EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF FAMILY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON THE WORK-NONWORK RELATIONSHIP OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT EMPLOYEES

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Video Hyperlink

Abstract

Previous research on work-life balance in college athletics has examined the experiences of coaches, athletic administrators, and support staff, finding high levels of work-life conflict, burnout, and work addiction. However, limited research has looked at (a) the impact of organizational culture on levels of work-life balance and (b) examined the impact on the employee's family. A mixed-method approach was utilized to capture data from athletic department employees and their partners. We interviewed 25 couples (50 individual interviews) and received 591 completed surveys from employees and 77 from their partners. In the interviews, employees and their spouses expressed frustration and identified they often missed important events based on the cultural expectations within college athletics. They identified ways to communicate with each other to overcome scheduling challenges created by the industry. Insights were provided on supervisor influence regarding work flexibility, attempts made by their athletic department to create family-friendly events, and toxic cultural norms that have strained career or familial experiences. The employee surveys illustrated employees prefer to keep their work and personal life separate and reported moderate levels of perceived organizational support, family supportive organizational practices, family supportive behaviors from superiors, and high levels of obligation toward the athletic department.

Purpose and Introduction

The ever-changing responsibilities and roles within an athletic department can create a grueling schedule for employees, exposing them to negative ramifications, such as burnout, workaholism, job turnover, or career changes (Darvin, 2020; Huml et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019). Recognizing the strain on employees, scholars recently began examining work-family dynamics within college sports, especially within athletic department employees (Bruening & Dixon, 2007, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). However, the research has focused solely on the employee's perspective. There is a need to better examine work-family dynamics so we can better understand how these potential work-life ramifications impact their family sphere.

The purpose of the project is to better understand the relationship between employee's work and life domains by examining the following research questions: *RQ1:* How do athletic department administrators and their partners navigate their work and family boundaries?; *RQ2:* How do athletic administrators and their partners perceive the impact of an athletic department's commitment to work-life integration?; *RQ3:* How do family-focused events and departmental policies create a more family-inclusive culture?; *RQ4:* What strategies do athletic administrators and their partners utilize to handle escalating time strains associated with having a full-time job and a family?

Procedure

Following IRB approval, an email was sent to all full-time employees within ACC,

Big Ten, and SEC athletic departments soliciting their and their partner's participation in a 45-60 minute interview exploring their work-nonwork interface. Out of 200 respondents, 25 couples were selected based on the position held, relationship status, and demographics including gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and parental status. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then compared to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Three researchers separately coded interviews, discussed findings, and generated themes. Of the employees, eight were women and 17 were men. Majority (22) of the participants were in heterosexual relationships with three being in same-sex relationships and four couples both worked in athletics. The majority (21) of couples had children or were expecting.

Based on the initial codes generated from the interviews, the following topics were included in the survey instrument: perceived organizational support, boundary management preferences, work/family schedule control, family supportive organizational practices, family supportive supervisor behaviors, personal-organizational fit, felt obligations to the athletic department, job satisfaction, and work-nonwork balance.

Survey participation ($N = 591$) was evenly split between men (50.2%) and women (48.6%) on the employee survey. Majority of participants identified as white/Caucasian (85.6%) with 6.3% identifying as Black/African American, less than 3% of participants identified as American Indian, Arab/Middle Eastern, Asian, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/a/x, or Biracial. Majority of participants identified as heterosexual (88.7%). Of those who were married or in a long-term relationship, the majority (71.9%) had a partner who worked full-time outside the home. This demographic breakdown aligns with Huml and colleague's (2021) work on employees in intercollegiate athletics departments. Of the 77 partners who completed the survey, 71.4% identified as female and racial and sexual orientation breakdowns were similar to that of employee participants. Majority of the partner participants (68.8%) worked outside the home full time, with 15.6% reporting they work part time, and 15.6% reporting they do not work outside the home.

Results

In response to *RQ1*, survey results illustrate respondents prefer to keep their work and personal life separate ($M = 3.88$; All means reported are out of 5). Additionally, participants report more control over the scheduling of their personal responsibilities ($M = 3.76$) compared to their work responsibilities ($M = 3.26$). Partners perceive much less schedule control over work responsibilities ($M = 2.86$) than employees. Regression results illustrate that perceived organizational support, family supportive supervisor support, and family supportive organizational practices significantly predict work non-work balance in such a way that higher levels of the former positively predict the latter. Interview findings illustrate that athletic departments try to create an opportunity for families to attend athletic-related events, therefore integrating their family role into their work role. This decision allows employees to prioritize work while involving their family in work-related activities. This was met with mixed success from their partners, who either became fans of the program or feel like they are just attending an event while their spouse is still required to be in their employee identity.

Survey results for *RQ2* suggest moderate levels of perceived organizational support ($M = 3.38$), family supportive organizational practices ($M = 3.22$), and family supportive behaviors from superiors ($M = 3.45$). Partners perceive similar levels of perceived organizational support

(M = 3.20) and family supportive organizational practices (M = 3.03). However, partners perceive much lower levels of family supportive behaviors from superiors (M = 2.73). Additionally, participants reported moderate levels of personal-organizational fit (M = 3.44), defined as "an employee's perceived compatibility or comfort with an organisation" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 104). Employees reported high levels of felt obligation to the athletic department (M = 4.00). Regression results show that organizational, supervisor, and familial support were significant predictors of job satisfaction, organizational fit, and perceived schedule control. Interview responses included some positive comments about their athletic department extending themselves to create opportunities for employees and their families to feel welcome and interact with other families working in their department. Others were more concerned about their spouse's work role engulfing their family roles. Some spouses spoke about a lack of boundaries for work and the expectation they are available for job tasks "24-7".

To answer *RQ3*, employee and partner interviews described a mixed response regarding their employer's effect on family dynamics. Some employees and spouses believe the employer was genuinely open to involving families around the athletic department and created a culture that fosters positive family behaviors. Others view it as allowed but not supported. Reasons for this lack of support included believing the supervisors do not have parental empathy based on them not having their own kids, losing these opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and only a select few employees having kids to bring to events.

Survey results for *RQ4* include: using a shared calendar (54.6%), scheduling conversations about family events and who is responsible (92.9%), saying "no" to things that do not fit into family priorities (96.4%), seeking support from extended family (87.3%), friends (91.0%), or outside help (54.5%), setting up boundaries between work and home, including digitally disconnecting (90.0%), having a date night (95%), participating in counseling (19.5%), taking a vacation/time off work (98.0%), dividing household labor fairly (96.1%), and ensuring each person is getting what s/he needs personally and professionally (98.4%). Interview participants went further and talked about how they try to "cheat" the ingrained workaholism system within intercollegiate athletics. For example, some vacationed in Europe (to avoid work communication), put family visuals around their office to convince them to head home when they can, or set boundaries for other employees on when they can call for non-emergencies.

Conclusion

Although it seems intercollegiate department employees and their partners have established many solutions to the demanding schedule of the industry (as illustrated by the findings of *RQ4*), participants in the current study still illustrated a lack of work-nonwork balance and discussed a culture where "facetime" was necessary to be successful. Survey results point to important factors such as perceived organizational support, family supportive supervisor support, and family supportive organizational practices as a way to alleviate potential negative workplace behaviors that often stem from high levels of work-life conflict (e.g., burnout, turnover). Additionally, although many partners understood the realities of working in intercollegiate athletic departments (e.g., frequent travel, weekend work) they expressed an interest for athletic departments to create a more family-friendly culture including allowing continued telecommuting (which as required during COVID19) as well as family travel options for away competitions, longer parental leave, and better role modeling from department leadership to demonstrate positive work-life balance.