Perceived Leadership Support of Work-life Programs and Job Satisfaction in the Federal Government

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ABSTRACT

Eighty-three percent of the federal employees have experienced challenges in managing the conflicting demands of their professional and personal lives. One third of these public employees have reported challenges in attaining the necessary flexibility needed to manage the conflicts of work and home. Agencies offer various work-life programs to provide a flexible and supportive work environment that facilitates employee engagement. The availability of these work-life programs, however, do not guarantee work-life flexibility. Many agencies lack the necessary supervisory support and organizational culture needed for employees to adapt and use these work-life programs. This study discusses job satisfaction, work-life balance, and front-line supervisors, exploring employees' perceptions of their supervisors' support for work-life programs and the impact on their self-reported job satisfaction.

Keywords: Front-line supervisor; Job satisfaction; Work-life balance; Work-life programs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Federal Government work-life survey recently reported that 83 percent of the federal employees experienced challenges in managing the conflicting demands of their professional and personal lives (Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2018). Specifically, the report identified that one third of the public employees reported challenges in attaining the necessary flexibility needed to manage the conflicts of work and home (OPM, 2018). Agencies offer various work-life programs to provide a flexible and supportive work environment that facilitates employee engagement (OPM, 2018). The availability of these work-life programs; however, do not guarantee work-life flexibility. Survey findings show that agencies may be lacking the necessary supervisory support and organizational culture needed for employees to adapt and use these programs (OPM, 2018).

Only about 46 percent of the federal employees have reported having the necessary positive supervisory support needed to use the formalized work-life programs (OPM, 2018). First-level supervisors are the gatekeepers to an employee's professional success and workplace satisfaction (Russo & Morandin, 2019). Research shows that supervisors who support employees' participation in agency sanctioned work-life programs are reported to have improved retention and performance, morale, and health (Caillier, 2016; OPM, 2018). This study will discuss job satisfaction, work-life balance (WLB), and front-

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line supervisors, exploring employees' perceptions of their supervisors' support for work-life programs and the impact on their self-reported job satisfaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction, in its most simple terms, is a concept that describes an employee's view and emotional state as a result of their work and work experience (Pink-Harper, Davis, & Burnside, 2016; Wright & Davis, 2003). Essentially, "job satisfaction represents an interaction between employees and their work environment by gauging the congruence between what employees want from their jobs and what employees feel they receive" (Wright & Davis, 2003, p. 70). Job satisfaction has become synonymous with organizational productivity where factors such as pay, advancement, and benefits determine the commitment employees extend forth at work (Judge & Klinger, 2007; Wright & Davis, 2003).

The existing research on job satisfaction varies greatly in focus, measures, and results (Jung, 2013; Wright & Davis, 2003). "The conundrum of seizing factors that influence job satisfaction, and, by extension, worker productivity, remain just out of reach for those toiling in public offices and government substructures" (Frampton, 2014, p. 396). The job satisfaction discussion is further complicated in the public sector where bureaucratic management and red tape are still largely prevalent (Jung, 2013). Through the years the concept of job satisfaction has evolved to include situational factors of work; personality traits and dispositional factors; and interaction between personality factors and job characteristics (Judge & Klinger, 2007; Pink-Harper *et al*., 2016). Academic research has focused on the evolution of the job satisfaction factors, exploring the concept to better understand the associated areas of retention, productivity, and manager/employee relationship (Moon & Jung, 2018; Wright & Davis, 2003). Research findings suggest that organizations need to focus on creating an environment that facilitates employee engagement and satisfaction (Wright & Davis, 2003).

Employer's that focus on job satisfaction aim to build "a satisfying workplace [that] will help keep valuable employees and attract new talents" (Yang & Kassekert, 2010, p. 414). Federal employers, specifically, create satisfying workplaces by offering various work-life programs to assist employees manage the demands of their professional and personal lives (OPM, 2018; Warren & Johnson, 1995). The work-life programs are intended to support federal employees to achieve WLB (OPM, 2018).

2. 2 What is WLB?

The term WLB has only recently gained importance, resulting in a definition that continues to evolve and develop (Živčicová, Bulková, & Masárová, 2017). At the most basic level, however, WLB is defined as the balance of an individual's life activities, divided into two primary categories: work related/professional activities and non-work related/personal activities (Živčicová, *et al*., 2017). The concept aims to allow an individual to achieve sufficient control and autonomy to meet the demands of both their professional and personal tasks (Visser & Williams, 2006; Wilkinson, Tomlinson, & Gardiner, 2017; Živčicová, *et al*., 2017). WLB is intended to attain a "temporary state of harmony or homeostasis, without mental pressure, where harmony can be seen as compatibility, satisfaction and subjective well-being" (Živčicová, *et al*, 2017, p. 223). Feeney and Stritch (2019) discuss WLB from a structural and psychological dimension, where the structural aspect accounts for the physical aspects of time, distance, and the location of work and

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home, and the psychological aspect accounts for the emotional and health factors that take into include stress and happiness. Essentially, WLB is intended to allow employees to manage the struggles of personal responsibilities inside and outside the realms of undertaking some form of paid work (OPM, 2018; Visser & Williams, 2006; Warren & Johnson, 1995; Wilkinson *et al*., 2017).

WLB is intended to contribute to employee job satisfaction by providing workers with work-life programs/benefits within a family-friendly organizational culture, supported by supervisory practice (Warren & Johnson, 1995). Globally, government entities focus on WLB to manage the many social and economic challenges that face today's public organizations, directly impacting recruitment, retention, performance, and engagement (OMP, 2019; Živčicová *et al*., 2017). The federal government offers several work-life programs such as flexible work arrangements, employee assistance programs, family and dependent care services, and health and wellness (OPM, 2018). These programs aim to provide the workforce with a means to meet performance expectations while managing the needs and commitments of their personal life (OPM, 2018, 2019). Despite these attempts to offer WLB, the government continues to experience low-participant rates (OPM, 2018).

2.3 Front-line Supervisor

Research shows that while more employers offer work-life programs, the commitment to actual implementation is low, with some work-life programs being prohibited from use or even revoked (Visser & Williams, 2006). Additionally, work-life programs, such as flexible work schedules, can be considered a discretionary benefit that may have psychological implications based on how the benefit is approved or denied (Caillier, 2017). Thus, from an employee's perspective, there may be fear or concern about using some or all of the offered work-life programs (Allen, 2001; Warren & Johnson, 1995). Reports generated by the federal government, for example, indicate that employees have little to no flexibility to utilize work-life programs that help with dependent care, reporting a low employee usage but a high desired usage (OPM, 2018). Government mandated research indicates that "insufficient leadership support" is one of the most commonly reported reasons employees do not capitalize on available work-life programs (OPM, 2018, p. 13). This in turn has resulted in only 46 percent of the public employees perceiving to have their front-line supervisors' support and only 35 percent perceiving to have the support of their senior leadership (OPM, 2018).

The supervisor-employee relationship is a key to ensuring supervisory effectiveness and positive impact on job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Brunelle, 2013). Supervisors are the ultimate gatekeepers for defining their employees work experience and are the most important factor to achieving WLB (Allen, 2001; Mas-Machuca, Berbegal-Mirabent, & Alegre, 2016; Warren & Johnson, 1995). "Supervisor support creates a sense of reciprocation in employees, who then perform better; because of this, supervisor support is another critical factor related to employee work-life balance" (Mas-Machuca, *et al*., 2016, p. 590). Mas-Machuca *et al*. (2016) states that an employee's perception of their supervisors' sensitivity to personal activities is a direct reflection of the supervisors' support for WLB. Employees who perceive their supervisors to be supportive, report higher levels of job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Mas-Machuca, *et al*., 2016). On the other hand, a supervisor that is unsupportive of WLB can be detrimental and costly, impacting employee performance, morale, productivity, attendance, and turnover (OPM, 2018, 2019).

2.4 Rationale

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Job satisfaction is an integral part to the success of both the organization and the employee (Jung, 2013; Ting, 1997; Wright & Davis, 2003). However, unlike other sectors, job satisfaction in the public sector has varied levels of dimensions that adds to its complexity (Frampton, 2014). This is highlighted in Frampton's 2014 commentary on public job satisfaction, where he discusses factors such as public funding, world events, and government oversight, contributing to the intricacies of job satisfaction in the federal space. Regardless of these complications, and regardless of what an employer formalized to facilitate a satisfying workplace; supervisors are the ultimate and consistent element in delivering and managing employee job satisfaction (Caillier, 2017; OPM, 2018; Russo & Morandin, 2019).

Front-line supervisors are instrumental to a public organization's performance and effectiveness, influencing employee attitudes and workplace motivation (Allen, 2001; Brewer, 2005). However, findings suggest that there is insufficient research conducted on front-line supervisors, an important group that has both direct and indirect influence on the agency workforce (Allen, 2001; Brewer, 2005). The research that does exist shows that the front-line supervisor has great impact on an employee's perception of and experience within the organization (Allen, 2001). For example, Allen (2001) states that employees' perceptions of their supervisors' support for work-life programs, directly impacts whether or not they are comfortable utilizing these programs. The following research questions are offered to further explore the interconnections of government employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors, WLB, and job satisfaction.

RQ1: What is the relationship between employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their job satisfaction?

RQ2: What is the relationship between employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their WLB?

RQ3: What is the relationship between employees' perceptions of their WLB and their job satisfaction?

3. METHODS

3.1 Procedure and Participants

Data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) 2018 was utilized to explore the research questions. The FEVS is a large annual survey conducted by the U. S. Office of Personnel Management that solicits opinions and perceptions of experiences of employees working in federal agencies. Participants consisted of 598003 government employees, 293014 (49%) males and 225889 (37.8%) females with 79100 (13%) not reporting their sex. Minorities numbered 168099 (28.1%) and non-minorities numbered 342587 (57.3%) making up most of the sample, with 87317 (14.6%) not reporting minority status. The largest group in the sample had been employed with the government for ten years or less 221712 (37.1%) followed by groups that had spent 10 to 20 years of time with the government 162634 (27.2%) and more than 20 years of time with the government 140581 (23.5%), with 73076 (12.2%) not reporting time spent with the government. The largest group in the sample had been educated beyond a bachelor's degree 188481 (31.5%), followed by those who had attained a bachelor's degree 182979 (30.6%) and those with less than a bachelor's degree 149163 (24.9%), with 77380 (12.9%) not reporting their education level. The 2018 FEVS is an optimal date set because it includes items directly addressing federal employee job satisfaction, employees' perceptions of WLB support, and perceived support of front-line supervisors. The summary statistics for all instrumentation employed in this study can be found in Table 1.

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Table 1: Instrumentation Summary Statistics

Instrument	Coefficient Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceptions of Front-line Supervisors	0.96	44.12	10.08
Job Satisfaction	0.92	24.01	6.62
Perceptions of WLB	0.82	17.02	4.57

3.2 Outcome Variables

The first outcome variable of job satisfaction was comprised of seven items from the 2018 FEVS. These items involve content exploring employees perceived satisfaction in decisions that affect work, information received regarding the organization, training received…see appendix for the complete list of items utilized in this study. Individual employee responses to these items ranged from Very Satisfied (5) to Very Dissatisfied (1). A factor analysis conducted on these seven items revealed one extracted factor, explaining 68.4% of the variance. This supports these items being measured as one scale. The loadings for each item can be found in Table 2, and the questions can be found in the appendix. The current study yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.92 (M = 24.01, SD = 6.62) for this scale.

Table 2: Varimax Rotation of Job Satisfaction Items

Item	loading
Question 71	0.87
Question 63	0.85
Question 69	0.84
Question 64	0.83
Question 65	0.82
Question 67	0.80
Question 68	0.76
% of variance explained	68.43

The second outcome variable of perceived WLB factors consisted of five items from the 2018 FEVS. These items contain content that could be perceived as necessities for WLB to be possible. Content responded to included topics such as: perceived support for work/life programs, feeling empowered with respect to work processes, perceived workload…see appendix for the complete list of items utilized in this study. Individual employee responses to these items ranged from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). A factor analysis conducted on these five items revealed one extracted factor, explaining 58% of the variance. This supports these items being measured as one scale. The loadings for each item can be found in Table 3, and the questions can be found in the appendix. The current study yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.82 (M = 17.02, SD = 4.57) for this scale.

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Table 3: Varimax Rotation of Perceived Work-Life Balance Items

Item	loading
Question 30	0.81
Question 3	0.78
Question 9	0.76
Question 62	0.74
Question 10	0.72
% of variance explained	57.96

3.3 Predictor Variable

Employee perceptions of the front-line supervisors served as the predictor variable. The predictor variable included 11 items from the 2018 FEVS that assess employees' individual perceptions of their supervisors' support, trustworthiness, listening, and respectfulness…see appendix for the complete list of items utilized in this study. Individual employee responses to these items ranged from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). A factor analysis conducted on these 11 items revealed one extracted factor, explaining 72.2% of the variance. This supports these items being measured as one scale. The loadings for each item can be found in Table 4, and the questions can be found in the appendix. The current study yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.96 (M = 44.12, SD = 10.08) for this scale.

Table 4: Varimax Rotation of Employees' Perceptions of Front-Line Supervisors

Item	loading
Question 44	0.91
Question 51	0.90
Question 48	0.89
Question 46	0.89
Question 45	0.88
Question 49	0.87
Question 43	0.87
Question 47	0.86
Question 42	0.81
Question 50	0.75
Question 55	0.68
% of variance explained	72.18

4. RESULTS

In order to explore the research questions, data were analyzed using bivariate correlation analyses. The results of all correlations can be found in Table 5. The first research question addresses a potential relationship between employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their job satisfaction. The analysis between these two variables revealed a significant correlation ($r = 0.73$).

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The second research question addresses a potential relationship between employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their WLB. The analysis between these two variables revealed a significant correlation ($r = 0.65$).

The third research question addresses a potential relationship between employees' perceptions of their WLB and their job satisfaction. The analysis between these two variables revealed a significant correlation ($r = 0.82$). All three correlations revealed in this study were significant at $p < 0.01$.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

Variable		Perceptions of Front-line Supervisors	Job Satisfaction	Perceptions of WLB
Perceptions of Front-line Supervisors	Pearson Correlation	1.000	0.731**	0.651**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
Job Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	0.731**	1.000	0.821**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000
Perceptions of WLB	Pearson Correlation	0.651**	0.821**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the interconnections of federal employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors, job satisfaction, and WLB. The results indicated a strong positive association between these employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their job satisfaction. Additionally, the results indicated a strong positive association between these employees' perceptions of their front-line supervisors and their perceived WLB. Finally, the results indicated a strong positive association between perceived WLB and job satisfaction. When employees perceived their front-line supervisors to communicate effectively, listen, demonstrate respect, provide constructive feedback, and growth opportunities in a consistent meaningful manner; they reported being more satisfied with: the information they received from management, the policies and practices of their leaders, the training and recognition they received, and the involvement in decisions that affect their work. Regarding WLB, these employees perceived their workload to be more reasonable, while being more sufficiently equipped, and more empowered to be innovative in acting to get their duties accomplished.

Overall, these results are consistent with previous work that demonstrates the importance of perceived supervisory support on employee attitudes (Mas-Machuca, *et al*., 2016). When front-line supervisors are perceived to be more supportive, they may cultivate a more genuine emotional connection with their employees, which facilitates a more positive experience with work in their employees' minds. Job satisfaction is in part rooted in an interaction between employees and their work environment (Wright & Davis, 2003), and front-line supervisors play a significant role in contributing to what makes up the work environment. Moreover, leadership has a major impact on the culture within an organization (Richmond & McCroskey, 2009).

The results are consistent with previous studies exploring the impact of WLB. WLB, when perceived to be supported by supervisory practice, contributes to job

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satisfaction (Warren & Johnson, 1995). Consistent with previous work, when employees perceive themselves to be sufficiently empowered to balance their needs both inside and outside of work, they are more satisfied (Živčicová *et al*., 2017) and have a more positive psychological wellbeing (Feeney & Stritch, 2019).

5.1 Implications

The results of this study yield implications for both front-line supervisors and organizational policy makers. These results are important to current and future front-line supervisors in that they demonstrate the need for supervisors to build and maintain a supportive image in the minds of those they mean to lead. Making a genuine relational effort is important in building the perception of support and satisfying the whole employee (Allen, 2001; Brunelle, 2013; Mas-Machuca, *et al*., 2016). If employees perceive their supervisors to be more willing to work with the entire person, as opposed to just a part in a machine, then the employees might work harder and be more committed. The former is the foundation of Theory Y leadership in that a happy worker is a productive worker (McGregor, 1967); the latter might positively impact a department's bottom line in reducing losses associated with routine turnover. However, this is not to be taken as simply advocating for front-line supervisors to employ a singular leadership philosophy (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Instead, the supported argument is that some types of employees need to be led with this philosophy in mind. Other employees may be more responsive to other leadership styles (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Awareness and versatility on the part of the front-line supervisors is therefore necessary.

The results are significant to organizational policy makers as they demonstrate that factors related to perceived WLB play a significant role in breeding job satisfaction for the employees. In order to better satisfy employees, supervisors need to put policies into action that better equip employees for life at work and away from work (Warren & Johnson, 1995). When a work environment facilitates such employee engagement, job satisfaction is enhanced (Wright & Davis, 2003). Front-line supervisors would do well to listen to their employees' work-life needs, advocating for policies that not only authorize, but encourage employees to be more innovative in their management of WLB (Russo & Morandin, 2019). Front-line supervisors need to work as a liaison in communicating what is actually needed in the trenches to upper management (Russo & Morandin, 2019). Otherwise, upper management might not be aware; and implement policies on limited, and perhaps inaccurate information; negatively affecting job satisfaction and productivity (Judge & Klinger, 2007; Wright & Davis, 2003).

5.2 Limitations and Future Directions

The items in this study were drawn from the 2018 FEVS, an instrument designed to directly assess the employees' perceptions of leadership and job satisfaction, amongst other things. However, the accessible data in this survey less directly assess WLB. This study pulled items related to factors that might affect WLB in an effort to measure perceived WLB from an employee's perspective. Future studies should develop and/or employ measurement tools that more directly assess an employee's perceived WLB (e.g., how do employees actually define WLB?); as well as continue to explore factors that might affect or be associated with WLB. An employee's stage in life and needs outside of the work environment might affect how he/she defines and value WLB (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007); as well as his/her perceived overall WLB (Hayman, 2009). Such intervening factors may be worth exploring in the future. Finally, the perceptions measured in this study's data set are taken from the subordinates' perspectives. Future research should explore the

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perceptions of WLB from the management's perspective: the definition of WLB, the perceived efforts to provide WLB, and the perceived value of facilitating WLB. Perceptions of WLB from multiple perspectives will lend to a more complete picture regarding what it is, and how it is managed.

APPENDIX

FEVS Items used to measure Job Satisfaction

1. How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work? [Question 63]
2. How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization? [Question 64]
3. How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job? [Question 65]
4. How satisfied are you with your opportunity to get a better job in your organization? [Question 67]
5. How satisfied are you with the training you receive for your present job? [Question 68]
6. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job? [Question 69]
7. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization? [Question 71]

FEVS Items used to measure Perceived Work-Life Balance Factors

1. I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things. [Question 3]
2. I have sufficient resources (for example, people, materials, budget) to get my job done. [Question 9]
3. My workload is reasonable. [Question 10]
4. Employees have a feeling of personal empowerment with respect to work processes. [Question 30]
5. Senior leaders demonstrate support for Work/Life programs. [Question 62]

FEVS Items used to measure Employees' Perceptions of Front-Line Supervisors

1. My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues. [Question 42]
2. My supervisor provides me with opportunities to demonstrate my leadership skills. [Question 43]
3. Discussions with my supervisor about my performance are worthwhile. [Question 44]
4. My supervisor is committed to a workforce representative of all segments of society. [Question 45]

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5. My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance. [Question 46]
6. Supervisors in my work unit support employee development. [Question 47]
7. My supervisor listens to what I have to say. [Question 48]
8. My supervisor treats me with respect. [Question 49]
9. In the last six months, my supervisor has talked with me about my performance. [Question 50]
10. I have trust and confidence in my supervisor. [Question 51]
11. Supervisors work well with employees of different backgrounds. [Question 55]

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