Balancing the Stress of International Business Travel Successfully: The Impact of Work-Family Conflict and Personal Stress

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ABSTRACT

Globalization is the growing worldwide trend today for economies to become borderless and interlink. Companies are no longer limited to domestic boundaries and now conduct any business activity around the world. (Cullen & Parboteeah, 2008). Taiwan’s economy is based on international trade between businesses face to face. Thus, international assignments for business trips by business organizations will require more international business trips to meet corporate organizational needs. Business travel can assume many characteristics in terms of types, missions, and destinations.

International business travelers must travel more frequently than others. Because of the demand to leave office and family, these travelers need to negotiate with spouses to maintain family responsibility and connections with their children. These issues can cause personal stress and strain and conflict between work and family needs. It is difficult to satisfy both roles and have the right balance, so these business stresses need more classification and attention. The business trip not only produces personal stress, even health issues, but also losses and gains in individual career development. The dual responsibilities of work and family and their conflicts need to be better balanced in both work and family demand. Social support provides the moderator factor to balancing the stress of international business travel successful. This research using the qualitative research method, these participants were divided into three groups for interviewing and asked to fill out a demography data sheet. Semi-structured questions and the propositions then were described to these participants, and they were asked to recall the experiences and opinions during the week prior to their trip, the on-trips that were abroad, and the post-trip a few days after their return. There were 52 participants who signed the agreement to join this research. This research find that social support may be an important coping mechanism against the strain from work-family conflict and through its impact on perceived stressors and suggests individuals develop strong social support resource and networks at work and at home. This connection will have function as actually perceive lower stress from company and family life.

Keywords: International business travel, work-family conflict, work stress; social support.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has caused organization between nations to be more integrated and interdependent than ever before. Trade barriers are falling, and the world trade among countries in goods and services has grown faster than domestic production over the last decade. Globalization is a worldwide trend that allows the economic effort to become borderless and interlink more closely. Companies are no longer limited to domestic boundaries and can conduct business activity anywhere in the world. (Cullen & Parboteeah, 2008) Taiwan’s economy is based on international trade that deals with business face to face. Thus international assignments for business trips for business organizations will frequently require international business trips to meet that organization’s needs.

Business travel can assume many variations in terms of type, mission, destination, and a trip’s purpose. Each year, 270 million Americans fly for business purposes (Smith, 1999), as do millions of Asians, and Europeans. The more mature international businesses countries will have their business travelers take short trips in-country as well as international travel. The National Business Travel Association reports that the average US business traveler takes four trips a year, and each trip takes about three days (Employment Review Online, 2001).

Most researchers who have examined the nature of business trips regard them as a source of stress to business travelers (DeFrank, Konopaske, & Ivancevich, 2000). Welsh and Worm (2006) point out that the international business
trip is perceived as having positive consequences, such as life style variety and education, variety and renovation, special lifestyle experiences, and personal career development. Westman and Etzion (2002) also found that stress and burnout decreased upon return from the business trip, while detachment from the typical physical work environment during a trip reduced work stress and strain. These positive aspects relate to the resources gained from the trip which do allow an opportunity for growth and accumulation of new resources.

According to the conservation of resources theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989), such inter-role conflict leads to stress because resources are limited for juggling one role with another in work and family. This role conflict produces resource disorder and causes the loss of resources and burnout (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). The work–family and stress balance is thus affected by the structural characteristics of the two roles. Work-related travel makes the traveler temporarily unable to handle family-related roles and instead replaces those roles with work-related roles (Roehling & Bultman, 2002).

This travel situation could increase work–family conflict (WFC), and physical strain and stress or burnout. International business travelers usually travel more frequently than others. As part of the job demand to temporarily leave office and family, the travelers need to negotiate with their spouses regarding family responsibilities and the child relationship. For travelers, that away from office and home will cause personal stress and strain from addressing both work requests and family needs. It is difficult to satisfy both sides in terms of good role play and life balance, but that balance is the major mission that still needs to be classified and addressed appropriately and clearly. A business trip will not only produce personal stress, but also produce health issues due to the dual responsibility experience and losses and gains unless the work-family conflict becomes more balanced.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A new era of globalization and international trade or business management has made business travel more acceptable, despite the many new technological communication methods, such as email, Skype, Internet meetings and more. One significant effective communication for business success is still face-to-face interaction to solve problems, negotiate contracts, and deal with ongoing agreement, and develop a positive, successful interactive relationship (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001). The globalization of world business and the growth of international trade are also reflected in the travel field. Therefore, the business traveler who travels abroad as part of a job has increased (Liese, Mundt, Dell, Nagy, & Demure, 1997).

**The International Business Traveler Work-Family Conflict**

A conflict between work and family for international business travelers is based on the idea that people make trade-offs when expending alternative amounts of psychological and physiological resources that they have to balance. Edwards & Rothbard (2000) suggest that demands from the one role can be incompatible with the demands of the other role, which then inhibits effective and clear functioning in the alternate role. Such conflict may arise because the performance of the one role absorbs time, creates strain, or is behaviorally incompatible with the performance of the other role (Etzion & Baylin, 1994). Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, (1996) claim that the conflict between work and family is actually bidirectional, and two types of inter-role conflict can be distinguished: (1) write out and put WFC in parentheses (WFC) as you do referring to a situation in which the pressures of the work hamper functioning at home; and (2) family–work conflict (FWC), referring to role pressures at home interfering with job functioning at work.

Kopelman et al. (1983) found that work–family conflict mediates the relationship between both work conflict and family conflict through life satisfaction. Specifically, conflict in both work and family domains leads to higher levels of WFC, and this WFC relate to lower life satisfaction. Cooke and Rousseau (1984) also found that workers with greater work expectations and workers who held a greater number of family roles (spouse and/or parent) reported more WFC. Also WFC produces higher levels of job dissatisfaction and more physical health problems. Further, Bacharach, Bamberger, and Conley (1991) found that WFC mediated the relationships between both role overload and role conflict and job burnout. Workers with higher levels of role overload and role conflict reported more WFC, and WFC was related to higher rates of job burnout.
According to DeFrank, Konopaske, & Ivancevich (2000), business travel is more stressful on those executives who are married and have young families. Nearly 75 percent of married travelers feel it is difficult to be away from home for extended periods, compared with only 50 percent of their non-married counterparts. The stress caused by a spouse’s absence is not a newly discovered phenomenon, but it is one that can be difficult for family members and business organization’s involved. Thus, the following proposition/hypothesis is offered:

**Proposition 1:** In the personal phase, when business travelers deal with work-family conflict (WFC), family life can significantly affect job performance.

### Stress From International Business Travel

DeFrank et al. (2000) distinguish three stages of a business trip: Pre-trip; the on-trip and post-trip. Each stage is characterized by different demands and notice for the frequent business traveler. The three stages will produce a different intensity of stressors. DeFrank et al. (2000) point out that family stressors appear most often while leaving for job demand before and after the trip because of the pre-trip preparation and the incapability of the traveler to spend time with the family due to a heavy workload and meeting schedule. That is followed by the conflicting needs of the tired and overloaded traveler and family demands during the post-trip stage. These can include children’s activities, sports events, yard work, household needs. Similarly, Liese (2000) claims that the most difficult part of business travel is the homecoming.

DeFrank et al. (2000) also mention that personality factors such as health condition, workload, jet lag etc. that may cause stress while traveling. Business travelers experienced cross-culture adaptability, and have an open-mind attitude, and this locus/loss of control for that personality factors makes travel less or more stressful than for those with different attitudes and personalities. In contrast, the better a traveler can adjust to different cultures and follow the same way of doing business. That less stress will allow the business traveler to experience and enjoy the trip when visiting host countries. These travelers will be more confident in their ability to interpret unfamiliar cultural circumstances and communicate in their usual way in the host country. Moreover, the more open-minded a traveler is when visiting a country, the more able that person will be to receive and process information from the host and the host environment.

John M. Ivancevich et al (2003) state that during the business travel-oriented model phase, stress is the degree of that exists between the person and the environment. Stress is something that derives from the international business traveler’s perception of the balance required between what is expected and what is demanded in terms of job performance and the traveler’s ability to deal with the job demands already in place from the organization and the personal family. Stress can occur when the organization does not provide adequate ways to help and meet the business traveler’s needs, or the traveler’s personal abilities don’t meet the necessary requirements and produce both a misfit and frustration.

Liese et al. (1997) investigated the impact of work-related travel on the staff of the World Bank. In a cross-sectional study of these business travelers, the researchers found that travelers filed medical claims at a rate three times greater than that for non-travelers. Striker et al. (1999) found that more than a third of the respondents reported high- to very-high travel stress. In line with this finding, Fisher and Cooper (1990) suggest that workers who travel will demonstrate distress because of the frequent changes in their daily routines to which they must adjust. Frequent changes in location can cause a feeling of poor adjustment when the environment one travels to and one’s own home environments are very different. However, any change of place can also create a sense of detachment from the workplace that may, as in the case of the participants, be viewed as a respite that alleviates job burnout (Etzion et al., 1998).

Hobfoll and Lilly (1993) demonstrated that personal gains become important only in the context of a sequence of losses. Business travel may be a source of resource loss for the traveler, starting with the pre-trip stage and trip planning and job demands all the way through the trip phase that poses physical and psychological demands, to the end and post-trip stage, often characterized by overload. Against these presumed resource losses, the resources gained during the trip stage itself can have a strong positive emotional effect on the traveler. Westman, Etzion, and Gurtler (2004) corroborated these findings. They demonstrated that women travelers experienced the least WFC and FWC during the trip stage and while away from home and work. Therefore, the following proposition/hypothesis is offered:
Proposition 2: In the personal phase of business travel, stress resources from the work-family conflict and job demand can cause personal physical disorder and stress that will significantly affect job performance.

Social Support for the International Business Traveler

Social support can have positive consequences for improving health, reducing stress, and mitigating work-family conflict for business travelers (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Research suggests that social support in the workplace, such as the support of supervisors and coworkers, has a positive impact on work outcomes and job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Goff et al., 1990). Social support outside work, such as that provided by spouses and friends, may also have a positive impact on work-family balance by reducing overall work-family conflict (Carlson & Perrewe, 1999). Previous studies have focused on social support from either the work or the family domain; however, as boundaries between work and home decrease in the future, it will be critically important to consider the relationship of the entire social support network to produce both work-family balance and work-related outcomes. (de Janasz et al., 2003)

Work-Based Social Support

Social support at work can come from the organization at large, immediate supervisors, and also coworkers. When support is viewed in this manner, organizations address (or sometimes ignore) the issue of support through their policies, benefits, culture, and career paths to achieve a workable balance between work life and family life (Gordon et al., 2002). In a survey of a variety of occupations, employees who perceived their organization as being less family-supportive experienced more work-family conflict, less job satisfaction, less organizational commitment, and greater turnover intention than those employees who perceived their organization as being more family-supportive. Employees also will differentiate the support they receive from the organization from the support they receive from their immediate work group or supervisor (Allen, 2001). Both the immediate manager and an employee’s peers are sources of social support that do help relieve occupational stress and reduce turnover (Buunk & Verhoeven, 1991). Allen (2001) found that supervisory support had both a direct and an indirect effect on employee job attitude, and because supervisors do administer organizational family-supportive benefits, the willingness of supervisors to allow employees to take advantage of these benefits influenced job attitudes as well. Goff et al. (1990) found that supervisory support in an organization that provided daycare was associated with lower degrees of work-family conflict and absenteeism for employees with children under the age of five. Kram & Isabella (1985) found that peer relationships at work will vary for employees who provide confirmation and emotional support that willing to exchange information about work or temporary share job responsibility Ducharme & Martin (2000) also found that the social support of peers enhances job satisfaction for all workers.

Personal Social Support

Social support outside of work can come from an employee’s spouse or partner, parents, siblings, children, extended family, and friends. Husbands contribute in a variety of areas, including earnings and personal financial management (Kate, 1998), home and family responsibilities (Bonney et al., 1999), career management and support (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004), and interpersonal support (Becker & Moen, 1999). Studies of working couples found that although household chores and child care duties may not be equally divided, women were generally satisfied with their husbands’ contributions (Biernat & Wortman, 1991), and spousal support significantly influenced job satisfaction and stress (Bures & Henderson, 1995). To balance the many demands of home and work, couples collaborated to attend to all of their obligations fully (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Family, friends, and neighbors may also play significant roles for women who must actively juggle the demands of work and home. Adams et al. (1996) found that family-based social support was negatively associated with family interference with work, a dimension of work-family conflict. However, these relationships also provide support that can impact work-family conflict positively by reducing time demands and stress (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1994).

Thus, the following proposition/hypothesis is offered:

Proposition 3: In the personal phase of business traveling, social support will have a significant effect to reduce both travel stress and work-family conflict.
METHODOLOGY

International business travelers who traveled abroad more than four times annually that were delegated the focus group at their organization that matched ‘snowball’ sampling method (Babbie, 2001). This research using the qualitative research method, these participants were divided into three groups for interviewing and asked to fill out a demography data sheet. Semi-structured questions and the propositions then were described to these participants, and they were asked to recall the experiences and opinions during the week prior to their trip, the on-trips that were abroad, and the post-trip a few days after their return. The questions and phases focused on the business travel mission, work-family conflict, and their experiences of personal stress. In terms of collected research data, the participants were promised confidentiality and assured that their responses would be used only for research purposes. There were 52 participants who signed the agreement to join this research. Of these, 45 males (86%) and 7 females (14%) traveled abroad on international business more than four times a year. The mean age of the three groups was 41; the professional service average was 12 years. Of the research group, 97% of participants had a four-year college degree or above and only 3% were high school graduates alone. Of the group, 78.8% were married, and 87.8% had children. The average number of business trips for each group during the year was 4.6, and the average length of each business trip was 5.6 days. The participants worked on different professional jobs: 68% were managers, 15% were engineers 15%, and 11% were cabin crew.

RESULTS

The findings of the study were classified in terms of each research proposition. Actual interview comments are shown as italicized sentences.

Proposition 1: In the personal phase, when business travelers’ deal with work-family conflict (WFC), family life can significantly affect job performance.

International business travel to support business is a symbol of the new international, global business model. A business traveler who takes significantly more trips than the average traveler and requires overnight lodging can be considered a frequent traveler. (Ivancevich et al, 2003) A trip that is longer than one week may cause intense work-family conflict and create higher stress, not for the traveler, but for family members or a spouse. In order to meet company needs, I sometime need to travel more than 10 days in one trip. There are many complaints from spouses, kids and even parents when I make this travel announcement. Because of the long period when I can’t see children and parents worry about work load, there can be health problems. During the traveling, spouses need to take care of home affairs alone, including the household, kids’ daily lives and their education. Those jobs will cause spouses to have to take on additional responsibilities. Family conflicts will occur if such trips happen too many times over a short period or more than a short period. (Mr. Calvin, sale manager, age:43, AC technology Co.)

Kossek and Ozeki, (1998) state that gender differences in men and women’s experience of the work–family interface show that women experience significantly higher levels of WFC and FWC and more emotional exhaustion than do men, possibly a result of women having to prioritize family overwork (Lundberg, 1996). Although my husband helps to take care of the family while I was in business travel, my kids miss me, and the house needs to be cleaned when I return from business travel. My honey kids love to stick around me and I need time to share with my children; moreover I have many job needs to complete post trip. Sometime it makes me feel exhausted. (Mrs. Jessica, product manager, age:36, Intel’s trade Co.)

Westman et al. (2004) found that gender moderated the fluctuations of work family conflict WFC. Thus, the research showed that WFC remained constant for men before and during a trip, but decreased significantly in the post-trip stage. In contrast, a female in the same work-family conflict found WFC decreased during pre-trip and while on-trip, but then increased upon returning home.

Proposition 2: In the personal phase of business travel, stress resources from the work-family conflict and job demand can cause personal physical disorder and stress that will significantly affect job performance.
Stress is the general reaction at work from particular conditions that lead to physical, psychological, and behavior reaction to such stress from strain. DeFrank et al. (2000) define travel stress as the perceptual, emotional, behavioral, and physical responses made by an individual to the various problems faced during one or more of the phases of that travel. These stresses from pre-trip include trip activities planning, work arrangement, home or family issues. On-trip activities include the characteristics of travel, travel logistics, health condition, host country culture issues, and job factors. The port-trip stress includes job completed, home and family responsibilities, and physical and emotional recovery from the business travel. The stress factor at the individual level, such as knowledge gap, government and political barriers, and resource limits at the organizational level may exhibit first level outcomes including fear, anxiety, and turnover intentions. (Ivancevich et al. 2003).

There is pressure at each level of business travel. I must complete the mission in a definite period of travel, and it is important to report to the company the schedule each day and each step I take. Sometime it drives me crazy due to the shortness of time and the task difficulty. It will bother me to my losing my temper when I negotiate with customers or a supplier. The worst part is getting a phone call from my children that complained I didn’t get home for their school activity or party or they are missing me at home. Although everything is arranged well before I leave home for work overseas, I still feel guilty that I can’t be with my family. Hopefully, my spouse supports me and lets me feel more comfortable and thus concentrate on the business mission. I would like to say spousal support is very important for any business travel assignment.(Mr. Steve, senior manager, age: 46, Intel’s trade Co.)

Home and family factors that can influence the degree of stress experienced during business travel include marital status, family status, and degree of family support. Marriage stability may influence the impact and stress of business travel during an assignment. A low marriage relationship or poor marriage stability may create even more risk and become an extra burden during business travel. Stress may be lower while the problems are not immediately nearby, but they will need more attention and lead to more confrontation after the employee returns home. DeFrank et al. (2000) Proposition 3: In the personal phase of business traveling, social support will have a significant effect to reduce both travel stress and work-family conflict.

Social support is an interpersonal transaction that involves emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, and appraisal (House, 1981). If an individual perceives conflict on the job, but then also experiences a fair amount of social support from work peers, the resulting strain from the experienced role conflict may lessen. Similarly, although an individual may have a high level of family time demands, social support from the spouse may reduce the impact of that strain. Social support in the work domain can come from a number of sources, including peers or supervisors, and that support can create a more positive work environment. A supportive supervisor can sometimes provide organizational support to make work situations less stressful by discussing family-related problems and being flexible when emergencies do arise (Roskies & Lazarus, 1980). This type of social support has been found as moderating the situational stressor effect on work-family conflict. For example, given similar work situations, lower work-family conflict was found to occur for employees who had supportive supervisors (Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990). In contrast, a lack of social support is related to higher levels of work-family conflict (Burke, 1988). Social support has also been found to affect the influence of conflict on those outcomes. For example, supportive supervisors can facilitate employee job satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1992), and supportive organizations are often found to be associated with increased organizational commitment (Scandura & Lankau, 1993).

Social support from family is very important to reduce my stress. I am a single mother who has one daughter. If I have a schedule for a cross-ocean flight, such as to the USA or Europe, my parents always provide assistance in taking care of my daughter. My colleagues also help me shift my monthly schedule if I have a family demand. My supervisor also helps me negotiate a flexible schedule if I have an emergency that affects my job responsibilities. (Miss. Helen, cabin vice supervisor, age: 38, Eva airline Co.).

Stephens and Sommer (1993) found that supervisor support moderates the influence of perceived work-family conflict on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Thus, social support in the work domain is an important consideration in the overall evaluation of the work-family conflict phenomenon.
CONCLUSION

This qualitative research sought to find the balance of international business travel and work-family conflict and stress and the interchange between the two. After the focus group interview and discussion done for this research, there were many opinions expressed regarding business travel demands related to family, travel mission, travel stress, and personality. However social support does provide much assistance to reduce individual stress and family conflict. Work-family conflict does mediate the relationship between work expectations, work conflict, job involvement, and family involvement to help maintain both the quality of work and the quality of family life (Higgins, Duxbury, & Irving, 1992).

Specifically, individuals who reported higher work expectations, greater work conflict, and higher involvement in both job and family domains experienced higher Work-family conflict. Work–family conflict predicts reduced levels of both the quality of work life and the quality of family life. Further, Thomas and Ganster (1995) found that supervisor support reduced WFC among health care workers, which in turn led to greater job satisfaction, less depression, fewer somatic complaints, and lower cholesterol levels. In the focus group, interviews also found that social support can reduce business travel strain or conflict from family factors. Individuals who perceived role stressors and time demands in their environment were supported in the work domain, as well as in their family or home domain.

Therefore, social support may be an important coping mechanism to use to address the strain from work-family conflict and its impact on perceived stressors. This point of view suggests that individuals develop strong social support resources and networks both at work and at home. This connection will have the function of letting employees perceive lower stress from the company and family life. However, Carlson and Perrewe (1999) point out that balance of work-family conflict and stress once an individual's role is perceived as having stress from pre-trip, on-trip or post-trip can reach an effective resolution and reduce strain through social support from the work network or the family domain. The social supports that from family, organization and friends provide not only helpful function to reduce the actual stressors and any work-family conflict also benefit both side for build up the relationship and commitment.

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