ADVANCES AND AMBIVALENCES: ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT TO WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN A POLICE SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

This article studies organisational support to work-life balance in a demanding work environment: a municipal police service in Québec. Based on case study methodology involving a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with police officers and agents, the findings substantiate the importance for organisations to offer formal and informal support to employees in the work environment with regard to work-life balance. While support among colleagues and supervisors is significant, we observed that supervisor support is often insufficient. Our research goes beyond the statement that informal support is important as was highlighted in previous research. It shows how this may and does occur with colleagues filling in for the lack of supervisors and bringing supervisors to accept schedule changes when agreed between colleagues. The findings should lead employers to develop programs and measures for employees who face work-family conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance has become an important concern for both organisations and individuals (McCarthy, Darcy & Grady, 2010). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to work-life balance practices (Fusulier, Giraldo & Lanoy, 2006) since they have been found to enhance organisational performance through increased cost savings, improved productivity, and reduced turnover (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Many studies shed light on the importance of organisational culture and the attitudes and behaviors of colleagues and managers as key determinants in work-life balance issues (Behson, 2005; Haas, Allard & Hwang, 2002; Lewis, 2001; McCarthy et al., 2010). The perception of organisational support to work-life balance is not only influenced by the formal provision of work-life balance measures, but also by the organisational culture, as well as the attitudes and behaviors of colleagues and supervisors (Tremblay & Genin, 2011).

In this research, we dwelt on the perceptions of organisational support to work-life balance in a police service in the Canadian Province of Quebec. Our objectives were not only to assess the perception of formal and informal support to work-life balance in a demanding work environment, but also to identify more precisely the processes through which colleagues and supervisors can provide, or not provide, informal support to work-life balance.

Based on previous research (Families and Work Institute, 1998), we assumed that the perceived support to work-life balance would be quite weak in a traditionally masculine work environment; indeed, women entered the police workforce only recently and to this day they remain a minority. Contrary to what we expected, we found that the perceived organisational support was judged valuable, more than in some female sectors (Tremblay & Larivière, 2009). Of course the police sector presents specific difficulties due to work schedules, but the support of managers and colleagues partly compensate for these difficulties. The effect of the professional environment on the perception of work-life balance therefore seems to be confirmed in this research. Our findings are all the more interesting since they show the demands of men, especially young fathers, have been increasing over recent years on this issue. Younger generations of policemen actually feel increasingly concerned by work-life balance.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Many studies have reported the lack of time expressed by parents of young children, mainly of children under 6 years old (Conference Board of Canada, 1994; Frederick, 1995; Galinsky, Kim & Bond, 2001; Tremblay, 2008), as well as work-family conflicts they experience (Stephens & Sommer, 1996). Work-family conflict is defined as the incompatibility between work and family demands, so that the implication in one role makes the implication in the other role difficult (Frone & Rice, 1987; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Work-life balance practices, or family-friendly policies, generally aim to reduce this conflict by facilitating the organisation of times and responsibilities of employees. We use the term *formal support* to refer to family-friendly policies in an organisation.

Research has showed that engaging in a challenging employment with a lack of organisational support tends to make employees more stressed, less apt to face difficulties, and less energetic after work; which can reduce personal and family wellbeing (Families and Work Institute, 1998). This situation can interfere with employee productivity (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Formal organisational support to work-life balance thus appears as a key element to increase both organisational productivity and employee wellbeing (McCarthy et al., 2010). According to the Families and Work Institute (1998), the most

important factors influencing the existence of programs and policies toward work-life balance are, by order of importance: the industrial sector, the size of the organisation, and the proportion of women holding executive positions. This led us to pay attention to the sector and to the proportion of men and women in the organisation. The proportion of women in the workforce and the proportion of women in management are generally linked. We expected the police sector to be a difficult work environment for women and for parents because women entered the police workforce only recently (approximately 25 years ago) and still very few of them have reached management and executive positions (Labrèche & Lavoie, 2004). Although the issue of work-life balance has emerged rather recently in the police sector (Vallière & Lavoie, 2006), the research by Howard, Howard Donofrio, and Boles (2004) on police officers established a link between job satisfaction and work-family conflict. They concluded that police services should pay more attention to work-life balance because it impacts on overall job satisfaction.

While much research insists on the availability of family-friendly policies, i.e. formal organisational support (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003), informal support may play a positive or negative role in the actual use of these policies (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Budd & Mumford, 2006). Indeed, the use of these policies may depend on the perceptions of the employees and the anticipated consequences on their career (Tremblay & Genin 2010; Whitehouse, Diamond & Baird, 2007). The presence, or absence, of *informal support* to work-life balance is likely to encourage, discourage, or even deter employees from using those policies. As a result, it is relevant to study in-depth informal support to work-life balance in the workplace and its perception by employees.

We chose to look at informal organisational support since several researchers stressed the importance of the organisational culture as well as that of the behaviors of colleagues and managers on work-life balance issues (Behson, 2005; Haas et al., 2002; Lewis 2001; McCarthy et al., 2010). On the one hand, organisational cultures can play a favorable or unfavorable mediating role for the implementation and development of work-life balance practices (Fusulier, Giraldo & Lanoy, 2006; Fusulier et al., 2008). On the other hand, informal support by management and colleagues has been found to reduce work-family conflict (Conference Board of Canada, 1994; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Rothbard, Philips & Dumas, 2005). The findings of Thompson, Kirk, and Brown (2005) concerning female police officers showed that supervisors have significant influence on professional stress; they can reduce moral exhaustion and contribute to a better work-life balance. These dimensions are therefore at the center of our research: organisational culture, management, and colleague support.

In this research, we looked into the issue of organisational support -- that is

support offered by supervisors and colleagues -- which some have qualified informal organisational support (Behson, 2005). As mentioned earlier, the importance of organisational support was highlighted as a significant factor beyond the formal measures offered (Families and Work Institute, 1998; Guérin et al., 1997; McCarthy et al., 2010). While the police sector has a good collective agreement and provisions aimed at work-life balance (leave options), the typical police service 24-hour work schedule can pose significant challenges. We therefore tried to see if organisational support is present and how it can operate in such a context. While research has been done in organisations with different categories of personnel, there is little research concentrating on a specific category and no research on the police sector, which is one of the 24-hour a day sectors.

METHODOLOGY

We opted for a case study methodology in order to assess the impact of work environments, colleagues and supervisors, and organisational cultures on the perception of work-life balance. Case study analysis is particularly appropriate in instances where the purpose is to study a phenomenon in depth or where the contextual conditions are believed to be pertinent to understanding it (Yin, 2003). Case study research also provides more precise information on the specific difficulties police workers are facing to balance work and life and on the importance of organisational culture on the perceptions of organisational support in a traditionally masculine sector.

In this research, context was fundamental to examine the interactions between variables such as organisational culture, supervisor and colleague support, and work-life balance. The case we present is based on qualitative and quantitative methods (Yin 2003). While we concentrate on the qualitative part of the research, we recall quantitative results in order to contextualize qualitative findings.

The first part of the research was carried out using online questionnaires or identical forms distributed by mail. The second segment of the research is based on in-depth interviews.

The email and postal survey were carried out concurrently in 2007. An email was sent to the members of the police service in collaboration with the HR department. While about a thousand emails were sent to the professional email address, the HR director indicated that not all police consult their professional email, so we cannot say how many received and read the email. The survey included questions about work-life balance practices, perception, and support offered by the work environment. In order to assess the organisational culture, we asked questions on the perception of parental leave take up. We used the 5

point Likert's scale for the majority of questions and added some open-ended questions in order to obtain personal comments. There were also questions pertaining to supervisor and colleague support (Behson, 2005; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Rothbard et al., 2005). The majority of questions had been validated by previous work, and the validation of questions is presented in Guérin et al. (1997), whose instruments we used, and complemented with a few additions of our own.

In our treatment of results, we compared men and women, as well as parents and non-parents. We considered "parents" as those respondents who live with at least one child under 18. It was deemed interesting to ask the opinion of nonparents to compare opinions with that of parents given that parental leave is the most sought after work-life balance practice. Finally, nonparents may also assume family responsibilities toward a sick spouse or an elderly relative. Although such situations are less common in the presence of children, they can also induce work-family conflict. With the ageing of the population, such circumstances are likely to become more common.

Qualitative data was gathered from fifty-three semi-structured 60-minute interviews with police service employees who had volunteered to participate. The questionnaire contained a box respondents could fill to indicate their agreement to do the interview. Interviews were conducted individually and confidentially except in three instances at participants' request: two interviews were conducted with two participants and another involved four persons simultaneously. Our sample of interviewees is made of police officers, both men and women.

Although their seniority in the service varies, most respondents entered the service directly. Our intent was to scan through as many personal and family situations as the participants would allow, gathering as much data as possible and saturating the corpus. Some respondents are childless and some have family responsibilities toward parents or an ailing spouse. The age of children ranges from newborn to young adult. Among the respondents with minor children, some share custody or live with their spouse's children. Finally, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and processed using the Nvivo8 program to sort and aggregate the information. Data were coded in a number of information categories. The following categories were used to sort the information: work-life balance; work-family conflict; organisational support to work-life balance (from supervisors and colleagues); distribution of tasks within the household; support from partner; work hours and schedules; access to family-friendly policies; provisions claimed by respondent; positive and negative impacts of these policies and impact on career.

Context: a municipal police service

We studied a municipal police service in Québec (Canada). One of the main trends is without any doubt the significant feminisation of the police service's workforce over the past twenty years. In 2006, women accounted for 28% of the police workforce against 22% in 2001 (Vallière & Lavoie, 2006). If we include the civil workforce, 36% of the total police service staff were women in 2006 (Vallière & Lavoie, 2006). Another important trend is the renewal of personnel. Indeed, in 2006, 65% of police service employees were 40 years old or less. Both trends contribute to the emergence of new issues and expectations among police employees, subsequently contributing to concerns of work-life balance.

Younger generations place much more emphasis on work-life balance than "baby-boomers" in their parenting years; they even sometimes tone down their professional expectations in order to devote more time to personal and family activities (Labrèche & Lavoie, 2004). In addition, they are more open to an equal sharing of housework and family roles between men and women (Pronovost, 2006), which includes parental leave take-up for example. This trend is confirmed by the increased number of maternity leaves, but also the increase number of paternity leaves. Further, forecasts show that the number of non-working days related to parental leave will continue to increase in the coming years (Vallière & Lavoie, 2006). At the outset, this can be explained by the growing number of young women in the police labor force, but also by protective re-assignment of pregnant women in their functions within the organisation. Additionally, this trend is reinforced by the implementation of a paternity leave program in the Province of Québec which is non-transferable to the mother and that a majority of fathers take up (3 to 5 weeks are set aside for fathers and in 2010, 80% of fathers take leave). Moreover, the human resources management department (HR) pays more and more attention to work-life balance issues and this was the subject of a survey in 2005 (Lavoie, 2005).

The reorientation of current HR practices is warranted by this survey which indicates that 96% of police service employees believe work-life balance is a matter of concern; and 61% state that their career plan is somewhat governed by work-life balance issues (Lavoie, 2005). Moreover, 35% say they face work-family conflict and this proportion rises to 40% for police officers. The greatest concern of policemen lies with their work schedules; they would prefer more regular daytime hours, and more flexibility in start and finish times. Among the relevant concerns, workforce shortage, day-care and "night-care" for children are underlined as well. For policewomen, the main concern is the organisation of childcare, the improvement of programs related to maternity leave and work schedules (Lavoie, 2005).

RESULTS

For the questionnaire, a total of 200 answers were returned by 104 men and 96 women. Women are clearly overrepresented compared to their percentage in the workforce (36%), but the answer rate of men is good for a topic they are not always directly concerned with. It should be noted that the questionnaire was also sent to administrative employees, which is mainly composed of women (even if they are not police officers, they also often have atypical schedules; for example, nights and weekends).

This section discusses the perceived organisational support from management and colleagues (informal support). Table 1 indicates job distribution by gender for the survey.

Table1: Job occupied according to gender

Type of job	Men	Women	Total
Administrative	8 (8%)	36 (38%)	44 (22%)
Police officer	71 (68%)	51 (53%)	122 (61%)
Police supervisor	17 (16%)	9 (9%)	26 (13%)
Executive	8 (8%)	0 (0%)	8 (4%)
Total	104 (100%)	96 (100%)	200 (100%)

Women are clustered in the administrative functions, whereas line personnel are mostly men. Differences between the jobs held by women and men are statistically significant (chi-square test). However, we did not differentiate the various positions as all work were under a 24 hour schedule and rather similar conditions; although police officers in the streets have somewhat more direct stress.

In the interviews, we had only police officers. Twenty-eight interviewees are women and twenty-six are men, aged between 26 and 55.

Traditionally not a family-friendly environment

In a general way, our respondents did not perceive their work environment as particularly family-friendly. In response to the statement "*I feel that my work environment is attentive to work-life balance*", nearly 40% expressed disagreement, 24% remained neutral, and only 37% agreed (less than 8% say they fully agree with the statement). The differences between men and women are not statistically significant nor the differences between parents and nonparents. Overall, opinions were equally distributed with regard to work-life balance in the police workforce. We also observed that a significant share of respondents express a neutral position.

In order to better grasp the context in which the work environment plays into

work-life balance issues, we interviewed male and female police officers and were able to observe that while a substantial number entertained a positive outlook on the support available from their supervisor, it is not the case for all. This indicates that our findings are the result of individual attitudes of supervisors and do not result from any clear organisational commitment toward flexibility and work-life balance; individual supervisors and colleagues may well be supportive and flexible, and others much less if at all. The organisation is therefore subject to mild forms of equity unbalance. Let us now examine supervisor support and colleague support, which is our main interest here.

Support from management

Support from management was measured using the statement: "*I feel that my supervisor is attentive to work-life balance*". Here, 16 % of the respondents marked their disagreement against 57% who agreed with the statement. There is no statistically significant difference between men and women or parents and nonparents in the perception of support offered by supervisors.

Moreover, when asked about the possibility of taking parental leave, the majority of respondents agreed with the statement: "*I have the support of my supervisor*" (63%). The proportion of respondents who disagreed with this statement is relatively small (15%). Differences between men and women are somewhat significant and it is interesting to note that more women than men disagreed with the statement: "*I have the support of my supervisor*" (21% of women versus 9% of men).

In the interviews, comments seemed to be pessimistic at times, especially among respondents who have experienced parental leave. Comments came in a wide variety of shades with respect to supervisor support:

> "The process was extremely difficult. I was shifting from maternity leave to parental leave and here in the collective agreement there is a provision stating that we may take up to two years including all of work leave provisions and unpaid leave. I had given birth in 2001 and during my parental leave; my other daughter was diagnosed with cancer. At the time of my expected return, she was undergoing a full-fledged chemotherapy program. Management refused to extend further leave and I called upon the union, I appealed. I had to attend hospital and put up a fight here just to keep my job." (Female, police officer)

> "There were a lot of procedures and I had to get assistance because I had neither the time nor the energy to go through it all." (Female, police officer)

A few cases clearly exemplify how employer arbitrariness and management rights can cause problems when supervisors are not understanding and flexible:

> "Yet in our collective agreement there are provisions allowing partial return from parental leave. Here, that possibility was denied to all women after their pregnancy. We'd apply anyway, but we knew in advance that our requests would be denied". (Female, police officer)

> "We all have our reasons, but in the end it's a source of frustration … a number of sergeants will tell you that they'll have none of this here…" (Female, police officer)

> "She calls this her 'management prerogative'. You must understand that all types of schedules can be found here, including full-time regulars like me. At one time there were part-timers here but those jobs have been abolished. Everything can be found here, students are hired, temporary staff, people who only make four hours during rush periods, cycles vary wildly. There are countless possibilities but this (female) manager just won't cooperate and grant leaves." (Female, police officer)

Some respondents mention that conditions change from one station or work environment to the other, and that one former chief had been less open-minded than his designated substitute. The following respondent testimony establishes that there is no genuine 'organisational' policy or practice and that all such matters are ultimately determined by individual supervisors:

> "Management changed two and a half years ago and we now report to another, more open-minded person. Nevertheless, the work we must accomplish and the schedules remain rigid. There are problems with this. The female director, well, is the mother of a young child, a baby, and she had to tell her own boss that meetings couldn't last forever and that they should fold at 4 p.m. otherwise she'd be late to pick up her child at the day-care centre. I guess I can say that management pays attention, but flexibility measures have yet to be implemented so that I could call one morning and say I can't make it to work because my son is sick in bed." (Female, police officer)

> "With my work partner, things are changing. On the night shift everything is fine, but on the day shift it's impossible. Everything must be negotiated… Today for example, they sent me out by myself, you know.... This way, however, we can't respond to emergencies, so there is some form of flexibility, but one needs a 'good boss' and some are simply uncompromising". (Female, police officer)

This comment underscores the importance of informal support to work-life balance. While flexibility is not integrated within the organisational structure, it is clearly associated with specific positions or functions:

"Day patrol was offered to me because I told them I needed help. That kind of flexibility isn't organisational; it is specific to this station. I know of this female officer who had to quit because she wasn't able to cope." (Female, police officer)

"Things change from one station to the other. Here, decisions concerning team composition are made by the sergeant. If you have an open-minded supervisor things will go well for the group. He's the one who decides. But if you happen to have an indifferent sergeant who'll tell you 'That's your problem', things will be rougher. Whether the sergeant is open-minded or not is matter of personality". (Female, police officer)

Respondents indicate that lack of flexibility entails problems with work schedules. This may increase overall stress and lead some to skip their lunch break:

"Being on a tight schedule and short on time is very troublesome. Calls are received and if I'm not at work early I'll have to skip lunch and eat on the go; only then can I work the hours and fill my work schedule." (Female, administrative worker)

"You'll need a good boss because some of them are adamant. It can become stressful." (Male, police officer)

Respondents also mention that the supervisor's open-mindedness should extend to ailing parents and even to the extended family, not only to one's children:

"I have a sister and two brothers. Us girls take care of our parents, our brothers don't. But then one of our brothers is at risk, I mean that he was diagnosed bipolar (manic-depressive) and we have to take care of him as well". (Female, police officer)

All employees recognize the importance of the collective agreement and the rights entailed. They all concur that the collective agreement protects them better and gives them more rights than their supervisors.

"More than often the collective agreement is on our side, and not on the side of managers. For the employer, it is difficult to control because between ourselves we manage to fill the gaps." (Female, police officer)

In any event, it seems that the overriding factor on the ease or difficulties encountered in taking any leave from work lies with the supervisor. The latter may also allow one to leave work early on certain occasions and thus facilitate work-family balance in the police service context. The supervisor's support or lack of flexibility is even more important where joint custody of children is involved, especially for fathers who are new to daily chores:

> "With the support of the regional director […] I told him the problem I had and that I'd have to work differently. He said 'If you're able to perform...'; he could have said no from the onset and reply instead: 'you need to be there from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.' and things would have gone awry.." (Female, administrative worker)

Some members of the upper management indicate that they are willing to grant leaves for family reasons because family issues are important, but others mention how it is difficult sometimes to accommodate people because it stirs jealousy among work team members:

> "If we're talking about someone who accompanies a person in her last moments, there's no question and obviously we'll work with a minimal workforce and try to accommodate, but it's such a rare instance. I am honored to grant leave to someone who will accompany a person in her last moments and in such circumstances we figure it could be us and leave is granted." (Male, police manager)

> "To tell you the truth about that employee, somehow we were able to keep her with us; I'm convinced we saved her. […] It turned out to be a win-win situation except maybe for the few employees who were jealous but that's beside the point. We kept her with us, her marital life is fine now because that's what had gone wrong and now everything is back to normal". (Male, police manager)

Equity in the workplace was also mentioned. Both supervisors and colleagues would resent the fact that one police officer – always the same – would regularly request leaves at the expense of colleagues who must bear the extra workload.

> "Police officers are aware of their responsibilities and outcomes must be reasonable and fair. Employees will seldom come to my office and only in exceptional situations. They'd rather discuss the matter with their supervisors or team leaders. I don't think that requests are very frequent, it's a question of fairness to the rest of the team because indeed it would be irritating if the same person consistently requested advantages for family reasons at the expense of his team." (Male, police manager)

Finally, supervisors who are themselves parents, particularly those who are

involved in alternate custody, are more flexible:

> "I need to get organised because I have joint custody of the kids. Sometimes the situation requires unusual solutions… Since I'm a supervisor, I am aware of the problems because I face the same issues and therefore I try to be as flexible as possible. I try to accommodate them as best I can. I'm aware of the difficulties because I have children and it's like anything else, if you haven't gone through the same situation you may have an idea but you don't have first-hand experience." (Male, police manager)

Support from colleagues

Where taking leave for family reasons is concerned, we observed from the statistical data that the perception of colleague support is somewhat more important than that of supervisor support. A large majority of respondents agree with the statement: "I have the support of my colleagues" (80%), whereas 20% think they do not have, or would not have, the support of their colleagues should they want to take parental leave. On this issue, there is no statistically significant difference between men and women.

Likewise, during the interviews some respondents stated that colleague support is more important than supervisor support in achieving a balance between work and family and that good team understanding – especially in teams of two – is a key factor:

> "It's a matter of adjustment; for example, having Fridays or Mondays off. It's all the same for me. I could work seven days a week because I still love this work. If I need Monday off, we manage among us. For vacations it's the same. We manage not to schedule the same periods. If she needs to take a week off, I can fill in to allow this… We understand that agreeing to solutions is always preferable to imposed solutions." (Female, police officer)

> "Sometimes we'll work out a solution of our own based on minimum requirements. If someone needs to leave at noon because there's a problem at home, the rest of us will manage to fill in and redistribute the work." (Female, police officer)

> "I told them that my child comes first. Once, while my parents were taking care of the child, he went into convulsions and they all headed to the emergency. My father called me, he was crying. I called my (female) supervisor and told her: 'It's 1 PM and I'm leaving because my son is at the hospital.' She replied: 'Right, leave now and I'll be down to fill-in for you.' No problem was encountered." (Female, police officer)

The importance of colleague support is largely due to the necessity of replacing personnel who requires time off work. Police officers on patrol and those who hold operational positions must find someone to fill-in for them before they may leave. A tradition has developed whereby police officers trade work time among themselves.

"If I have unavailable days in the coming month because let's say my brother is getting married, I notify my supervisor and he might tell me to find someone to fill-in for me. Or someone asks me to fill-in for him or her, you can't say no if it can be done. You either manage to be available or find somebody to back you up. Those hours are paid back in time or in money. It's up to us to decide. Take last Saturday for example, I did my 13 hours and had the choice between collecting the money or trading the work time. I chose the work time because my daughter was sick a while back and I had to pay back the leave I had taken then." (Male, police officer)

Respondents were nevertheless aware that this system is likely to generate tension, frustration, or jealousy as was mentioned in the case regarding supervisor support:

"Once in a while there will be tension in the ranks. We are aware of this because we're all in the same boat. We hate the situation whereby no back-up personnel is available, but we stick together... I don't mind working four extra hours but, before that, management got involved and handed down the schedules. We do everything we can to plan ahead and file requests. Before this, schedules were handed down and that was it! I told them that they'd better find out who would volunteer to accomplish a few work shifts. Tensions would drop and people could make arrangements instead of having full days imposed on them. It's done on a small scale, but it is far from being easy." (Male, police officer)

"There's always something, and, yes, it creates conflicts among us. There is a shortage of personnel and it prevents leaves from being granted; for example, if I have a medical examination scheduled. Come on, that's only two hours. In such a case, arrangements are possible, but it gets frustrating when someone is granted leave to play hockey or something. We all have good intentions, but tension does build up at times." (Female, police officer)

The importance of colleague support must not be underestimated not only in situations where children and relatives are concerned, but throughout entire working years and in step with changing family requirements (sickness, mortality). Some of the problems encountered by employees are often more

complex and acute than caring for young children because there are little, if any, opportunities designed for unusual circumstances; for example, chronic illness of a close relative.

> "In the past three years we, the teams had to deal with many situations where employees needed to balance work requirements with events in their lives. There were these young employees whose spouses were struck down by cancer, mortality right here within our teams. We weren't familiar with such situations... We were shaken because it's difficult, and unlike situations such as birth for which programs exist in the form of maternity leave, we don't know what to do when a colleague comes to work in tears and tells you that her husband was diagnosed with cancer..." (Male, police officer)

The following excerpt shows to what extent colleague support is essential although limited in scope since the same colleagues must adjust to and bear the extra work load when a member is on leave:

> "We tend to manage for a while but only until we realize three or four weeks later that colleagues begin to complain about the absence of the person. It triggers a form of crisis. At the outset, you sympathise with the employee but when you begin to realize that the missing person's work load is distributed between the seven remaining workers – and I'm not talking about management here – the colleagues themselves become less supportive. I found it difficult to witness the team's reaction. They become less supportive because they have to reset their family life. Of course we solved one problem, but seven other sensitive situations were created." (Male, manager)

> "Most of the time when I left work earlier I ascertained that nothing pressing was outstanding because it can be upsetting for co-workers to finish up your work. I'd do things in such a way that I could pick up the threads the next day without aggravating my colleagues." (Female, police officer)

Finally, several respondents are aware that they are privileged because they have access to more and better measures and leave provisions than in many other work environments. In this regard, it is important to put our findings into perspective and to underscore the weight of the collective agreement:

> "It's easy to put the blame and to say 'they could do this or that instead', but at the end you and I must stop complaining and try to get organised. When I look at things elsewhere, some are better off and some don't fare half as well. We have to try to improve things but we also need to understand that financial capacity is limited." (Male, police officer)

Our qualitative information complements the statistical data and offers insight into: the concept of informal support within the workplace (by supervisors or management and by colleagues); the importance of informal support; how it works through exchanges among colleagues; and, how it generally involves an understanding with supervisors, especially managers who have experienced similar situations.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The police service under study showed that a mostly male work environment can address work-life balance issues and the progress is remarkable; particularly as it is pressed by young fathers themselves. It is even more interesting to note that in female sectors, such as social work and the public nursing sector, workers perceive a lower level of support from their management, as was observed in another part of this research (Tremblay & Larivière, 2009). This goes against what is presented by many authors, including the Families and Work Institute (1998), i.e. that more feminised sectors are more supportive than masculine sectors.

The effect of both formal and informal support to work-life balance therefore seems to be confirmed in our findings. However, there appeared to be better support in the police sector in comparison with female sectors, such as nursing and social work (Tremblay & Larivière, 2009). We looked into the issue in detail with a case study methodology relying on in-depth interviews with police officers and focusing specifically on organisational support and informal support offered by supervisors and colleagues. Qualitative data allowed us to look at how colleagues supported each other by exchanging work hours and days, and how supervisors only need to acknowledge the change without much effort on their part. Therefore, while some quantitative research has shown that informal support is important, this particular case study shows how this actually occurs.

Specific situations can induce problems, and time-swapping may end up causing tension, conflict, frustration, jealousy, and other kinds of problems among colleagues. From an organisational standpoint, differences exist between services or positions (assignments). Where some are in a profitable situation with respect to organisational support, it is not the case throughout the system. Supervisors who have experienced work-family conflict are usually more flexible.

Forms of arbitrariness may nevertheless be observed. The interviews clearly demonstrate that behaviors of supervisors and colleagues can be critical; and while many do display open and flexible behaviors, the model cannot be generalised. We also noticed that employees choose to remain at a station or

in a given service because their situation would deteriorate should they relocate to another service, department, or station. It nevertheless seems remarkable – even in a predominantly male work environment such as the police sector – that a newer generation of men would clearly express that paternity should be considered as one of the most important aspects of their lives, and consequently put forward requests for leave to their employers. Women are no longer the only candidates who file such requests, and the organisation must oblige not only because formal programs apply to all the personnel, but also because demands come mainly from the younger generation that the police service needs to attract and retain.

The police must thrive to attract the best applicants and retain them in the most active departments, on the beat and in neighborhood stations. Without openness towards work-life balance, personnel tend to request transfers to administrative or office positions. Developing some form of understanding to both supervisors and colleagues of organisational support aimed towards balancing professional and personal responsibilities is therefore an important issue in this sector.

While quantitative data reveal that the police service is surprisingly open to work-life balance, some in-depth interviews show that this is often due to the personal mindset of supervisors and not necessarily to organisational policy. The latter should be asserted in order to make organisational support into a more steady resource throughout organisations such as the police sector and in other predominantly male work environments. Moreover, where parental leave is acknowledged and deemed acceptable, leaves for family reasons such as caring for ailing relatives are not necessarily recognised as legitimate.

Furthermore, the entry of women in the police sector exerted additional pressure on the organisation (such as calling for incentives to acknowledge maternity leave), which resulted in setting the stage for paternity leave and finally adjusting to leaves for family reasons (ailing or aged relative). Going beyond the police service survey that had indicated that work-family issues were a concern to many, our interviewees clearly affirmed that work-life balance has become a major challenge in their environment. This means it is a major issue in traditionally male work environments, and that organisations and human resources managers have to deal with this accordingly. This case study demonstrates that supervisors and colleagues have a role to play in the regulation and management of work-life balance. However, work-life balance is unevenly supported throughout the various levels of organisations.

The limits of this research are those of the case study methodology: the specific characteristics of this police service cannot lead to generalisation, but

our findings draw attention to the crucial role of supervisors and colleagues which appears essential in managing work-life balance issues in any organisation.

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