Employee and Human Resource Managers Perceptions About Family-Friendly Work Practices: A Case Study Focused on Perceived Organizational Support

Sandra Amorim and Gina Gaio Santos

Abstract This chapter looks at employee's perceptions regarding the type of family-friendly work practices available to them by their employing organizations and, at the same time, it conveys their views on the organizational support received on these matters. The empirical research is based on a case study design that includes four companies belonging to different industries in Portugal. Overall, we conducted 24 in-depth interviews with both operational employees and human resource managers. The findings show that the HR managers in all the companies admit not having formal procedures on family-friendly work practices but only a set of informal practices that vary according to the functional level and the employee rank. The company size and resources, the type of operational activities or the work schedules are important explanatory factors for the scant adoption and implementation of family-friendly practices in these companies, and seem to play a more influential role than institutional forces. Immediate supervisor and co-worker support are perceived by the employees as fundamental sources of organizational support in the work–family life conciliation. The study limitations and future research suggestions are also presented.

Introduction

In a world economy increasingly competitive in terms of work rhythms and work pace and progressively more diverse regarding family-types, such as dual-career couples or single-parent families, the relationship between professional and family

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life has become a central concern for individuals, but also for organizations and society overall. Recognizing that the issue of work and family life encompasses distinct matters related to organizational culture, family trends, and diversity issues, it is important to understand how current organizations manage this issue. Thus, we aim answering the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1 What type of family-friendly work practices and policies can be currently found in employing organizations?

RQ2 What are employees' perceptions about the organizational support regarding the various family-friendly practices (FFPs) that are made available to them by their employers?

The current study intends to shed some light into these matters and it is organized as follows. In the first part, we establish the meaning of work and family life and we conduct a brief literature review on the issue of FFPs and organizational culture. In the second part, we proceed with a description of the methodology used in the empirical study—a case study undertaken with four organizations in the Portuguese context. The third part is focused on the findings presentation. Lastly, we look at some limitations of the research and present suggestions for future research.

Defining the Work–Family Life Relationship

The last decades have been characterized by various economic and social changes that made it difficult to manage the relationship between work and life domains, leading to a growing interest in this subject. It is important to conceptualize what we mean by "work" and "life." Thus, we use Pocock et al. [44: 23] conceptualization that defines work as "paid work" and "life beyond work as the activities outside of paid work including household activities and those activities with family, friends and community, including care activities and voluntary activity." In this research, we are particularly focused in family activities and in the work–life policies that are being implemented by employing organizations in that matter.

The relationship between work and life domains has been conceptualized in various ways, being one of the most widespread the conflict perspective [for a comprehensive review see the studies by 17, 18]. Greenhaus and Beutell [27: 77] define work–family conflict as a "form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect." According to the authors, there are three distinct sources of conflict: (1) time-based conflict, where time spent in one role (work) cannot be devoted to activities in the other role (family); (2) strain-based conflict, when strain in one role affects one's performance in the other role and; (3) finally, behavior based-conflict, where patterns of behavior in one role may be incompatible with expectations regarding behaviour in another role. Studies on conflict and interference (sometimes also referred in the literature as negative spillover) are rooted in role theory, which argues that role conflict (and role overload) occurs when there is a simultaneous

occurrence of two or more sets of pressures such that the compliance with one would make more difficult the compliance with the other [18].

More recently, Ashforth and colleagues [5] developed the concept of 'boundary theory' to depict the micro-role transitions between distinct life domains (e.g., work and family), involving the crossing of a set of boundaries on a daily basis and along a continuum of segmentation and integration. The boundary theory presupposes that it exists some degree of flexibility and permeability between life domains. As Pocock et al. [44: 24] explain work and life are interactive domains that frequently overlap each other and that are characterized by the spillover between them. Thus, the boundaries between work and family life are not closed but porous and varying in their degree of boundary permeability and porosity [5, 44]. Hence, the porosity between domains may be spatial (e.g., with work being done away from the workplace); temporal (e.g., with work and caring activities being conducted simultaneously); and interactive (e.g., with the actions of one domain affecting the other) [44: 24].

Also important, is the concept of "flexibility enactment" introduced by Kossek et al. [32: 244] which is "the type of use and the way boundaries are psychologically managed and identify the conditions under which flexibility promotes positive work–life outcomes". The authors posit that the way workers use and experience flexible work arrangements is dependent on how they prefer to manage the boundaries between work and home. Thus, the integration of work and life domains is not always the preferred approach and individuals may prefer to segment to some extent work and family.

In this regard, for instance, the study by Santos [47] conducted with Portuguese academics outlines the importance of the life-cycle in boundary-crossing processes. For several academics in this study, parenthood is the life domain that influences the most the crossing of boundaries between work and family on a daily basis. Thus, the existence of young children at home help in forming more impermeable boundaries between work and home because children's needs tailor the workday, while guarding against work interferences. Thus, various work factors and individual life circumstances may dictate more segmented or integrated boundaries between work and family life [5].

Theorizing FFPs: Definitions and Perspectives

Albrecht [1] defines the concept of FFPs as a set of corporate programs or measures designed to respond to employees concerns with their family responsibilities, aiming to help them manage their professional demands and personal and family needs, thus contributing to overall work and life quality. Other authors [51] characterize the FFPs as measures aimed at alleviating the conflict or negative spillover between work and family life. More recently, the designation of FFPs has been replaced by the term "work–life" initiatives [10, 12, 28]. This is a more encompassing label because it entails other life domains that go beyond the family and that include leisure and voluntary and community work. Nevertheless, our study is

particularly centered on the issue of family activities and needs, as such we will be employing the more strict designation of FFPs. Examples of such measures may include job sharing, flexible scheduling, on site-day care, elder/childcare provisions, and condensed work weeks [51]. Overall, the FFPs have been categorized into three main areas: (1) measures aimed at responding to family needs, such as childcare or eldercare assistance; (2) measures regarding temporal and spatial flexibility, such as telework or flextime; (3) and, finally, legal measures, such as the granting of parental leaves [12, 21, 26].

Regarding the reasons why organizations favor the adoption of FFPs, we find distinct explanations in the literature. The most prevalent explanation relates to institutional theory [15] that posits that organizational fields become increasingly alike because there are a set of forces that pushes them towards isomorphism: "which is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" [15: 149]. Three isomorphic mechanisms were detected by DiMaggio and Powell: *coercive* isomorphism relating to legal and political influences; *mimetic* processes that occur when one organizational unit imitates others units' behaviors and successful practices and policies; and, finally, *normative* isomorphism that steams from professionalization processes within the organizational field. Thus, various authors highlight the role played by institutional pressures for explaining the adoption of FFPs by organizations within a given organizational field [e.g., 7, 25, 42, 43, 51, 55].

The recent study by Pasamar and Valle [43] with Spanish HR managers in two industries—food and beverage and IT industries—shows a mixed support for both the institutional perspective and expected efficiency gains from a managerial perspective (i.e., the perception by managers of the internal benefits and costs from adopting work–life initiatives). The results show that mimetic and particular normative pressures influence the adoption of work–life practices, while coercive pressures (e.g., the strength of legal arrangements) are less effective than expected. The authors conclude that Spanish legislation is not enough to promote effectively the use of work–life practices because it might be difficult to legislate workplace culture changes [43: 1145]. Moreover, according to Pasamar and Valle, whenever the organizational decision makers perceive positive outcomes related to the adoption of work–life practices, they respond more positively to coercive and particular normative pressures, which increases the availability and use of those benefits.

Consequently, important factors in the adoption of FFPs, at the organizational and managerial levels, may refer to the size of the firm; the work force composition in terms of gender distribution and academic qualifications levels; labor shortages in specific work specialties; human resources recruitment and retention strategies; and the prevalence of management systems focused on assuring employees' organizational commitment through the benefiting of FFPs, as well as other organizational efficiency gains, such as reducing absenteeism and turnover costs [7, 9, 14, 23, 25, 33, 34, 42, 45, 55, 56]. For instance, the recent study conducted by Kotey and Sharma [33] with Australian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) points to the prevalence of low levels of flexible work arrangements (FWAs). Overall, SMEs allowed for the flexible use of leave entitlements and flexible working hours but

seldom conceded the use of paid parental leave or job sharing opportunities due to their limited resources and firm size. There were also differences in terms of business sectors with the use of FWAs more common in the IT or scientific services industries than in the manufacturing or primary sectors. And this happened because, due to job requirements, the employees had to be physically present to perform certain services or tasks, which did not allowed them to work from home (e.g., in the IT sector it was more common to work from home because of the use of the internet). In addition, unskilled workers by comparison with skilled workers used much less FWAs. The rationale for that was that skilled workers held more control and autonomy over their work and they were in a position to negotiate better employment conditions and terms.

Overall, in recent decades, the research in this area [e.g., 11, 13, 29, 34, 36, 57, 59] recognizes the importance of implementing and adopting FFPs for both employees' well-being and organizational effectiveness and improved economic performance, in particular, because the adoption of FFPs helps in the strengthening of employee commitment, human talent retention, and decreased absenteeism and turnover intentions.

The Adoption of FFPs: The Role Played by Organizational Culture

Despite the individual and organizational positive consequences connected to the use of FFPs, some barriers have been detected in what concerns its effective use inside organizations. Thompson et al. [54] suggested that the lack of use of FFPs by employees may be explained by the level of support that they encounter in their workplaces, arguing that the level of work–family conflict that they may endure is more influenced by the organizational support encountered than by the availability of FFPs. In other words, in order for the FFPs to have a positive effect in reducing work–family conflict levels, it is necessary that individuals feel that their use is supported by the organization and does not put their career opportunities at risk. Thus, how the organizational culture favors (or not) the use of FFPs is a fundamental aspect in the adoption of FFPs [e.g., 3, 4, 6, 12, 28, 38, 39, 54].

Thompson et al. [54: 134] define a supportive work–family culture "as the shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees work and family lives." The authors underline three important aspects that may make an organizational culture more or less supportive of the work–life relationship: (1) the expectations that the employee will prioritize work demands above family needs, which is reflected in the number of hours that is expected that the employees will devote to the organization as well as their unrestricted availability. This is characterized by Daverth et al. [12] as organizational time expectations of spending long hours visibly present; (2) the perceived negative career consequences or outcomes of

adopting the available FFPs, [12]; (3) and the perceived organizational support and sensitivity to employee's family responsibilities and needs. This is referred by Daverth and colleagues [12: 1712] as the managerial and organizational support for the uptake of FFPs. These authors include two more determinants of a supportive work–family culture: (4) the gendered perception of policy use that is the prevalent idea that FFPs pertain only to women; (5) and, lastly, co-worker support regarding work–family issues. Thus, individuals are more likely to benefit from the use of the FFPs in a supportive organizational culture, thus experiencing reduced levels of work to family conflict [54].

One of the most studied organizational barriers refers to the cultural stereotype of the "ideal worker," which contributes to the maintenance of workplace inequalities. The "ideal worker" is someone that displays an undivided time commitment and loyalty to the organization and is not distracted by family responsibilities, being often depicted as a male worker [34]. This idea of the "ideal worker" is deeply rooted in most working organizations that assume a preference for the employees segmentation of work and family life domains, and which usually results in a greater appreciation of male workers or of those workers without major family commitments. In most organizations success and commitment is thus equated with working long hours—which is usually more problematic for women that are still the primary caretakers of the family—, and those who contest this culture and exhibit their family commitments are perceived as less organizationally committed [8, 10, 22, 28, 34, 48].

Although there is an effort to make the issue of work–family interaction neutral from a gender point of view, in practice, FFPs tend to be seen by both the employers and the employees as policies broadly directed towards women [14, 23, 34]. According to Gregory and Milner [28] men often benefit from some type of informal work flexibility but in a more concealed way and not explicitly connected to family needs. Thus, FFPs are stereotyped as 'women policies' reinforcing more than questioning gender stereotypes [34] as women continue to be perceived as the main caretakers of the family and not committed enough to their organizations.

The study by den Dulk and de Ruijter [14] indicates that managers are essentially interested in the performance of their departments and that work–life policies are often seen as disruptive of work tasks and performance goals. In this research, manager's decisions to grant FFPs were dependent on whether the employee making the request was supervising others, which was considered less favorably, as well as on the gender of the employee. Requests made by women were considered more favorably than those made by men, in particular when it concerned taking up parental or care leaves. According to the authors, this is an indicator that family duties are seen mainly as the responsibilities of women, which might curtail men's opportunities of also undertaking FFPs. Likewise, in the Greek context, Giannikis and Mihail [23], pinpoint that the adoption of flexible work arrangements was mainly uptake by women and public sector employees who were more likely to perceive more benefits and fewer costs concerning the use of work flexibility.

The adversarial organizational culture is also reinforced by the lack of supervisory support. McGowan [38] found in her study that although managers publicly defended that the employees with responsibilities in caring for the elderly should present their cases to management, in practice they advised them to keep family matters in the private realm. According to the author, the paradox between the recommendation given by managers to explicitly express their family needs and, informally, their advice to keep family issues silent highlights the power of organizational cultures to resist change and inhibit the use of FFPs. In this particular case, the following of a silence strategy, by not communicating personal matters, shows that the employee understood the (informal) message conveyed by the organization about the proper ways to manage family commitments, emphasizing the individual strategies, in which silence is included to the detriment of formal organizational policies [38].

Hence, the support of supervisors or immediate managers is crucial for employees' successful work–life integration [12, 13, 20, 30, 35, 36, 46, 50]. As underlined by Hopkins [30: 449] supervisors act as organizational gatekeepers regarding "worker's knowledge and use of organizational benefits, resources and programs that might help workers better manage work and life responsibilities." Additionally, workers trust that their supervisors will help them manage their work–family responsibilities by being knowledgeable about the family-responsive policies or benefits available to them. The recent study by Daverth et al. [12] proves that the existence of a "context of support" is essential in the uptake of FFPs by employees and that middle managers tend to mirror the behavior of senior managers relatively to the support that they extend to the available work–life policies, thus keeping with their perceptions of senior management expectations. The interdependence between organizational culture and structure (i.e., formal HR policy and practice relatively to FFPs) was then fundamental. Moreover, the study by McCarthy et al. [36] shows that both organizational support (i.e., from the HR manager) as well as the immediate supervisor support affect employee uptake of work–life programs. In this study, employees reported more positive work–life outcomes such as less role conflict, greater job satisfaction, and less turnover intentions, when they perceived their supervisor as supportive.

Additionally, the support obtained from co-workers is also important because it may enhance or inhibit formal initiatives aimed at managing work and family [2, 12, 13, 31, 40, 53] with research findings suggesting that co-workers may play a vital role in the work–family relationship by providing emotional and/or instrumental support. Emotional support is related to the display of respect for the personal and family problems of work colleagues, while the instrumental support refers to the completion of co-workers tasks whenever needed. The authors found that emotional and instrumental support were more likely to occur in cohesive groups, where employees considered the work climate as family-friendly, and believed that the procedures relatively to the use of FFPs were managed fairly, and recognized that their own supervisors supported the solving of conflicts between work and family. Mesmer-Magnus and Glew [40] further note that the messages coming from supervisors, consistently reinforcing the importance of family support, have a

positive impact on co-workers behaviors and attitudes in terms of also reinforcing a supportive work–family attitude amongst them. Also, the study by de Sivatte and Guadamillas [13] shows that co-worker utilization of flexible work arrangements was one of the strongest predictors for the effective use and adoption of various flexibility benefits by employees (e.g., flextime, extra vacation days, or telework).

An important implication of the studies above is that it is not enough to create FFPs, as these have to be supported by immediate supervisors and managed with fairness throughout the organization and among distinct categories of employees. To sum-up, the improvement of human resources management practices should consider the analysis of the symbolic and cultural dimensions of organizations, thus further advancing organizational work–family supportiveness.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Participants

To carry out the empirical study, a research strategy guided by a qualitative approach was adopted with the use of the case study method [19, 60]. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen [19] the case study design offers a detailed and holistic knowledge on the subject under-research because it is based on the analysis of multiple empirical sources of data, which are rich in real context. We employ an extensive case study design by using four companies. Taking in consideration our research questions, the study goals were the following: (1) to identify the FFPs that four companies made available to their employees; (2) to isolate differences or similarities between them relatively to the work–family organizational culture, namely the role played by the immediate supervisor and co-workers in the adoption of the FFPs.

The case selection was based on theoretical sampling aspects [19] and a convenience sampling strategy was used. Thus, by selecting these four cases we expected to find similarities as well as differences between them that might allow us to verify existing theory and/or make comparisons. The sampling criteria were the following: (1) to have companies belonging to different business sectors or industries in order to make comparisons and find differences or similarities between cases; (2) to have companies with a human resource management (HRM) department and with different sizes because this would enhance the variety in what concerns the availability of FFPs. Table 1 offers a detailed description of the study participants.

For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, the names of the companies are fictitious—hereafter designated as Alfa, Beta, Delta, and Chi. For each company we interviewed the HR manager as well as five other employees, totalizing 24 participants. Regarding the marital status and the number of children, most interviewees were married or cohabiting and a few were divorced or single. Eleven

Table 1 Socio-demographic characterization of the interviewees

	N = 24	%
Gender		
Men	8	33.33
Women	16	66.67
Age		
Under 30 years	2	8.33
31–45 years	19	79.17
46–60 years	3	12.5
Educational level		
Preparatory level	3	12.5
Secondary level	10	41.67
Graduate level	11	45.83
Hierarchical position		
HR manager	4	16.67
Supervisor/manager	6	25
Operational	14	58.33

interviewees had 1 child, another 11 participants had 2 children, and only 1 interviewee had more than 3 children, whereas another 1 had no children. In most situations, the children were under the age of 12 and living in the family household.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data the following instruments were used: various organizational documents (e.g., organizational mission statements, annual reports, and company websites), direct observation and field notes, and qualitative interviews. The gathering of documents was useful for a general characterization of the company and its human resources strategy. The access to the empirical data involved the making of several visits to the companies, which provided the possibility of direct observation and field notes, thus registering some observations and comments either during the visits or immediately after them.

The main instrument of data gathering was the semi-structured interview which involved the outline of main topics, by using an interview guide, but that differed according to the interviewee reasoning [19]. Two different interview guides were developed, one aiming the responsible for HR management and the supervisors and the other one intending the operational employees. The length of each interview comprehended a minimum of 30 min and a maximum of 90 min and they were all recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted during the year of 2013, and the majority was held at the company facilities with the exception of two interviews that were conducted outside the company at the interviewees' request.

The data gathered through the interviews was subjected to a theme or coding analysis [24]. Hence, some codes were defined previously based on the literature, whereas other codes were established during the data analysis. Given that two different interview guides were drawn up, one for the HR managers and other for the employees, we developed two grids of analysis. The findings revolve around four main themes: (1) types of FFPs that are available to employees; (2) HR managers and employees perceptions about the FFPs; (3) industry or business characteristics that facilitate or hinder the adoption of FFPs; (4) and, finally, characteristics of the work–family organizational support culture.

Findings

Case 1: Alfa Company

The Alfa Company was established in the 1980s and is part of a Portuguese multinational corporation that operates in the food retail industry. The company is geographically distributed into two distinct locations, and employs an overall number of 1013 employees of which a significant number are women. The Alfa Company has always supported employees in terms of health insurance benefits or various financial assistance programs through the establishment of an internal corporate social responsibility (CSR) department that functions as a support unit for employees. The CSR department unit is nowadays part of the company formal structure, having its own human and financial resources and an annual action plan that is built around employees needs and upon consulting them. The CSR department possesses the explicit support of top management and its initiatives are closely linked to the top administrator leadership style that is highly paternalistic. For a detailed description of the main FFPs and company benefits of Alfa Company, see Table 2.

The corporate initiatives were conceded to all employees regardless of the function, the type of contractual arrangement or job seniority but its concession was conditional to the employee's annual income (e.g., the education and social assistance initiatives were especially designed to benefit employees with lower incomes).

The following statement from an Alpha employee is illustrative of the paternalistic-oriented work–family policies of the company:

> When my wife got pregnant we looked for day care and kindergarten prices, (…) and the minimum monthly price was 150€… So, each month I manage to save 150€. And I see that assistance benefit as a salary extra, right? If I have a monthly salary of 550€, and if I have my child kindergarten for free, I feel that I earn 700€! (Man, operational worker, 39 years)

In the case of the highly educated employees, holding top-level management positions, the Alfa Company offered other benefits, such as a personal laptop and a mobile phone to have remote access to the workplace, and a health insurance plan that was extended to all family members. The HR manager in this company concurred with the perspective that the work–life relationship should be viewed as integrated and not as segmented:

Table 2 Corporate initiatives and benefits implemented by the CSR department of Alfa Company

Corporate programs	Type of initiatives or benefits
Health and employee welfare	Health insurance internal program (free medical consultation or reimbursement of 90% of medical expenses)
	Wellness week
	Recreational and sports activities
	Gym activities and physiotherapy
Education	Support of employees' academic and educational goals (e.g., allowing them to pursue the completion of a secondary school degree during working hours)
	Granting of scholarships to employees and/or their children
	School kits for employees' children who start elementary education
	Discounts in the purchase of textbooks, school supplies and clothing
	Full payment of school books to large families
	Summer camps for employees' children
Social assistance	Financial support (e.g., grants) in extreme situations, such as a prolonged illness, death of a close family member, and exceptional financial assistance)
	Baby's kits upon birth
	Life insurance
	Telephone helpline to employees providing assistance in legal matters or other rights clarifications
	The offer of family Christmas vouchers
	At one of the company locations, there is a nursery and a kindergarten that is free for employees' children

> In the past there was this mistaken belief, which annoyed me that 'work was work and family was family and that they should be kept separately'. Fortunately, our top managers understood it differently as time passed and that has changed. (…) Boundaries in life get blurred… (Man, HR manager, 43 years)

The work schedules in Alfa Company are continuous, established in a 24 h and 7 days week basis with the use of shifts. Hence, continuous work schedules bring about some difficulties in terms of family life management since most of the schedules do not have entry and exit times coincidental with the schedules from other institutions such as schools, day care centers and study centers, or even public transport, and the schedules of other household members. The company offers flexible work arrangements but acknowledges that the nature of the business and company performance goals do not always match the personal needs of all employees, especially operational workers that have to choose between shifts. Here is an excerpt that illustrates this point of view:

> In our line of work we have the stores that are open daily during 14-16 hours a day, thus we have multiple shifts with different work schedules…an opening shift and a closing one, and so on. In terms of logistics, its non-stop, the work schedule is 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Hence, if the company wishes to meet its performance goals and remain competitive,

> something is got to give, and usually it is family and personal life… (Man, HR manager, 43 years).

Interestingly, some of the operational workers in Alfa Company were resorting to individual strategies as a way to manage their work and family lives. Hence, the interviewees mention the use of informal support networks such as neighbors, babysitters or other family members. The company has a significant number of couples that are both employees of the company, and sometimes they try to juggle their work schedules in order to take turns in the fulfillment of family responsibilities, thus sacrificing their living as a couple. The sacrifice of time to rest and sleep was also frequently mentioned.

When negotiating with their immediate supervisors, many operational workers try to bargain an informal solution which, in most cases, refers to schedule flexibility that allows them to make switches in terms of entry and exit times, days off, number of hours worked per day or vacation periods. In this context, the fact that there are continuous working hours is considered an advantage from the perspective of employees since the margin for exchanges with other co-workers is very large. However, this measure is used informally and at the discretion of each supervisor, which seems to pose problems in terms of fairness between distinct employees. Thus, some workers report situations of support and comprehension for family matters by their immediate supervisors and of mutual support:

> My supervisor has always trusted me and she has always been very flexible regarding my family and personal needs overtime. If I tell her: 'tomorrow I'm not able to come because I have to do this and this…' and even if she does not have anyone available to replace me, it has happened before, she would replace me herself… and I have also done that for her. There were situations in the past where I had to cover for her. (Man, operational worker, 34 years)

By comparison, other participants convey situations of preferential treatment between employees and lack of support and understanding on the part of their supervisors, pointing to a scenario where productivity interests and compliance to organizational goals prevail exclusively:

> I think the company should pay more attention to those who have young children at home as well as elderly family members, because it is complicated in those situations. Allow us with more flextime and more freedom in terms of schedules because we often need to go to the doctor's and sometimes we need an hour or two and they [the supervisors] don't let us, they say no! But when they need us to do overtime, we are always amicable to their requests and we receive them with open arms! (Woman, operational worker, 30 years)

Statements were also collected that refer not only to barriers posed by immediate supervisors but also discouragement to seek support at other levels of the organization, such as the HRM department:

> I know that I had the right to a schedule change, to make an adjustment. I know that if I wanted to have it my way, I should have complained to the HRM (…) and I think that I would have wan. But, should I do that? Start a war with my supervisor? Go behind his back and complain to the HRM? No, I don't think so… (Woman, operational worker, 37 years).

It seems from the testimonies that some employees do not feel at ease to address their concerns at the HR level because they believe that this puts into question the legitimacy of their immediate supervisors and they may fear paybacks for confronting their decisions. Explanatory reasons for the diversity of situations encountered regarding supervisor support may be related to the size of the company and the complexity of its hierarchical structure, with four hierarchical levels within a single unit or store, and the lack of formal policies regarding the concession of various flexible work arrangements.

As regard to the support provided by co-workers, the statements of the workers report evidences of emotional and instrumental support, with colleagues available for shift switches among them and showing concern for the well-being of their colleagues. Some statements also show that co-workers can act as a strong cohesive group and with power to alter dominant management practices, including the imposition of limits on overtime requests by their supervisors. Overall, most operational workers interviewed at Alfa Company seemed to be unaware of the availability of concrete work–family policies despite the company formally displaying a broad array of CSR programs and benefits (see Table 2).

Case 2: Beta Company

The Beta Company is a Portuguese multinational company founded in the early twentieth century that exerts its activity in the industrial sector and has 1092 employees working in Portugal. Beta Company workforce is mostly male—90% of the job positions. Additionally, the company possesses seven factories, of which three are operating in Portugal and all of them are run in a highly automatized way with cutting-edge technologies. Thus, the HR manager underlines the difficulty in recruiting personnel for highly specialized technical functions at the operational level as well as for some management positions that require skills that are scarce in the labor market.

In 2011, Beta Company started the formal process of obtaining social responsibility certification. The implementation of the social responsibility norm was followed by several initiatives aiming at sensitizing the employees to social responsibility matters. The company is also known for its strong links to the community and its sponsorship of several local initiatives. Although the company recognizes the importance of the work–family relationship for employees' job satisfaction, with the need for work–life conciliation referred to and endorsed in institutional communication letters, the HR department recognizes the absence of formal FFPs:

> We do benchmarking by comparing ourselves with other companies that operate in the same sector, that's how I know about this subject [work- life policies] and its importance nowadays (…) I would say that in terms of formal procedures, hum… with don't have any, no. Of course, if there is a situation that for some reason, an employee has a serious family

> problem that requires an exceptional measure… we analyze it, this has already happened. But a formal procedure (…) we have nothing established. (Woman, HR manager, 40 years)

Despite this, Beta Company offers a set of measures or work–life benefits that are, nevertheless, differentiated according to the employees' functional level and rank (operational *versus* managerial and administrative functions) and that include:

(1) A family open day: it is a day in the year where employees are allowed to bring their family members to the workplace to know the factory facilities. This initiative was also extended to employees' friends in the current year.
(2) A Christmas party for the employees' children with gift giving.
(3) Flexible work arrangements but only for administrative personnel and managerial levels.
(4) The granting of 23 days off to the operational workers that work on rotating shifts.
(5) The possibility to work remotely from home that is offered to managerial employees on special situations.
(6) The inclusion of issues related to work–family conciliation on career development plans for employees in managerial positions (e.g., the allocation of geographic moves or expatriate assignments).
(7) The granting of a health insurance that is extended to family members, but only for employees at managerial positions, and the concession of favorable conditions of adhesion to the health insurance for all other categories of employees (namely, operational workers).

The absence of formal FFPs, particularly at the operational level, is explained by the HR manager in two ways: (1) on the one hand, work is allocated according to rotating shifts, which introduces some rigidity in work schedules and makes it difficult to implement flexible work arrangements, such as shift exchanges or changes in terms of hours of entry and exit (they operate with a morning, afternoon, and night shift and every worker rotates between shifts for given periods of time); (2) on the other hand, the employees do not seem to experience difficulties in terms of balancing work and family life, and according to the HR manager, they have the opportunity to do so through the work climate questionnaire that is administered biannually to all employees.

In addition, working in shifts is seen, at the managerial level, as an advantage because there is the possibility of a clearer separation between work and life outside work, as the worker ends his shift he also leaves the work load for the next shift that comes in. On the other hand, the possibility of granting flexible work arrangements is higher in the case of the employees holding managerial functions. The following testimony is illustrative:

> Operational workers, at the factory, also have family needs and problems to resolve, but as they work in shifts it is easier to deal with those at the end of the shift, whereas I cannot simply leave my workplace during working hours, my work schedule is always the same.

> As they work in rotating shifts, they sometimes have to be here during the day, but other times they don't. (…) In my case, what I often feel is that if I missed a working morning because of a family matter, then I have to compensate the company, and I take the work with me to do at home. (Woman, managerial position, 35 years)

In the Beta Company, the 23 days off that are granted to operational workers in rotating shifts seems to be the explanatory reason for the high levels of employee satisfaction with the company policy. According to the HR manager, in the last working climate survey more than 80% of the employees signaled that they were able to balance their personal and family life with their work.

Additionally, another motive that may justify the satisfactory results is the fact that most of the workers are male. According to the HR manager, the work–family policies are more justifiable in organizations where most of the workers are female, which is an indicator of taking gender into account when thinking of FFPs, and of the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes at the decision-making levels. The fact that the division of household chores still remains much in the hands of women means that organizations with mostly female workers may display a higher probability of adopting FFPs, either for reasons of recruitment and retention or for organizational efficiency reasons, such as reducing absenteeism and/or improving productivity. Lewis [34] underlines that by centering FFPs on women, organizational decision-makers are not promoting diversity goals or gender equality but are marginalizing the issue of work–family conciliation by making it a woman's problem:

> I think that another reason why we never had a formal policy on that matter [FPPs] has to do with our workforce being male…. My personal opinion is that in the Portuguese private sphere, it is still the woman that is responsible for household chores and family care, so I believe that companies with mostly female workers are certainly confronted with issues that do not affect us much. (…) Most workers here are husbands and… I, do not see these requests: 'Oh, my child is sick, I have to take a family leave'… (Woman, HR manager, 40 years)

The HR manager describes the organizational culture has being strongly influenced by the top administrator, which has been heading the company for 20 years: "*I believe that our organizational culture has much to do with our President and our Executive Board and how they look at these things, and the messages that they convey to us about it. And what they tell us is that: 'family always comes first'*." In this regard, the HR manager states how working overtime is not a common practice and how administrative employees are encouraged to leave the company on regular hours. In those cases, there is also the possibility to finish pending tasks through remote access to company computers. Nevertheless, in Beta Company the interviewees also show a lack of knowledge regarding the availability of organizational practices to support the conciliation of family life and work.

Case 3: Chi Company

The Chi Company is a Portuguese company with 20 years of existence that operates in the new information technologies sector. The Chi Company is a small-size enterprise with 98 employees, with a balanced distribution by gender, most employees are highly qualified personnel in the information technology and management areas. Presently, the Company is a member of the 'Portuguese Network of Corporate Social Responsible Companies' and integrates the European Guide on Corporate Social Responsibility. The Chi Company is involved in several initiatives with the local community and some of its employees do volunteer work in the community. The company is characterized by few hierarchical levels and a corporate history strongly marked by its main founder, who continues to run the company. According to the HR manager, his leadership style has always been characterized by proximity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

In terms of work–family benefits, the Chi company does not possesses any formal policies and is also characterized by policy informality on those issues, as explained by the HR manager:

> We have a set of measures, of initiatives, that are being implemented and developed but that are not formal measures, that is, we have some family- friendly practices that are in use but that are not on paper. What are they? Let's see, there is no formal policy stating that an employee has the right to skip a work's day to go with a family member, a grandparent or a child, to a doctor's appointment, but that already happens here and we have the availability to accommodate that type of request. There is, on the company side, a concern with the issue of work- family conciliation, I would say that… (Woman, HR manager, 37 years)

Despite the Chi Company being an intensive user of IT technologies, the company does not offers the possibility of adopting flexible work arrangements to its employees (there is the exception of the Research and Development departmental unit). Once again, this is explained by the HR manager has being linked to the characteristics of the work tasks that are strongly customer- service oriented (on a business schedule that runs from 09.00 am until 19.00 pm), which means that the employees have to be physically present to attend the customer, thus limiting the possibility of more flexible work schedules. Nevertheless, the HR manager present us with a set of family-friendly benefits and social responsible initiatives that are used by the company although not formalized:

(1) The possibility to have schedule flexibility or to work remotely from home but on an informal basis (this is the case of the employees working in the R&D department and that are software developers).
(2) A health insurance that may be extended to the employees family members.
(3) The celebration of some dates, such as Fathers' day and Mothers' Day.
(4) The granting of a financial bonus of 500€ to the employees that become parents.
(5) Several initiatives of community proximity that also involve the employee's family, such as doing joint volunteer work in the community.

Overall, the interviewee's testimonies show us a supportive organizational culture in terms of supervisor and co-workers support and the sensitiveness to work–family problems and difficulties. The following statement is illuminating:

> My co-workers are also women and they are very understanding of my family needs… We help each other out and we substitute for each other whenever we need (…) For instance, when scheduling my holidays the other day my colleague even said to me: 'you have your kids and your husband to worry about, so you see first which dates you prefer to book'. (…) And if I need to take an hour or two hours in the work day, I talk to my supervisor and I come in earlier in the next day. I'll make up for it another day…. (Woman, operational worker, 34 years)

Despite the testimonies of employees reporting a working climate of proximity and mutual support, and supervisor openness to family issues, some employees underlined that the effort to balance work and family life was essentially an individual effort and not something in which the company played an active role:

> I do not have any extended family nearby, so I and my wife have to manage everything without family help, so…in the days that the school closes, we already know that we have to take some vacation days in order to stay with our children. Usually, we both try to take those days off, so that we can have some family time together. (Man, operational worker, 34 years)

As with the previous companies, Chi employees demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the existence of family-friendly benefits or practices inside their organization and they display difficulty in identifying measures to support that conciliation. They usually pinpoint the importance of having schedule flexibility, considering this a subject about which they have never reflected upon.

Case 4: Delta Company

The Delta Company operates in the Portuguese hospitality sector and it owns seven units that vary between 3, 4, and 5 stars city hotels. The Delta Company was founded in 1986 and currently employs about 220 employees. The company is characterized by many hierarchical levels and the emphasis on employee productivity and organizational profit arises several times during informal conversations with employees. The Delta Company is also characterized by the lack of formal policies in the area of work and family conciliation. The HR department sees the issue of work–family conciliation as not making part of the department's main goals. In this company, the HR department has a strong administrative and legal character, and is essentially focused on administrative tasks, such as recruitment and selection procedures and salaries and compensation issues. The areas of training and internal communication are clearly underdeveloped. The lack of interest by the top administrators about work–family issues is conveyed by the HR manager interviewed:

> In the short term, the main company stakeholders [shareholders and top administrators] do not recognize that the implementation and development of such policies and practices

> [FFPs] will carry a significant weight on the return of financial investments and, therefore, they are not interested in making any investment. I do not even know if they ever thought about this… I guess they never sat down to think about it. (Man, HR manager, 43 years)

Some of the interviewees at Delta Company clarify that the lack of organizational initiatives concerning work and family conciliation may be explained by a distant Administration that emphasizes financial short-term results, and that uses aggressive strategies to reduce personnel costs, a management style which has become more pronounced in the recent four years due to the severe economic crisis that affected the country between the years of 2011–2013:

> I think that the company is not suited to deal with issues of work- family conciliation, because that also entails some financial costs, and maybe they do not have that money available for that, and as long as they pay the salary to the employees they think that they are okay, that the company is fulfilling their part. (Woman, managerial position, 50 years)

In the last years, Delta Company introduced several changes that were depicted negatively by the interviewees and that led to the augmenting of employees' unionization. Among those dissatisfactory measures, the company decided to cut back on food subsidies and replace them by meals and, at the same time, demanded from employees' greater geographical, schedule, and functional flexibility. The HR manager states that the employees may refrain to make more requests regarding flexible work arrangements because, on the one hand, they may not feel entitled or may feel unease making the requests to their supervisors and, on the other hand, they may be afraid of being let go and lose their job. The use of flexible work arrangements, in the case of Delta Company, seems to be one-sided and work only to the company advantage. In Portugal, the hospitality industry is characterized by short-term contractual arrangements. Here is an excerpt taken from an interview with the HR manager that corroborates this rationale:

> Some people do not want to ask for schedule flexibility because having worked in the company for a long time, they are aware of the workplace culture and the need to show a great availability for work and do overtime. And also because they think they do not have the right to ask (…) Here in this company, the issue of schedule flexibility is critical, it is a critical point, the employees who do not show the openness in terms of working long hours and be flexible, they may soon be 'invited' to leave. (Man, HR manager, 43 years)

At times of economic crisis and financial strain, some organizations may reduce the benefits granted to employees in order to remain financially viable [10]. This might be the case of Delta Company that seems to consider the issue of work–family as a strictly personal matter and that considers that assuring the employee with a monthly salary is what the contractual arrangement obliges. This company positioning is reinforced by the current Portuguese socioeconomic context of high unemployment rates and welfare retrenchment [61]. The following statement depicts well how employees feel about the company top management:

> Our managers are not concerned with that, there are no such things as family- friendly policies! Our managers' mentality is very short-term and one-sided. They should know that we are human beings and that we may get sick or have other personal stuff to manage, we are people, not machines. (Woman, operational worker, 47 years)

Once more, the role played by immediate supervisors seems to be crucial. At Delta Company some employees acknowledge the support given by their supervisors and co-workers in family related matters, who are often available to facilitate schedule changes and assist in completing tasks. This support seems to be an informal practice that may vary according to the supervisor management style. In the absence of written policies, immediate supervisors are empowered to authorize schedule flexibility, which translates into the possibility of the employee changing entry and exit time or the number of hours worked in a day. Given this supervisory autonomy and informality, some references to unfair situations appear, as shown in the following excerpt:

> It is obvious that sometimes there are two weights and two measures. In a section of 10 people, they are not all treated in the same way, and there is the chance that a given person who was ill of staying home and make up for it later, while another person who was also ill got her salary cut. (…) With the economic crisis, people hold back, do not speak of injustices and do not express this feeling. (Woman, operational worker, 47 years)

Conclusions

The current study aimed answering two research questions: (1) What type of FFPs can be currently found in employing organizations?; (2) What are employee perceptions about the organizational support regarding the various FFPs that are made available to them by their organizations?

Regarding the first question, it was clear that in both four case study units there were no formal policies or practices regarding the issue of work–family conciliation. The HR managers interviewed in the four companies have a general knowledge of the subject under study, but acknowledge the absence of formal work–family conciliation policies and practices in their organizations. Only in the case of Alfa and Beta companies was there a more developed set of work-–life benefits that were, nevertheless, part of the CSR strategy being followed, especially in the case of Alfa Company. More importantly, in both four units what seems to prevail are informal policies regarding flexible work arrangements or small adjustments in terms of daily work hours or schedules (e.g., shift exchanges). Thus, like happens in Townsend et al. [56: 16] study, our findings show that what prevails is an informal system of practices that is associated mostly with the "utilization of ad hoc, short-term flexible arrangements" that are granted by immediate supervisors. Thus, the ad hoc solutions shift the work–family responsibility away from the organization and to the individual [28] and hinder an effective organizational change, often contributing to the maintenance of unfair management practices that are legitimized by the labor market and organizational financial needs.

Additionally, the findings also reveal that the prevailing perspective in terms of HRM is a legalistic one, since organizations are only concerned with complying with parental leaves and with the granting of other leaves allowed by law (e.g., sick

leaves and legal protection of pregnant or postpartum women workers). For instance, no company had formal arrangements related to the care of elderly.

Like in the study by Pasamar and Valle [43], we found that institutional pressures [15] influenced those companies adoption of work–life benefits especially due to normative and mimetic pressures. For instance, the HR manager interviewed at Beta Company clearly stated that the company benchmarked others in the industry in order to know the 'best practices.' This is one reason why the company offered, for example, a health insurance, which was a common practice in the organizational field (mimetic pressure). Corporate certification in terms of Social Responsibility (normative pressure) awarded the companies with added legitimacy in their respective organizational fields as well as the reputation as a 'social responsible company.' Nevertheless, there were other reasons, related to organizational efficiency gains and managerial reasons that also explain why the companies in our case study opted not to offer FFPs. Thus, very alike the findings in Pasamar and Valle study [43], we have to consider not only external pressures from the organizational field but also the assessment being made, by organizational decision-makers, concerning the internal benefits and costs of adopting work–family-friendly policies and practices, which clearly seemed to be the case of Delta Company.

In times of economic crisis, organizations may refrain from adopting FFPs because of financial constraints, which might be the case of some companies in the current Portuguese context due to a prolonged economic crisis that reached its peak in the period 2011–2013 with an international financial assistance program that avoided State bankruptcy [61]. Hence, it might be the case that managers in Delta Company are able to "distance themselves to some extent from being accountable for decision making in response to request for flexibility through reference to externally derived financial constraints" [56: 18].

Other important organizational characteristics that should be considered when adopting FFPs are organizational size and workforce characteristics [33, 56]. In our study, the large size companies (Alfa and Beta) offer more work–life benefits overall and this might be explained by the availability of more economic resources. At the same time, workforce composition seems to influence the adoption of FFPs. For instance, in Beta Company, the HR manager interviewed considers that implementing FFPs would make more sense if the company had more female workers, because family care is mainly a women's responsibility, thus being the company workforce predominantly male there is no need for those policies. This shows a gendered organizational culture, which has also been reported elsewhere [e.g., 23, 34, 48], and that ends up reproducing gender inequalities inside organizations.

One distinctive aspect of our findings is that within each case unit, with the exception of Delta Company, there are differences between the various categories of employees regarding the type of work–life benefits available to them. For example, in Beta Company only the managerial and administrative employees could benefit from remote work or flexible work arrangements, which were not granted to operational workers. In Chi Company, only the software developers that belonged to the R&D unit were allowed to work from home or to have irregular work hours. Thus, the nature and the type of work activities or tasks entails

differentiations in terms of the work–family measures that might be granted to each category of workers. This has also the potential of generating perceptions of unfair treatment amongst the different categories of workers within each company. See Table 3 for a summary and comparison of the main organizational characteristics of the four case study units.

Table 3 Comparison of the main organizational characteristics of the case study units

	Companies: summary and comparison			
	Alfa	Beta	Chi	Delta
Company size	Large	Large	Small	Medium
Geographical dispersion of the business	Large	Medium	Small	Medium
Type of operational activities	Routine activities but highly dependent on influxes from the external environment	Highly automated activities, routine but highly specialized tasks	Non-routine tasks R&D activities	Routine activities but highly dependent on influxes from the external environment
	Not specialized		Customer-service oriented activities	Customer-service oriented activities
Work–family (informal) policies and practices	Some, differentiated by job function	Some, differentiated by job function	Few, differentiated by job function	Nonexistent
Schedules	Various and diversified	Rotating shifts at operational level	Regular work hours	Various and diversified
		Regular work hours		
Top management leadership style	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive	Unsupportive
	Paternalistic promotion of employee loyalty and commitment	Promotion of employee loyalty	Emphasis in employee participation and development	Instrumental view of the employee, focused on organizational profit, and short-term financial outcomes
	Explicit support to HRM	Explicit support to HRM	Explicit support to HRM	Lack of support to HRM
Supervisor management style	Inconsistent: supportive or uncooperative	Supportive	Supportive	Inconsistent: supportive or uncooperative
	Often resistant to the implementation of FFPs			
Co-workers support	Instrumental and emotional support	Instrumental and emotional support	Instrumental and emotional support	Instrumental and emotional support

Hence, those employees at the operational level that performed routine tasks and that were under a tight control due to the technology in use or that occupied a client—service function had less access to FFPs compared to more qualified categories of employees who had more access to flexible work arrangements used as a way of retaining scarce talent. This finding is consistent with other studies that point to the fact that the possibility of flexible work arrangements is dependent on the possibility of task reorganization and workers replacement by co-workers [59], as well as on the scarcity of the worker's skills in the labor market [49].

Moreover, at an operational level, in the Alfa and Delta Companies the use of informal flexible work arrangements worked mostly to the advantage of the company and the need to adjust workforce volume to work loads and business seasonality, which was resolved through the implementation of banks of hours that covered, above all, the company seasonal needs. Additionally, working in shifts or in diversified schedules, is considered by some interviewees of the Alfa, Beta, and Delta Companies as a practice that helps them to better conciliate work and family life because they are able to change schedules or days off with co-workers, allowing them to accompany their family more regularly or deal with personal matters.

Regarding the second question included in our study on employees' perceptions about the organizational support regarding the various FFPs that were made available to them by their organizations, our findings highlight that most of the employees were not able to identify the availability of FFPs inside their organizations and were mostly unware of its existence. With the exception of the Delta Company, all the other companies offered a set of health, education, and leisure benefits that sometimes entailed the establishment of protocols with external entities. Some of these benefits could be extended to other family members, such as the health insurance. The lack of awareness on employees' part may mean that internal communication processes are not the most effective or even that the management is not interested in largely publicizing those benefits.

Some studies reveal that the belief that work–family conciliation is a private matter may lead employees to hold a low expectation of support from the employer, which is legitimized by the low probability of employee mobilization to access their rights [41]. Thus, individuals may seek family support essentially from informal networks (such as neighbors, friends, or extended family) and by acquiring childcare assistance through nannies and kindergartens [52]. Thus, in our study the employees were resorting to individual coping strategies by using the support of the extended family or nannies. Additionally, balancing work and family life was also possible at the expense of sacrificing time to rest: "*In average I sleep 4 h a night. (…). And when I see that I won't have time to organize everything at home, I don't sleep*." *(Woman, 42 years, Alfa Company)*

Additionally, the organizational culture of support towards the work–family life relationship proved to be stronger in organizations like Alfa, Beta, and Chi, where top management seemed committed to the issue, not only verbally, but also through its inclusion in the overall CSR strategy (e.g., see Table 2 for Alfa Company). This finding concurs with several other studies that underline the importance of top management in promoting a culture of support [21, 37, 58].

Also important in this study is the support of the immediate supervisors in the granting of access to flexible work arrangements on an informal basis, thus confirming the evidences brought by other studies that also pinpoint the relevance of immediate supervisor support for the uptake of work–life programs by the employees [12, 13, 30, 36, 50]. Hence, the organizational culture of family support is created and sustained by the behaviors, attitudes and values communicated not only by top management, but also by immediate supervisors and co-workers, who, as a collective, weave the workplace culture. Thus, supervisor support play a crucial role as they are responsible for allowing the adoption of flexible work arrangements by employees.

Several statements made by the interviewees in Alfa, Beta and Chi companies show how the understanding attitudes of immediate supervisors and co-workers were important sources of emotional and instrumental support, hence contributing more than formal support to the work–family life conciliation. The few studies that depict co-worker support confirm that it is a type of support that increases job satisfaction, performance, and employee well-being and that reduces conflict levels [16]. In this study, in all the companies the support from co-workers was frequently acknowledged as relevant.

One important aspect that should be underlined is the supervisor or manager discretion concerning the management of informal flexible work arrangements, which may be a source of potential inequalities between workers. The availability of flexible work arrangements is internalized as part of a 'give and take' in the relationship between employer and employee. However, as Lewis stated [34], when the conciliation policies are designed as a reward to be earned, workers exhibiting less availability for the company feel a lack of legitimacy to use them. On the other hand, the fact that flexibility is a reward for an additional allocation of time, creates a paradoxical situation where people less able to give their free time to work are in disadvantage to benefit from these policies that have been implemented to help them [34].

This research has some limitations that should be discussed. First, it is not possible to generalize the findings to other contexts. Nevertheless, the purpose of an exploratory study that is qualitative is not to statistically generalize its findings, but rather to enable theoretical replicability, which this case study makes possible. Second, the study participants in each case unit were selected by the human resource managers, which might have added the effect of social desirability to their answers. Nevertheless, there was the concern by the researcher to assure the full confidentiality and anonymity regarding the information being provided by them. Also, the study participants were limited, in most situations, to those having children. The option to include participants with other family configurations might lead to different and/or complementary information on the subject under study and a more complete picture of the phenomena.

Future research suggestions include: (1) a deeper analysis about the differences regarding the usefulness of FFPs between distinctive categories of workers (e.g., operational *versus* managerial levels); (2) how distinct forms of employment contracts (e.g., temporary *versus* permanent) may play a part in the adoption and use of

FFPs; (3) and, finally, a comparison between organizations in the public and in the private sectors, which might reveal important dissimilarities in terms of family-friendly workplace cultures.

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