their needs.

We don't have organization-wide teleworking policies. However, most unit managers work with individual employees to provide them with flexible start times, or working from home arrangements. We cannot do it for all jobs, but when it is possible, as the HR department we work with the unit managers to make it happen.

Such individualized plans were used as a strategy to retain good employees, creating a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee.

4.1.3 Creating a Culture of Caring: It is "A Family"

Most HR managers highlighted the importance of organization culture as an integral part for their organizations, and thus were intentional about "caring for their employees." Some used the term "caring" while few others emphasized that they treat employees as "family." These themes resonated with many employers as seen by the variety of quotes. It should be noted that the notion of "family" was more prominent with the nonprofit employers.

Without appearing to be cheesy, I would say that—[company culture] is like a family.

We are almost like a big family;" and "we do look after each other like family.

All these organizations were serious about achieving the organizational objectives and maintaining a professional workplace. However, this collegial, “family-like” environment, portrayed through both formal and informal policies, fostered a culture where employees feel they belong and fit-in with the organization, thus helping the retention of employees.

Some of the participating nonprofit organizations were in the “business of caring for individuals in need,” and caring for their employees came naturally as part of the organization culture. But, the HR managers pointed out that they are very much focused on the results and employee performance, which is also crucial for the positions filled by the employees of these organizations. For example, a senior HR manager who joined the nonprofit sector after a 20-year career in the private sector stated her own experience as follows:

I find is that we here are . . . very focused on the business, as much as the private sector, but it is much more on the employee as much as the needs of the business. Whereas in the private sector, what I found was, we got these things for the employees, but the business comes first, and if there is choice between the two, then the business comes first, and you need to know that. Whereas here, while the business comes first, they almost go the opposite extreme of “how can I change things around in order to meet both business and personal needs of the employees?”

4.1.4 Recognizing the Life Beyond Work

The new ideal worker is predicated on integrating work and personal life (Kelly et al. 2010). Thus, the organizations need to cater to the demands of this new ideal worker and the first step is recognizing that the employees have a life beyond work. A common theme heard from almost all participants is that the recognition of employees as individuals with lives beyond work duties. Providing opportunities for employees to manage their work demands as well as nonwork demands appeared as a prominent feature for these organizations. Many HR managers specifically mentioned the practice of treating employees as “a whole person”:

We treat the person holistically, and we don’t say ‘don’t let your home life interfere with work at all’; we realize that the whole person shows up at work.

This respect for individual as “a whole person with a life beyond work” guided employee-related decision making of these organizations. They offered simple and unique value-adding LFWP for employees such as “a birthday holiday”, where employees were given their birthday as a paid day off. In many instances these were initiated as retention strategies, which evolved to be great attraction strategies.

4.1.5 Intentional Means to Reduce Employee Costs by Creating a Healthy Workplace

On the one hand LFWP were instrumental in creating a culture of employee wellbeing. On the other hand, they had an impact on influencing the overall benefit

costs. Two participating organizations have actively introduced new initiatives targeting employee wellbeing with multiple objectives in mind. The following quote is from an HR executive in the energy sector;

Our insurance provider has indicated that there is a high cost on prescription drugs in relation to diabetes and high blood pressure. We realized that this could be a far greater issue than the drug cost and we have initiated a healthy living campaign within our Calgary head office. We have education programs, exercise challenges where employees could compete against each other and healthy eating initiatives. We hope these will help us have healthier employees and also bring down some of the drug costs in the long run.

As identified by the HR executive, the benefits of these initiatives are not immediate, whether it is fostering a healthier workforce, retaining employees in the long run or, reducing insurance premium costs over time. The difficulty in quantifying the long term benefits in monetary terms was consistently identified as a challenge, especially when seeking approval from the upper management to introduce such LFWP initiatives.

4.2 Organizational Strategies in Measuring the Outcomes of LFWP

Whether it is the case of giving into the institutionalized norms or genuinely caring for the employees, all participating organizations had some form of LFWP implemented. However, almost all of them indicated that they didn't have proper matrices for measuring the effectiveness or the return on investment of such practices. Informal surveys or discussions to receive employee feedback on specific initiatives, employment engagement surveys, external sources such as insurance providers (e.g., specific drug costs) were the more common forms. There were a few instances where direct measures were used to identify the effectiveness of specific LFWP initiatives. Some of the participating organizations have been recognized as "best employers to work for in Canada" competitions, validating organizational efforts in providing "an ideal" work place. Therefore, all senior HR managers were keen about having a better understanding of how to measure the effectiveness of their LFWP.

4.3 Ideal Organization for the Ideal Worker: Exploring the Needs of the Future Ideal Worker

Post secondary students participated in the study as future employees. The majority of the participants were between 20 and 25 years and taking a full course load in one of three post-secondary institutions in Calgary. Almost all students had part-time employment to support their education and living expenses, and in many instances,

were currently not employed in their area of study. They all had plans for different career paths upon graduation. The following section reports the findings based on the themes emerged from the interviews with the student participants. One of the interesting insights in the findings is that there was as much diversity as there were similarities, in the needs and expectations of these future employees.

4.3.1 Pay is Still Very Important

For many participants, money still held a significant attractiveness in looking for their first “real job” post-graduation. Most participant have been working menial jobs to support themselves and get through university, and the prospect of having more money with a “real job” was very appealing. Many had plans to settle student loans, and have a dwelling of their own, which demanded a stable income. While the importance and emphasis placed on a “big salary” varied, this was still a “top of the list” item for many participants.

Honestly, I am just greedy and care about the money. As long as the people who work there aren't miserable and don't drag me down with them, I think I am ok.

I guess I could sacrifice salary a little bit, in order to get the benefits, although I don't agree with all the benefits. So salary is still very important.

Most important attraction would be rate of pay.

Almost all the participants had a realistic estimate of what they would like to earn as their first position post-graduation, based on industry norms, personal research and also from what they have heard in their classrooms.

4.3.2 The Match of Company Values with the Individual Values

One of the recurrent attraction themes was the match of company values with those of the individual. Many were interested about organizations' corporate social responsibility initiatives as much as the other perks the company had to offer.

I look at the company's corporate social responsibility. I have to believe in what they are doing to want to work there.

Their corporate social responsibility would be really attractive to me, as much as their flexibility with hours and flexibility with time off.

There were few who specifically avoided certain industries as they felt that there was a clash between personal and corporate values. For example,

I rather not work for an oil and gas company because I do not believe in pollution and I am very environmentally friendly.

It is possible that these individuals have not given full consideration towards facts in their decision making, or perhaps it is simply a perception about the whole industry with insufficient information about specific organizational initiatives. Considering

that some of the oil and gas companies were operating with talent shortages, differentiating themselves from the pack with regards to social and environmental sustainability initiatives may be a way to tap into some individuals who may share similar sentiments to our interviewees.

4.3.3 Emphasis on Organization Culture

A common thread of interest was the emphasis on company culture. Envisaging an ideal place of work, the majority of the participants specifically mentioned the work culture and collegiality:

Working in an environment when I really enjoy the people.

The work culture is really important to me. I need to work in a place where I feel part of a team where I am valued.

These future employees used their current jobs as a way to gauge the cultural experience. Working in entry level minimum wage jobs in serving and retail, some participants felt that they were not truly valued by their employers. They were seeking for a real change in their future employment opportunities upon graduation.

The participants who were seeking employment in small companies were driven by the assumption that the organization culture would be better in a small company. It seemed that the future job seekers had pre-conceived associations between good company culture and organization size, perhaps based on their personal experiences or what they have heard from peers.

4.3.4 Company Size: Big or Small?

What attracts potential employees into their new organization had a certain amount of diversity in all areas related to organization, including the size. For many participants the organizational size was not a decision factor, but for some there were specific needs for it to be either big or small with reasons. Few participants were interested in big name companies as they were “*known for what they can offer.*” However, few others specifically wanted to work for a small company to “*feel belonged*” or for learning opportunities.

I would prefer a small-sized company because then you get more all around, hands on, learning skills of all different departments, because in a large scale business, your job is very specific.

There was concern about the organizational stability and job security, for organizations both big and small. As some of the student interviews were conducted after the collapse of the oil prices, the participants were well aware of the impact it had on Calgary economy for all forms of organizations. While the participants understood the business case for layoffs that followed the economic downturn, most participants were less sympathetic towards big-name companies and their approach towards “*caring for their employees.*”

4.3.5 Balancing Work and Life at the Same Time

All student participants had a clear idea of what work-life balance meant for each of them. For some, it was a clear separation between work and life, and for some others the border was more fluid. They defined and identified facets of work-life balance as follows:

A healthy balance between work and personal life, where work does not interfere with my personal time. Say you are on vacation, you shouldn't be checking your emails. Work is totally independent from your personal life.

Being able to enjoy my life, and not take work home with me. So when I leave the office or whatever, I don't have to answer phone calls or send emails on my own time, there is a definite separation of the work and life. When I'm at home, I'm enjoying my time, and when I'm at work, I'm work.

Working with the organization you are employed find a balance that works for you. It will be different for each individual.

If there is something important to me I need to be able to balance that with the job. If I want to work extra hours, and take off a few hours the next day, I need a job that allows for that.

It appears that all the participants placed a great value in their ability to manage both realms of work and life. Thus, they were conscious of their personal needs and the characteristics required from their job to facilitate their work-life balance.

4.3.6 Limited Knowledge about Available Life-Friendly Work Practices of Organizations

Our future employees had clear idea about what they meant by work-life balance, however, there was little understanding about what LFWP are normally available in organizations. When inquired about the benefits, most of them were familiar with the typical offering of organizations such as medical and dental benefits, and some vacation options. However, considering the wide variety of LFWP options offered by organizations, most of the participants could think of only a few examples; more commonly cited were child care and maternity leave. This is quite interesting considering that most organizations didn't offer childcare options and most participants associated LFWP with family and child care obligations.

The limited knowledge of LFWP could be due to multiple reasons. First, the majority of these students so far have held part-time, menial jobs where they were not entitled to most of the benefits offered by organizations. Second, due to low level of obligations beyond themselves, they didn't have the need to negotiate for additional benefits, perhaps, other than the need for flexibility to attend university. When inquired about what would be the most preferred LFWP in organizations (after providing possible available options) most participants had great interest in flexible work schedules, vacation, time off, and developmental opportunity.

4.3.7 Changes over the Life Course

Many student participants alluded to possible changes to the value placed on different types of LFWP over their life course. This change of focus was evident from two folds. First, the participants were asked about whether they anticipated any changes in their preference patterns over 5 years and 10 years. Many participants in their early twenties attempted to forecast what they may be doing, or what they are planning with their life at such a futuristic time. Second, the anticipated expectations were corroborated by relatively older participants, who were in their mid-to late twenties. For example, a mature male student who is currently in fulltime work and following courses to earn a business degree explained,

When I started working, all I cared about earning more money. But once I had the earnings to meet most of my needs I realized I needed more things. For example, for me now, I would take work flexibility over anything. I don't have kids, but I care for my dad. Therefore, time and flexibility is more important to me than anything now.

While many participants didn't have any care obligations now, they anticipated that they would be attracted to family-oriented benefits later in life. One noted element was the gendered view of LFWP. Both female and male participants emphasizing the value of certain LFWP (e.g., childcare benefits) to female employees.

A female may value childcare more than a male.

Because as a guy I am probably never going to take parental leave. I mean I could take it, but guys aren't expected to take, they are expected to work while the wife has the baby. Like it matters less to me than if I were a woman.

While this may not be the majority view, it is interesting to see such strong gendered view towards LFWP with this younger generation. Perhaps this could be still driven by broad societal biases (Duncan et al. 2004; Poortman and Lippe 2009) or individual perceptions. It is possible that these notions could evolve as the participants mature and have their own experience (e.g., become parents). Employers also indicated somewhat similar gendered notions towards the use of LFWP. In many instances even with liberal employers, most male employees didn't fully utilize some of the LFWP such as parental leave. The long standing employers however indicated that there is more uptake of these benefits compared to the past.

5 Discussion

One of the main objectives of this study was to have a better understanding of how organizations can use LFWP as a means of creating a workplace to attract and retain "ideal" workers. Results demonstrated that potential employees have certain expectations when identifying their ideal workplaces. Organizations seeking ideal employees may need to cater to these expectations to attract the right candidates that suit the organizational needs. The section below will discuss the themes that are

in harmony for both parties and where there are certain gaps to be filled, with suggestions for improvement.

5.1 Strategizing LFWP

5.1.1 Value of Intentionally-Created Organizational Culture

Individuals were purposeful about selecting an organization which portrayed certain characteristics (Firfiray and Mayo 2016). Some of the highly valued attributes included a satisfying work environment, ability to contribute as a valued team member, and appreciation of employees work-life balance. Some organizations were intentional about crafting LFWP to portray these elements as part of the organization culture, while some others had a basket of LFWP simply as a means of having some LFWP. The intentionality has delivered positive results for the organizations assessed through employment surveys, and in multiple instances with recognition as “the best places to work” awards.

Further, organization culture has a considerable impact on actual utilization of certain LFWP. For example, even when organizations had policies with flexibility and additional parental leave options, there were instances where employees didn’t fully utilize such benefits due to the fear of negative job implications. Thus, while the mechanisms were set for offering LFWP, the organizational cultural norms were not clearly established to facilitate the effective use of the LFWP. In organizations where the culture supported the utilization of LFWP, the success resulted from the senior management endorsement and organization-wide awareness creation.

Emphasizing about the facets of company culture may be a good way for organizations to differentiate themselves and attract the employees for the best person-organization fit. It is important to understand that the description of an ideal employee could differ from one organization to another, and it is the responsibility of both the organization and the potential employees to strive to get this match right. Since future employees have limited access to specific information about the organization culture, there is a greater responsibility placed on the organization to convey the information about their culture so that the potential employees can make informed decisions.

5.1.2 Highlighting Organizational Values through CSR Initiatives

In many instances, organizations’ LFWP such as volunteering opportunities, community engagement, and wellness programs are closely linked to their multi-faceted corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. However, CSR activities are not always utilized as an element of the recruitment message (Aggerholm et al. 2011). Potential employees used employer’s track record of CSR endeavours as a means of gauging the match between personal and organizational values. Since Person-

organization fit is known to be important for both attraction and retention of employees (Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001), providing opportunity for potential employees for self-selection based on the alignment with corporate values is in the best interest of organizations. Therefore, employers would benefit from conscious inclusion of their CSR initiatives in their employer branding (Aggerholm et al. 2011; Martin et al. 2011; Wayne and Casper 2012; Wilden et al. 2010).

5.1.3 Creating Alignment with the LFWP Value Proposition of Employees

The results suggested a mismatch between the most valued LFWP from employee and employer perspective. Potential employees ranked work flexibility and time off options as the most valued LFWP. However, work flexibility arrangements were one of the least formalized and most inconsistently adopted LFWP. Flexibility arrangements were mostly offered at the discretion of individual departments or managers, and in many instances negotiated case by case basis. With the lack of formal policies, the sustainability of the program and uniform application of the practice could be affected, leading to employee frustration and dissatisfaction (Sweet et al. 2014). Therefore, organizations should be mindful about these highly-valued LFWP and have consistent and fair practices to create that ideal work place.

5.1.4 Capitalizing on Available LFWP

Post-secondary students as future employees had limited knowledge on the available LFWP, possibly due to lack of exposure in their current part-time positions and minimum wage, menial jobs held during their school years. Important attracting criteria for them were company culture, pay, time off, and schedule flexibility. Many organizations offer a broad range of LFWP which could be attractive to wide range employees. For example, some organizations had extremely flexible benefit packages where each employee were allowed a percentage of salary to be utilized towards the benefits of their choice or to be taken as pure cash. However, such information was not mentioned in job advertisements, nor the careers page, which could have been attractive to individuals who are interested in monetary rewards as much as their preference towards LFWP. Thus, it appears that organizations should be mindful about providing more information to potential candidates about these attractive LFWP options already in existence. Further, as noted, our future employees anticipate their life needs to change over time, and the attraction of LFWP changing along with evolution of life stages. Organizations with flexible options would benefit from elaborating on these as part of their employer branding message to both attract and retain the ideal workers (Wayne and Casper 2012; Wilden et al. 2010).

Future employees had a clear idea of what work-life balance meant for them. While some were adamant on keeping segmented domains, others were open to

more fluid interactions across work and life. However, there was the consistent requirement that employers recognize employees as individuals with lives outside the work domain. It is important to note that most of our employers have evolved from the “traditional ideal worker” norms (Reid 2015) to accepting their employees as individuals with multiple demands on their time. Most employers implemented their LFWP because they genuinely cared for the employee wellbeing and to demonstrate their understating of the demands of the new ideal workers. The alignment from both employers’ and potential employee perspective would foster better attraction and retention.

5.1.5 Gendered View of LFWP

Even with our limited participant pool, there was clear evidence about the gendered perspective towards LFWP. It was somewhat surprising to see this notion that LFWP are primarily for the benefit of working moms, especially with the younger group of participants. Perhaps, it could be due to the lack of knowledge of the wide range of LFWP that are available, or it could simply be that the societal gendered norms are well established even with these millennials (Kushner et al. 2017). While most organizations offered their LFWP to *all* employees, there were certain benefits which were mostly used by female employees such as flexibility options and parental leave. According to some HR managers, male employees may shun from taking parental leave (even when they are available) to avoid possible negative repercussions to their job status. This is not uncommon even in situations where organizations are actively promoting the utilization of LFWP (Kelly et al. 2010). Therefore, organizations may need to be intentional about their message and creating the culture where employees don’t feel penalized for utilizing the available benefits.

5.1.6 Creating a Strong Employer Brand

The sections above discussed multi-faceted approaches for creating the ideal organization to attract and retain ideal employees with a focus on LFWP. They can be simply summarized as being intentional about creating LFWP that align with organizational values, and foster a culture that enables the effective utilization of LFWP by employees. This would help the employees feel valued and connected to the organizational goals. An important element in the recruitment of the ideal employees is to convey this message to the potential employees by creating an effective employer brand.

Ambler and Barrow (1996) first conceptualized employer branding as a unique bundle of economic (monetary remuneration), functional (developmental or useful activities) and psychological benefits (a sense of belonging, direction and purpose) an organization can offer individuals. Delineating these different dimensions helps organizations to set themselves apart from competing firms (or even industries) when drawing potential employees (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004). Building an

attractive employer brand requires both instilling an image in the minds of potential employees that the company is a great place to work (Ewing et al. 2002), and continually delivering on that promise with existing employees. The more attractive and clear this image is, the more enticing and fulfilling its employer brand (Berthin et al. 2005). Thus, it is important for organizations to be conscious about the creation of their employer brand, and effectively highlight and capitalize the already embedded elements (e.g., LFWP, great company culture, and CSR initiatives etc.). In alignment with the signaling theory, this intentionally created employer brand, encompassing a realistic organizational image will act as a form signaling the organization as an ideal employer to the comparable ideal employees (Connelly et al. 2011; Ehrhart and Ziegert 2005).

5.2 *Limitations*

The current study focused exclusively on post-secondary students as future employees. Organizations would benefit from a similar understanding of the individuals currently in the workforce. Also, the small number of participants as future employees limits the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the future studies should broaden the scope to have a more holistic view of the needs and aspirations of all levels of employees.

6 **Conclusion**

This interview-based exploratory study examined the role of Life-Friendly Work Practices (LFWP) as a way of creating an organization that would be considered as an ideal workplace by potential employees. The multi-source data from sixteen human resources managers and sixteen post-secondary students revealed several unique themes from employer and potential employee perspectives.

The sample of future employees was exclusively millennials. They were intentional about maintaining good work/life balance and had specific criteria when selecting an “ideal workplace.” However, many lacked an in-depth awareness of the diverse spread of LFWP available. Student participants envisioned an evolution of the perceived value of LFWP over their life course, indicating the need for organizations to be mindful about diversity of their workforce. The job seekers placed great importance on organization culture, learning opportunity and pay. Still, they were willing to trade off high salary in lieu of preferred LFWP. They sought the alignment of personal and corporate values, evaluating it by company reputation and CSR initiatives.

Many employers genuinely cared for the wellbeing of their employees and used LFWP as an intentionally crafted strategy to address employee needs. Some other organizations were forced to adopt the practices to be competitive in the labour

market. The breath, availability, and the utilization of LFWP ranged widely among organizations. Irrespective of the reasoning, almost all organizations were not effectively measuring the derived benefits from LFWP.

The multi-perspective examination of LFWP provided useful insights for practical applications, and directions for further research. Key recommendations highlighted the importance of strategic selection of LFWP, and proactive use of organizational strengths (e.g., LFWP, CSR initiatives, and culture, etc.) to consciously create a strong employer brand to attract ideal employees.

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