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LINE MANAGERS' RATIONALES FOR PROFESSIONALS' REDUCED- LOAD WORK IN EMBRACING AND AMBIVALENT ORGANIZATIONS

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This study examines line managers' rationales regarding reduced-load work (RLW), an emerging talent management practice allowing professionals to reduce their workload and take a pay cut, while actively remaining on a career path. Unlike flextime and telework, RLW addresses professionals' core problems of rising work hours and workloads. Interviews with 42 managers in 20 North American employers suggested that managers were more likely to support RLW for employees whom they saw as (1) high-performers, (2) flexible in their use of RLW, and (3) doing conducive jobs. Interviews with 20 HR experts and 24 senior executives revealed four dimensions of organizational support, two cultural (senior management support and discourse on career penalties) and two structural (adaptation of HR systems and organizational diffusion). In embracing organizations there was a higher frequency of more supportive managers than there was in ambivalent organizations. Managers' rationales were connected to their organizational contexts, albeit loosely, suggesting managerial implementation agency. The same rationales were more likely to be used in supportive ways in embracing contexts and in less supportive ways in ambivalent contexts. This study suggests that managerial and organizational support for flexible talent management practices dovetail in nuanced and important ways. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Keywords: work-family, reduced-load work, flexible work arrangements, careers, work-family culture, HR practices

"How could you construct a job that was on a career track that was on a legitimate career track, that was moving forward but ... where the responsibilities were such that you could still have a family, which is increasingly difficult to do as family and job scope are rising for many?" [10, 2]¹

Comments made by a manager who supervised reduced-load work for talented professionals

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Professional and managerial careers are undergoing transformation. Professional and managerial work is increasingly characterized by rising workloads and hours, job insecurity, flatter career paths, and fragile attachments between workers and the organization (Cappelli, 2008). Exempt employees in professional careers ranging from business to law to engineering and medicine are typically expected to hold career as their paramount identity (Blair-Loy, 2003) and to work up to 60 to 70 hours a week handling heavy workloads (Litrice, Lee, & Kossek, 2011). In addition, requirements for face time remain strong, such that long hours spent at work are often construed as a proxy for career commitment and performance (Bailyn, 1993; Perlow, 1998; Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007). At the same time, the demographic profile of professionals has shifted to include more women, single parents, individuals with elder care demands, and dual-career families (Kossek & Distelberg, 2009). Thus, many professionals and managers experience growing work-family conflict (Blair-Loy, 2009, p. 279). Nearly half of all US employees report feeling overworked, overwhelmed, and not having the time to reflect and do their jobs well, with managerial and professional occupations the most likely to report these perceptions over all others (Galinsky, Bond, Sakai, Kim, & Guintoli, 2008). Therefore, more and more professionals are seeking to customize their careers by reducing their hours and workloads as a means to manage rising family and personal responsibilities jointly with careers (Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008; Moen & Roehling, 2005; Valcour et al., 2007).

In this article, we focus on reduced-load work (RLW), which entails a reduction in workload (such as four clients, if the normal allocation is five) and/or hours along with a commensurate pay cut. RLW is sometimes framed as “professional part-time” work. This is a socially constructed term, since full-time loads for exempt employees are often not clearly defined and typically have no clear upper limit on work hours. While part-time work is often taken up in low-skilled, hourly paid, insecure jobs, sometimes even by employees who would prefer to work full time, RLW is voluntarily chosen by career-oriented professionals

and managers. Like flextime and telework, RLW challenges managers’ supervision routines. Unlike flextime and telework where work remains constant, RLW also challenges managers’ assumptions regarding typical workloads, and their expectations of professional work and talent management (Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2000; Lirio, Lee, Williams, Haugen, & Kossek, 2008; Valcour et al., 2007). RLW is understudied compared to flextime and telework (Lee et al., 2000), yet it is critical that we learn more about how it is implemented and supported, as it addresses professionals’ core problem—rising workloads and employers’ challenges around talent management and retention. What are even more absent in the literature are the voice and experiences of the manager who supervises a reduced-load professional. That is a central element to consider given that managers’ perceptions have been shown to drive career consequences for users of flexible work practices more than users’ attitudes and behaviors (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012).

Managerial support for RLW is critical for implementation, as managers approve, implement, and customize each arrangement to meet the unique workload demands of a professional job assignment and to fit organizational career norms. RLW, however, presents managers with novelty because it challenges the “mold” of traditional career norms of full-time professional work (Bailyn, 1993). It also presents managers with ambiguity, since HR policies often do not provide clear detailed guidelines for implementation of RLW, and since the notions of professional work and full-time work are socially constructed (Lirio et al., 2008). In this article, we argue that managers need to *make sense* of reduced-load work, which is a relatively novel way of organizing work under conditions of ambiguity and change (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). That is, we suggest that managers create “intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action” so that they can comprehend this novel and sometimes confusing form of work that runs counter to their prevailing expectations and thereby enact “a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67). Consequently, and given the importance of managerial perceptions (Leslie et al., 2012), we focus on line managers’ rationales as they make sense of their experiences with supporting RLW. We analyze the rationales managers describe to determine whether or not to accept and help to implement reduced-load requests in specific cases; that is, how they assess the potential benefits and the feasibility of each reduced-work arrangement. In addition, we examine these managers’

inferences (based on multiple experiences supervising reduced-load professionals) about when and why RLW works out well and not so well for the work unit, the organization, and the individual employees. It could seem counterintuitive for managers to support RLW at a time when organizations are increasingly understaffed and constantly raising performance demands on employees. It is therefore important to study and understand managerial rationales at face value, since it would not seem to be in managers' short-term interests to support RLW.

Reviews point to very inconsistent results on the effectiveness of customized work arrangements, largely due to difficulties with line managers supporting implementation of available flexibility policies in their departments (Kelly et al., 2008). Yet the HR and work-family literatures have often focused on managers' *resistance* to supporting flexible work arrangements, over positive perspectives. Our first objective, therefore, was to understand what rationales surface in line managers' recollections of their experiences supervising reduced-load professionals, including benefits and obstacles. Using qualitative interview data from line managers in 20 North American employers, who describe their experiences of supervising reduced-load professionals, this study examines the rationales that line managers identify for examining RLW requests. Our focus on RLW addresses calls to study managerial reactions to a single form of flexibility (Mayo, Pastor, Gomez-Meijia, & Cruix, 2009), so as to disentangle them from reactions to other forms such as flextime or telework.

Second, given that managers' rationales are likely to be socially constructed and influenced by key actors, such as senior HR leaders and executives in their social contexts, our second objective was to explore relationships between line managers' overall supportiveness of RLW and the organizational contexts in they were embedded. We wanted to identify organizational support dimensions regarding RLW and to analyze the extent to which line managers' supportiveness was associated with organizational support. We therefore examined the nature and degree of cultural and structural support for RLW provided by these 20 employers, based on interview data with senior human resource experts and senior executives. We suggest that organizational contexts differ in the degree to which they foster new ways of working—with some being more "embracing" of employees' choices regarding work methods and timing and some more "ambivalent," placing conditions on when and which employees might be able to work a reduced load.

In developing our logic, we do not offer formal hypotheses in our literature review, as this is an exploratory, qualitative study undertaken to generate theory. After presenting our results, we develop propositions emerging from our findings to suggest future theoretical research directions. This study makes several important contributions by examining an innovative HR practice that addresses the core problem professionals and managers face—how to address heavy workloads, which has been quite understudied compared to flextime and telework. We contribute to the work-family and HR management literatures by adding to our understanding of why and when line managers believe it makes sense to support professionals wanting to craft customized work arrangements. Our research also provides a rare cross-level perspective on workplace flexibility suggesting that organizational support is loosely coupled with managerial sensemaking regarding employees and jobs, meaning that managers do have agency as they examine and manage implementation of RLW requests. Further, by documenting ways in which the traditional career mystique is eroding in contemporary workplaces, we contribute to the literature emphasizing employee and managerial agency—such as literature on I-deals (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and protean careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996).

An Understudied but Growing Practice: Reduced-Load Work

This section briefly reviews the literatures on RLW, on managerial sensemaking of RLW and on organizational support of this new form of work.

What Is Reduced-Load Work?

RLW is a form of customized work arrangement. It is an important way for employers to accommodate and retain top talent that might otherwise choose to leave the organization (Lee et al., 2000). RLW also provide a means to help manage growing workplace stress, rising workloads, burnout, and the development of sustainable careers (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014). Customization of work arrangements has been defined in different ways by different researchers. For example,

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Rousseau (2001) has talked about idiosyncratic or I-deals, where employees request modification of standard work arrangements governing hours or load to meet personal needs, in order to benefit both the firm and employee (Rousseau et al., 2006). Benko and Weisberg (2007) advocate for “mass career customization,” defining customization as shifting levels of pace, workload, location/schedule, and role throughout the total span of the career. Similarly, Valcour et al. (2007) argued that many professionals are challenging professional occupational regimes by “customizing careers.” They identified three kinds of customized careers that vary from traditional models: (1) varying the number or schedule of work hours, (2) interruptions or discontinuities in work patterns over the life span, and (3) reliance on self-employment and contingent work. Other writers have examined protean careers in the boundaryless career age (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). As careers

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have become less organizationally centric, employees have sought to gain control and increased their self-direction of careers (Hall & Mirvis, 1996).

We focus on the first form of career customization: varying the number of work hours or amount of work, as a strategy that gives greater employee control over career intensity, rather than flexibility for the employer such as the ability to flex labor hours to meet varying market demands (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Contrary to flextime or telework, where the workload stays constant, reduced-load arrangements challenge managers' routines

regarding professional work and typical workload. Customized arrangements are also different in concept from traditional part-time work of a permanent “mommy track” (Hill, Martinson, Ferris, & Baker, 2004), as many professionals working a reduced load make significant career progress and are viewed as high-talent and top performers (Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011). Incumbents can also work “full-time” or nearly full-time hours such as 35 or 40 or more a week (just less than coworkers' 50 or 60 hours a week), so the term *part time* is misleading as legal labor standards often depict 35 to 40 hours a week as “full time.” There have been studies of RLW in a variety of occupational and organizational contexts, for example, technical and knowledge workers (Meiksins & Whalley, 2002), lawyers (Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1998), doctors (Barnett & Gareis, 2000), and managers and professionals in corporations (Lee et al.,

2000). Yet relatively little attention has been given to managerial sensemaking and to the organizational context enabling RLW.

Managerial Sensemaking of RLW

Managers are critical gatekeepers in the implementation of RLW, as it is rare that a professional would be able to enact it without managerial permission. There has been so much debate and publicity around flexible work in the United States and Canada that at least a portion of managers may be aware of and convinced of the business case, especially when they make productivity attributions rather than personal life attributions for the reason why an employee want to work flexibly (Leslie et al., 2012). However, executives' and managers' resistance is persistently documented (see Leslie et al., 2012, for a review). Managers are likely to resist it for several reasons. It challenges existing schema of traditional professional jobs designed for a standardized work organization (Townley, 1993). In addition, managers might worry about coordination and communication difficulties such as scheduling team meetings or solving an issue when an employee is absent (Van Dyne, Kossek, & Lobel, 2007). Relatively little work has been conducted on managers' rationales to support RLW (Lirio et al., 2008).

We focus on how managers make sense of RLW, because sensemaking is a process that individuals engage in when they encounter ambiguous and/or novel issues or events challenging their expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), and we view RLW as an ambiguous and novel issue challenging line managers' expectations. First, RLW is an emerging way of working, around which there is a considerable amount of ambiguity. RLW challenges the organization of work in a team, and it implies that managers rely on different supervision routines. Because RLW is still new and there are no clear guidelines regulating who can access it and in what kinds of work settings, line managers need to interpret the information at their disposal and develop mental models that involve the interplay between action and interpretation of what people are doing (Weick et al., 2005). Second, what it means to work full time and to be a professional is socially constructed, rather than strictly regulated by labor laws. Line managers, when faced with a professional's request to reduce their workload, need to collect and interpret information regarding how many hours or what workload constitutes full time, according to their own mental models and experiences as well as to the social information they are able to gather.

Our focus on managers' rationales regarding RLW is consistent with Wells' (2010) argument

that rather than depicting managers as roadblocks to flexible work arrangements, it is important to examine how managers assign and integrate information to organize their interpretations and action in an evolving workplace. For instance, managers have been found to interpret the reasons why employees want to work flexibly and to make attributions (e.g., productivity vs. personal life) that determine employees' career success (Leslie et al., 2012). In addition, sensemaking is essential to the fostering of organizational change (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Wells, 2010). Without sensemaking, it is easier for managers to focus on reasons for resisting change and perpetuating the status quo (Weick et al., 2005).

Organizational Support for RLW: Embracing and Ambivalent Cultures

Organizational rationales for adopting and supporting customized work generally involve a rational choice or so-called business case perspective (Kossek & Friede, 2006). Organizations also adopt and support RLW due to social pressures, such as industry diffusion or pressure from professional groups (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995). Organizational support for RLW is typically characterized along two dimensions: formal and informal or, in other words, structural and cultural (e.g., Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). Structural support begins with the adoption of formal flexibility policies and programs and continues with the adaptation of HR systems to new forms of work. Cultural support, evinced in positive values and norms, is pivotal to the implementation and use of formal policies (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999).

Method

Research Approach

Organizational Sample

We chose interviews as the primary data source (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), because we were interested in studying an episodic and not highly formalized work practice, and because of the scarcity of research on customized work in general and reduced-load arrangements specifically. Since a main goal of this study was to compare organizational-level support for RLW across a number of different firms, we recruited 20 organizations in different sectors in the United States and Canada that were known to have been allowing and facilitating RLW among career-oriented professionals for at least five years or more. We needed the participation of these kinds of firms because our goal was to interview managers who had supervised (or were currently supervising) more than

one professional working on a reduced-load basis. We sought out firms with long-term experience with RLW and a willingness to help the research teams identify managers able to speak in depth about their experiences. We wanted to draw on supervising managers' global learning and generalizations based on hands-on experiences with reduced-load professionals. At the same time, we wanted to assess the broader HR and organizational context around employer facilitation of individuals' managing of work and life commitments. Thus, in each participating organization we also interviewed at least one HR executive and one senior executive. Given the research goals overall, this study can be viewed as an analysis of progressive organizations and line managers in the implementation of RLW. This is appropriate for a study of leading-edge HR practices, and one advantage of our approach is that we are capturing best practices. Since these practices will become more common in the future, we are studying future processes of organizing. More conservative firms may need to do significant preparatory organizational change management work with managers to create readiness and enable experimentation with RLW.

The 20 organizations recruited were identified by members of the research team on the basis of their personal knowledge of these firms' HR practices from prior research or professional contacts through roundtables on flexible work arrangements, or on the basis of the firms' positioning in industry rankings such as Best Companies for Working Mothers and Great Places to Work. In constituting the sample, the aim was to include at least two firms from a given industry to look for variation within the industry, and to include a variety of industries in order to surface a wide range of types of jobs being worked on a reduced-load basis and a wide range of supervising managers in terms of functional area. Six industries (at least two firms each) were represented: high-tech manufacturing (30%), professional services and managerial consulting (20%), financial services (15%), consumer goods (15%), pharmaceuticals (10%); and hospitality (10%). Slightly over half the firms (55%) had 50,000 or

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more employees, with workforces composed of about half women (52%) and nearly half (46%) professionals. All of the firms in the study were larger employers. One-third of firms had 30,000 or fewer employees, 20% had less than 50,000, 20% had less than 100,000, and one-third had over 100,000 employees.

To investigate our first research question on line managers' rationales regarding RLW, we aimed to interview two managers per firm, with experience supervising two or more professionals or managers working less than full time. We asked the HR manager or executive with whom we negotiated participation of the firm in the study to nominate two or more line managers with the required profile and to provide us their contact information. In firms with many manag-

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ers with the requisite experience, where there was a need for more guidance on whom to nominate, we indicated our interest in hearing from those with diverse views or drawing on diverse firsthand experience (e.g., line managers in different functional areas, or with experience supervising both men and women on reduced-load, or with experience supervising job shares vs. sole employees working a specified percentage of a full-time equivalent job). We also provided this key contact person with text for informing potential interviewees about the study and firm approval of the project. We then contacted each nominee directly to solicit voluntary participation in an interview and explained that we would be asking them for detailed information on their experiences supervising one or

two cases of RLW. In the interviews with supervising managers we used a case-oriented interview protocol. Managers recalled their experiences with specific cases of RLW and then also reflected on other experience to draw conclusions and insights on when RLWS work well, the biggest challenges, their organizational context and/or how other managers should proceed.

To answer our second and third research questions on dimensions of organizational support and their relationship with managerial rationales, we interviewed one senior HR expert and one to two senior executives per organization. All of these interviewees were initially identified by the HR contact with whom we negotiated participation of the firm in the study. Protocols giving examples of the interview questions for each

interview are in the Appendix. In total, this study drew on 86 interviews including 42 line managers, 20 senior HR managers, and 24 senior executives. The interviews took place between 2004 and 2006 about a decade after RLW started emerging in the 1990s as a new work form. Three of the authors plus two additional experienced researchers with doctorates conducted the interviews over an 18-month period. The interviews were usually conducted at company headquarters, across a number of states and provinces. However, in eight companies, where one or more line managers were working at different company locations from the HR expert and senior executives, some interviews were conducted in other cities or by phone. The team held research retreats about every six months over several years to promote consistency in utilizing the protocols, recording data, and to facilitate learning from replication (Yin, 1994).

Managerial Interviews

From the approximately 50 line managers nominated by our HR contact person, we were able to interview 42 managers. None of the nominated managers contacted declined to be interviewed. Those not included in the study were either not needed, because the researcher working with the firm fulfilled the minimum of two interviews in the study design, or actual scheduling of the interview was problematic. Among the 42 line managers interviewed, there was a wide range of experience supervising reduced-load professionals or managers, with some currently managing a professional on reduced-load for the first time and some having experience with 10 or more over a number of years. The range of number of reduced-load direct reports was 1 to 50, with a mean of 8 and a median of 6. Half of the managers were male and half female.

As for the number of specific individual cases discussed by these managers, there were 68 cases, but 13 were job shares where two different individuals were working reduced loads to do a full-time job. So the total number of experiences with individuals on reduced load discussed by the 42 managers included 26 who were working in job-share situations (13 job shares multiplied by 2) and 55 in solo reduced-load situations, which comes to a total of 81 individuals in all (78 women and 3 men). Of the 55 persons working a solo reduced-load arrangement, 35 worked 70% to 80% of full time and the remaining 20 worked 50% to 60%. The 13 job-share individuals worked between 40% and 60%, with the total percentage in the arrangement being either 100% or 120% (e.g. 60-60). Half of the 68 cases were managers with responsibility

for direct reports, and half were individual contributors without managerial responsibilities. There were few jobs found twice in the sample, for example, there were two lawyers, two biologists, two sales managers, two HR managers, and two business managers. But most jobs occurred only once in the sample. The most common reasons for requesting the reduced load were to take care of a new baby after parental leave (24%); wanting to spend more time with children (20%); and personal or family health issues (10%).

Organizational Support Interviews

During the senior HR interviews, the interviewee described the firms' historical background and current state of reduced-load and work-life flexibility arrangements, the current HR and business environment and culture, and how they worked with line managers to support implementation. We also asked for corporate documents explaining HR policies around RLW. The separate interviews with senior executives provided insight into the HR and business environment, their perspectives on organizational support for customized work among professionals and work-life issues, and the impact of RLW on the success of the firm.

Data Analysis

There were two stages involved in the data analysis. In the first stage, the focus was on (1) line managers' explanations of their rationales regarding RLW and (2) exploring and identifying dimensions of organizational support through examining interviews with HR managers and senior executives. An experienced transcriptionist who had not been involved in data collection transcribed the tape-recorded interviews verbatim. In analyzing the interviews, we used both a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where themes are identified by reading transcripts verbatim, as well as iterative and multistep processes to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcripts were read in a line-by-line manner to generate (1) categories for managerial rationales regarding RLW and (2) cultural and structural dimensions of organizational support. This generated hundreds of statements. We used open coding here to understand emerging response types, and conducted several iterations to collapse the data further using a process of axial coding to create subcategories and note response patterns. Two interviewers coded portions of each transcript to provide for rating consistency.

The analysis of line managers' transcripts found three main sets of rationales that encompassed 26 of our initial array of 31 first-order codes and were mentioned by over half the line

managers: (1) high performers (i.e., retaining high-talent employees with valued capabilities); (2) flexible on flexibility (i.e., employees willing to be flexible in their work arrangements); and (3) conducive jobs (i.e., jobs where RLW was feasible). This approach of clustered related activities and having focused on several broad themes mirrored the approach used in many qualitative studies (cf. Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011). As an example, the high-performers category included talent retention and strong contributor in the same category since these are related constructs of productive employees. We provide samples of text passages directly in the language of the informants, the first-order codes and the second-order abstract concepts developed by noting themes and relationships in the first order data (see Figure 1).

The analysis of HR manager and senior executive interviews resulted in identification of four dimensions of organizational support. Two represented cultural support: (1) senior management support (i.e., top management making statements valuing work-life flexibility); and (2) discourse on career penalties (i.e., the tone of perceptions and observations around career penalties associated with working reduced load). The other two represented structural support: (3) adaptation of HR systems (i.e., adaptations of traditional rules to support RLW—for instance, performance appraisals adapted on workload expectations, and benefits prorated); and (4) diffusion throughout the organization (i.e., many different types of employees and units experimenting with RLW). We provide text passages and examples, and the first- and the second-order codes that emerged for organizational support dimensions (Figure 2).

After identifying the organizational support dimensions, two of the coauthors then coded all participating firms as high, medium, or low on each dimension. We coded high when the support was clearly present and consistent across the different interviews within the organization, medium when it was less present and low when it was either clearly lacking or interviewees gave widely different accounts suggesting conflicting

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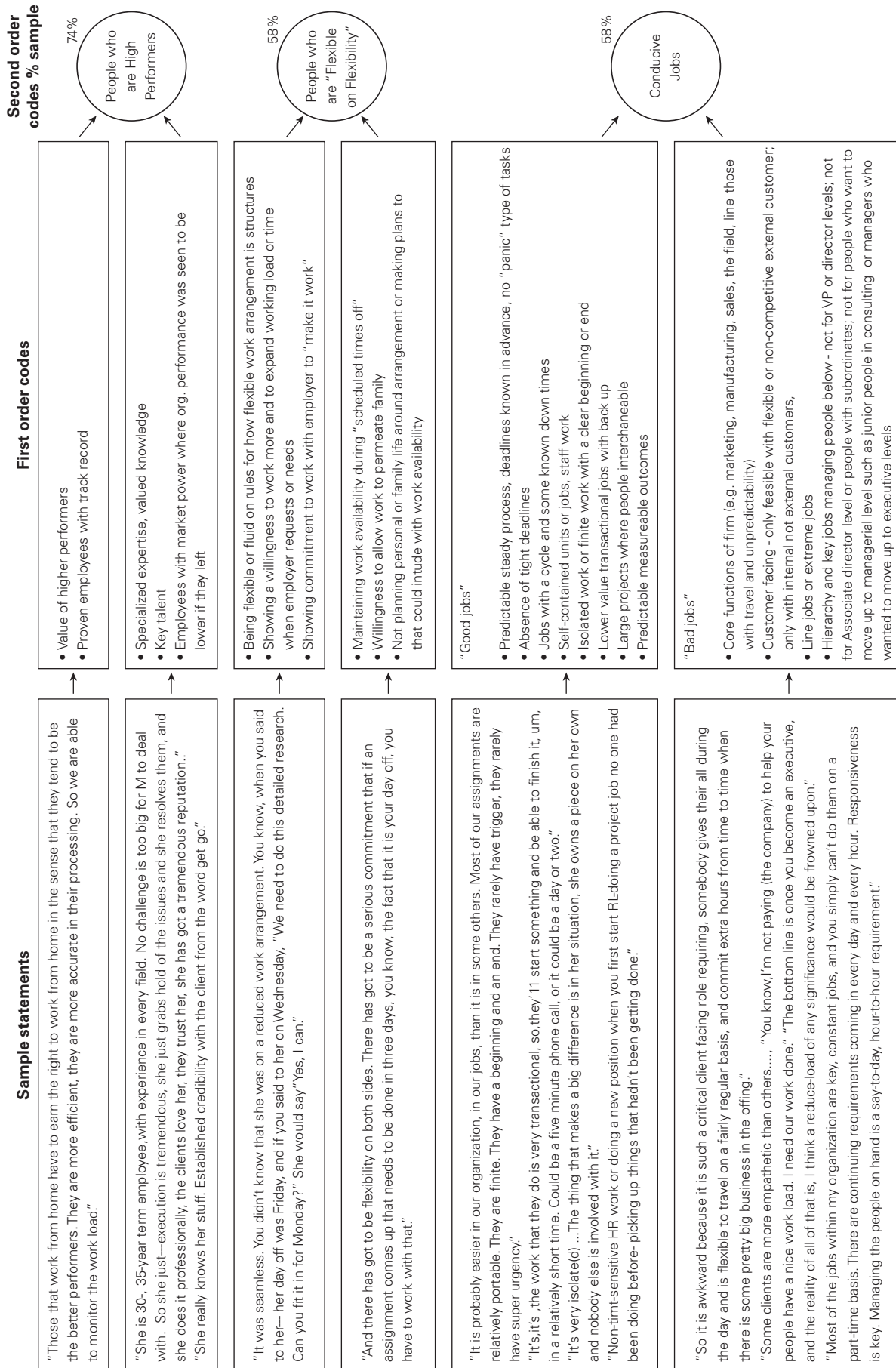


FIGURE 1. Managerial Rationales on Reduced-Load Work

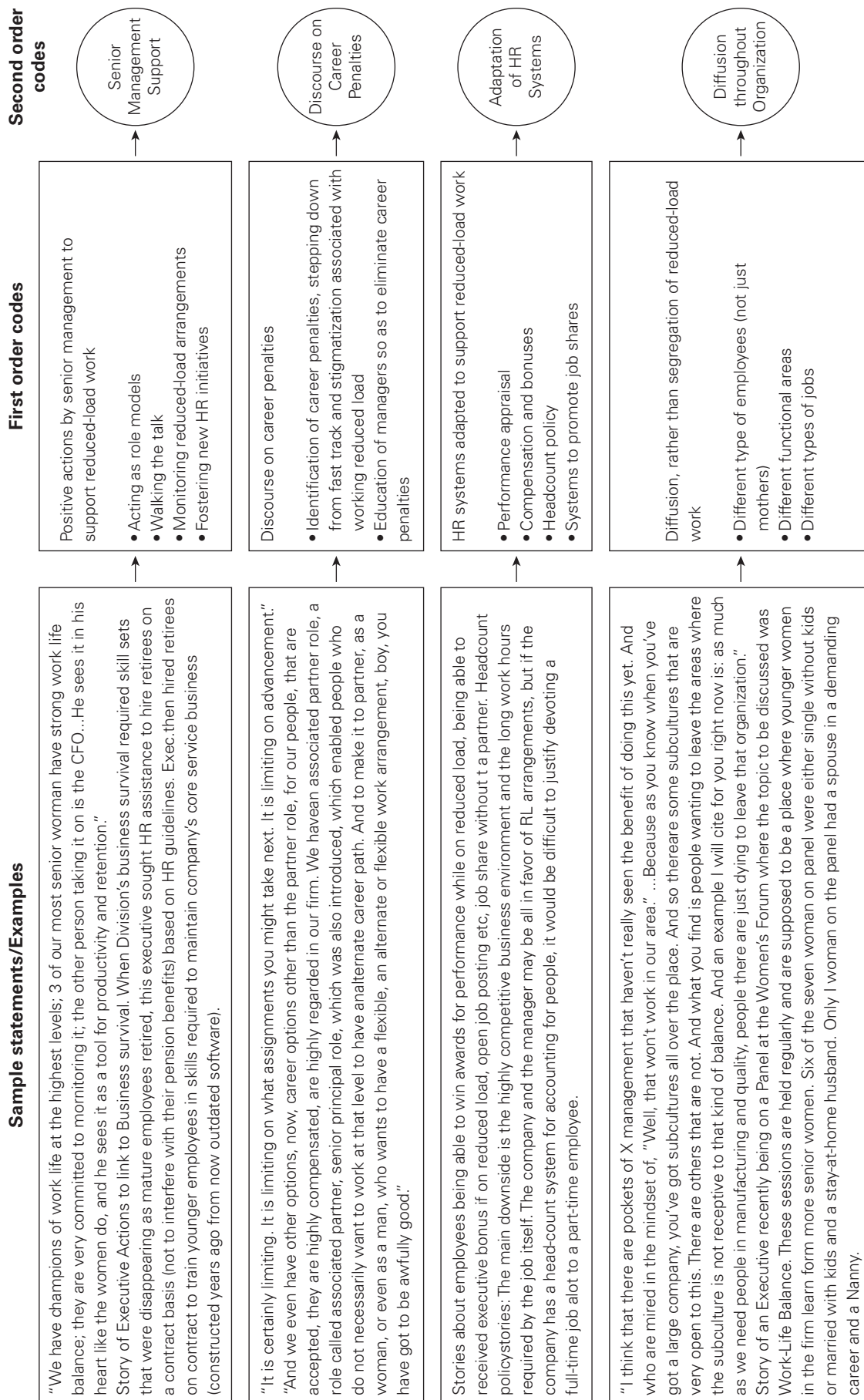


FIGURE 2. Dimensions of Organizational Support for Reduced-Load Work

scattered support. Next, the same two coauthors proceeded to use these ratings to categorize firms as either more embracing or more ambivalent in overall supportiveness of reduced-load work. We set a rule of coding organizations as embracing when either (a) the four dimensions of support were all coded high or (b) at least one dimension was coded high and the others were coded medium. We coded organizations as ambivalent when either (a) one or more of the dimensions was coded low or (b) all dimensions were medium. Out of 20 organizations, 10 were coded embracing and 10 were coded ambivalent.

The second stage of data analysis involved reexamining the line manager transcripts to make an assessment of each manager's level of support of RLW for the purpose of determining whether there was an association between managerial level

In our data, we found many statements about reduced-load arrangements when it was offered to individuals who had higher-level performance, key talent, valued expertise and/or a strong work ethic.

and organizational level support. Two of the co-authors who were *not* involved in Stage 1 analyses of line manager rationales and dimensions of organizational support reviewed the transcripts focusing on managers' descriptions of implementation and supervision of specific reduced-load professionals and their reflections on learnings from their accumulated experience over the years. Initially, the two coauthors focused on managers' rationales for supporting RLW, as summarized earlier. The blind coders concluded that the rationales were sometimes used in a less supportive manner and sometimes in a more supportive manner; so they shifted to assessing each line manager's overall supportiveness of RLW, as high or low. They

examined the transcripts of eight of the 42 managers; these were selected by the other co-authors to ensure inclusion of managers from both more embracing and more ambivalent firms, while allowing for an assessment by researchers "blind" to organizational categorization. After comparing independent ratings of these managers on overall support as high or low, based on excerpted quotes, and being in 100% agreement, these coauthors generated a list of themes constituting high support and low support. They then independently rated 14 more managers and achieved agreement on all but two cases, both of which involved a mix of more supportive and less supportive themes. After thorough discussion and coming to an agreement on classification of these cases, these coauthors expanded, collapsed and refined their list of themes constituting high and

low support and also decided on the importance of two critical themes among the more supportive statements (see Table I). They agreed to treat these two as essential to classification as more supportive in cases where both high-support and low-support themes were present. Having achieved an interrater reliability of 91% in rating of 22 cases, each of the coauthors then proceeded to rate an additional 10 cases, which completed rating of the total number of 42 line managers. Thirteen were rated as less supportive and 29 as more supportive. The distribution of these managers in embracing and ambivalent organizations is presented in the cross-level section of Results.

Findings

We will first elaborate on line managers' rationales regarding RLW and then examine dimensions of organizational support and the cross-level dynamics.

Three Managerial Sets of Rationales Regarding Reduced-Load Work

We focus on the three sets of rationales that were most common among the managers interviewed and then briefly discuss the secondary sets of rationales. Sensemaking is generally not driven by a complete or fully accurate mental model of a situation, but rather as a working theory that is reasonable and coherent from the managerial role (Wells, 2010). Thus, sensemaking research focuses on respondent's perceptions of plausibility, not necessarily complete accuracy (Wells, 2010).

High Performers

The high-performer set of rationales involved statements mentioned by three-fourths of the supervising managers about wanting to retain talented and productive employees who were perceived as having high human capital value to the firm. In our data, we found many statements about reduced-load arrangements when it was offered to individuals who had *higher-level performance, key talent, valued expertise and/or a strong work ethic*. As one manager stated, RLW allows "you to maintain ... productive workers who would not be able to stay otherwise." Another stated, "The benefit to the company is to attract and retain the best talent." Still another remarked, "The gain of this arrangement is we retained a really high-level, high-performing person." Most managers mentioned that they wanted to support strong contributors who have skills that added to the organization. An example of this was:

She's been such a strong contributor to the organization and such a great addition to the organization, you want to find a way

TABLE I Line Manager Themes More Supportive and Less Supportive of Reduced-Load Work

More Supportive Themes*	Less Supportive Themes
<u>Expression of concern for employee (e.g., telling to go home if working too late or coming into work on an "off" day), talking about importance of boundaries; advising on importance of managing time and not working too many hours or taking "comp" time when appropriate</u>	Expression of importance of employee always being willing to accommodate and "flex" when needed at the office, regardless of individual or family priorities
<u>Proactivity of manager making RLW (e.g., creative solutions, trying something new, making special effort to find and/or craft a job that works well, even if first try fails)</u>	Perception that reduced-load arrangements represent a "placeholder" for employees with problems and needing a temporary break
Looking for opportunities for reduced-load individual to be promoted or have developmental experiences to enhance career progress	Suggestion that employees on reduced load should have to make sacrifices or pay a price in terms of career development or advancement
Expressing that a person doesn't have to be a star to succeed on a reduced load	Assertions that reduced load only works with exceptional, outstanding performers: "stars"
Emphasizing mostly positive results for the individual and for the business	Expression of skepticism about functionality of RLW; concern about productivity consequences
Suggesting that RLW can be done in a variety of roles and settings, beyond what might first be evident	Emphasis on limitations or restrictions around when reduced-load can work out; listing of many kinds of jobs/roles or functional areas where it is just not possible
Articulating the business case for incorporating RLW (e.g., retaining valuable talent, high performance)	Raising questions about how anyone working less than the norm of full-time PLUS could be really committed to the organization and genuinely devoted to a career
Justifying or communicating positively about reduced-load arrangements to other managers, HR, etc.	
Expressing wanting to see reduced-load spread and be more accepted culturally and institutionally	

Note: *Underlined themes in more supportive column had to be present in order for manager to be coded "High support."

to accommodate her, to leverage the skills that she has. You know, even if that means pushing a little bit upstream. [16, 2]

Other managers spoke about having made such a large investment in an individual that they were not "fungible" or "interchangeable," but had unique historical knowledge of the work, that could not easily be replaced. An illustrative example of this rationale follows:

She is a 30-, 35-year term employee, with experience in every field. You know, no challenge is too big for M to deal with. ... Execution is tremendous. ... So it is one of these employees that is close to being irreplaceable, you know. ... When people have expertise and are knowledgeable, then they become of incredible value to the bank, and so they have more negotiating ability. [17, 1]

Employees Who Were Flexible on Flexibility

The second set of rationales that 58% of the managers saw as important had to do with employees who were willing to be flexible on when they worked reduced load to support their commitment to delivering the work: professionals who were: "flexible on flexibility." Managers talked about the need for employees to be flexible or fluid on the rules for how the arrangement was structured, such that when needed an individual would be willing to restructure personal life boundaries to meet job demands. This included expectations that whenever the manager felt work demands were high, reduced-load professionals must be willing to work more hours or during normally scheduled days off or even weekends. Line managers also stated that people were highly "motivated" to "make it work" in a reciprocal fashion:

The people who do take (RLW) ... actually ... are always the ones that come forward and say, "Look, I'm totally flexible. I can do ___." ... They provide flexibility because it works for them. They get "positive flexibility" back for themselves when they need to take it because they give it to the business. So it is a give and take. [10, 1]

Managers also talked about the importance of employees maintaining work availability even during their time off, so that in a crisis they could come in if necessary. Managers were generally more comfortable with customized arrangements when employees checked their voice mail and email even on their days or times legitimately "off" work. As a manager noted: "And they are pretty good also about checking, plugging in their laptops at home in the evening and just checking that there isn't anything critical that needs to be done." Managers supported employees who were willing to be flexible and monitor work needs during

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the output.

their off hours, in order to make sure their RLW arrangement did not negatively impact on coworkers, customers, or the manager.

Conducive Jobs

The third set of rationales that 58% of line managers mentioned was the nature of the job. The strongest agreement among these supervising managers was on two characteristics of jobs that facilitate successful RLW: (1) jobs with greater predictability and less exposure to tight deadlines or crises and (2) jobs not

at the executive level or higher up in the hierarchy. Jobs that were more predictable and involved less exposure to ups and downs related to external factors included jobs where there were known, reasonable deadlines and often clear work processes with measurable outcomes, or jobs with periodic known downtimes, such as accounting jobs related to closing out the books at the end of a financial quarter. The managers talked about reduced load being easier for self-contained jobs or for work that is more finite with a clear beginning or end. Some managers suggested that if people wanted to advance one level to pass up to a higher hierarchical group in the firm, they could not work reduced load. These included stories of early career professionals who wanted to advance to be a partner or manager; or managers who wanted to become executives.

Beyond these two characteristics of conducive jobs that were mentioned by many interviewees,

secondary themes included views on "core" and noncore jobs. Core jobs, in "key functions" that the firm competes on, were viewed as "bad jobs" for RLW. These jobs were seen as having extreme job characteristics with long hours and high workloads where managers believed reduced load "just couldn't be done." Surprisingly, what was constructed as a core job varied across managers and firms according to what was perceived as the key functions for a particular manager's or company's main lines of business. Examples of core jobs included product development marketing jobs in a cereal company that was always coming out with a new brand each year, or jobs serving major clients of a bank or consulting firm. Face time, visibility, and consistently fast response requirements were important, in particular in relations with customers. A statement illustrating this theme is:

You know, a customer can't call you and [hear] you say, "Sorry, I'm not in the office today. Try me next Monday." That is not going to work. [10, 2]

The norms about the perceived visibility requirements of the job could vary even within the same firm suggesting social construction on the necessity of face time and cultural fragmentation across locations. In one company, reduced load seemed to "work better" in California, where reducing commuting time was thought to be a legitimate rationale for use unlike the Midwest headquarters location. Variation in the importance of visibility based on geography also including stories regarding job incumbents' supporting distributed or global clients, or customers who did not need to (and physically could not) see individuals all their working time.

Two factors emerged as being perceived by managers as enablers of RLW even in core jobs: *backup systems in place* and the *measurability of the output*. Backup systems made managers see it as more feasible to implement RLW. For example, we found many examples of high-value jobs, with large ongoing projects like consulting firms or legal counsel where many team members could step in when needed. The following quote illustrates how a manager devised backup plans in a formal way, writing a contract with the employee to make sure that business could be conducted smoothly and that several backup options had been planned for:

We write a contract with contingencies, and [discussion of] "How are you going to cover this aspect of the business?" and "What are you going to do if—what is

Plan B if this doesn't work? How are you going to close this gap?" [15, 2]

Another way that backup was ensured was through teamwork and work coverage:

I think at the administrative level in the customer service area, [RLW is easier to implement] because there are multiple people doing the same work, and they are already backing each other up. [16, 1]

Implementation was also constructed as doable when work output could be easily measured without seeing the person doing the work. As this manager explains, RLW was easier to supervise when the productivity was readily measured in quantitative terms:

[This work is] so very data driven. Very analysis driven. A lot of spreadsheet work. So it was pretty quantifiable, like I said, you know, the type of work, whether it was being done or not. [15, 2]

Organizational Support for RLW

Turning now to the senior HR experts and senior executives' interviews, four main themes emerged suggesting organizational support for implementing RLW. Two were cultural: senior management support and discourse on career penalties. Two others were structural: adaptation of HR systems and diffusion of RLW throughout the organization.

Senior Management Support

High support indicated that HR and/or senior executives in a given firm mentioned CEO or senior management level explicit commitment of the firm to helping employees achieve work and family goals, or commentary of a senior executive about the strategic impact of reduced-load arrangements. One example of strategic thinking behind high support involved a senior executive who helped change HR policy to hire retirees on a reduced-load contract basis so that they could train younger employees in skills required to maintain company's core service business in information technology (IT). Another manager talked about how having frequent access to the CEO facilitates the diffusion of diversity initiatives throughout the organization:

It is amazing and now, getting to the CEO, he spearheaded the whole values thing. ... And so he personally chairs what we call the diversity leadership council. We meet with the CEO on a quarterly basis to talk about diversity and work life. [17, 1]

Discourse on Career Penalties

The second theme involved perceptions around career penalties associated with use of reduced-load arrangements. Here there were statements about whether working reduced load negatively affected potential for future promotions. Statements from high-support organizations include the following two:

Would it hurt her that she had done this? I mean, would people say, "Oh she's not really management material" because she worked reduced-load for a while? No. [19, 3]

They can still be promoted, because we have different examples of people who either were promoted while they were on the reduced hours or afterwards. ... People have to acknowledge, "Well, it may or it may not impact my career. It will all depend on what I do, what I accomplish, how my contribution is valued to the organization." [17, 1]

One example of strategic thinking behind high support involved a senior executive who helped change HR policy to hire retirees on a reduced-load contract basis so that they could train younger employees in skills required to maintain company's core service business in information technology (IT).

Adaptation of HR Systems

Some companies in our sample were actively adapting HR systems—in particular benefits, job postings, and budgeting—to facilitate RLW. Some companies adopted a prorated benefits policy so that managers were not penalized in their budgets when they supervised reduced-load employees. Some companies had an interactive job share system, where someone could advertise for a partner, if they wanted to reduce their load.

Diffusion of RLW throughout the Organization

The fourth theme pertained to the diffusion of RLW to different types of employees, jobs, levels, and work units across firm boundaries. In some organizations, reduced load was segregated to certain types of employee groups such as "women" or even more ambivalent, "working mothers," certain hierarchical levels such as "not senior levels" or "not executives," or certain business units or regions.

Clusters of Organizations

Based on the coding of these themes, one cluster of organizations was more "embracing" in cultural

and structural support of RLW, when compared to the second cluster of “ambivalent” firms. Embracing firms tended to report higher levels of senior manager support and discourse suggesting lack of major career penalties. They also had more adaptive HR and wider diffusion of RLW across employee and job types. In the “embracing” organizations, there was more of a mind-set that customizing work to reduce load was one type of work-life flexibility. It was seen as helping organizational resiliency. There were shared beliefs that employees can be trusted to determine for themselves the best way to meet the needs of the customer, and that it is up to the employee to figure out the best method, place, and time to get the work done. In the “ambivalent” firms, there was more of a conservative mind-set that the organization must exercise more control over employees through clear HR policies. RLW was seen more as an accommodation to the employee, as something that might entail a cost to the business, rather than as part of the overall business strategy.

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Cross-Level Analyses: Comparing Embracing and Ambivalent Cultures

We found cross-level connections between organizational supportiveness as reported by senior HR experts and senior executives and overall support of RLW arrangements by line managers in those

organizations. As shown in Table II, in the more embracing organizations, there was a higher frequency of more supportive managers and lower frequency of less supportive managers than in the more ambivalent organizations. Of the 13 less supportive managers identified, 8 were in ambivalent organizations and 5 in embracing organizations. Of the 29 more supportive managers, 18 were in embracing organizations and 11 in ambivalent organizations.

Managerial Agency: Managers Who Diverge in Supportiveness from Their Organizations

This pattern does not suggest a causal direction of influence between organizational and managerial-level phenomena; that is, one could argue that organizational context determines managerial behavior or, alternatively, that managerial attitudes and behaviors influence organizational policy, practice, and culture. The fact that we did find a number of less supportive managers in embracing organizations and similarly some more supportive managers in ambivalent organizations suggests that there is certainly not a close coupling between supportiveness at the organizational and managerial levels.

Here are examples of the subtleness of more ambivalent or lukewarm support from less supportive managers in more embracing contexts. For example, the following manager saw reduced load as an “accommodation” and saw his reduced-load workers as nonflexible if they wanted a day off a week if they had to work on their scheduled day off.

She’s not really flexible; she’s not flexible enough in my view when she deals with this. Like, she’d have one day a week off. And if she didn’t have the day off, she’d want it off another time. That’s kind of not how it works in our organization. [11, 1]

Another example of a manager diverging in supportiveness from his organization talked about his frustration in thinking about how to plan when scheduling meetings, or giving more up-front time for communication; he definitely preferred full-time workers.

At times it does get frustrating because you’re limited on when you can schedule meetings or, ... part of what [RLW employee] has had to learn to manage is okay, just because you’re in on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and you need to get this done doesn’t make it a priority for everybody else. You know, so she’s had to learn to maybe allow more up-front time to connect with folks ... I think

TABLE II Cross-Level Patterns of Organizational and Manager Support for Reduced-Load Work

Organizational Support and Manager Support	10 Organizations with Low Support	10 Organizations with High Support
13 low-supporting managers	8	5
29 high-supporting managers	11	18

our preference is still, gee, you know, it would really—We feel more comfortable and would prefer a full-time workforce. ... [13, 1]

The most dominant and determining themes that emerged among managers more supportive of RLW had to do with (1) expressing concern for the employee or intervening on behalf of an employee to be sure that individuals were not “overworking” or being too flexible around work/home boundaries to respond to work unit demands, or (2) describing ways the manager was very proactive in finding, crafting, or modifying jobs to be conducive to RWL. Two examples of demonstrating concern for the employee working reduced load:

... I see it as a role to at least ask the question for them, you know. Like if ____ starts coming in Fridays, the first thing I say is why are you here, you're not supposed to be here ... and by doing that, you're reinforcing a message ... we have an arrangement that has boundaries to it. And I'm recognizing that, at least I'm making it known that I realize you're going over the boundary. That's positive for the company, but that's not what we agreed to. [13, 2]

... One of the things I've always told people when they go on a flex arrangement, “Stick to it, don't get sucked up into [other tasks] ... there is a reason that you did it”. [20, 2]

This finding suggests that the “flex-on-flex” rationale is complicated. On the one hand, these line managers wanted to be able to count on their reduced-load professionals to deliver in times of high organizational demand, to be willing to bend to help out the work unit. On the other hand, there was a clear divide between managers who expressed that the individual employees must always be willing to flex versus those who were insistent that the organization had to do its fair share of being flexible as well and in fact that reduced-load professionals who were not able to stick to some boundaries were more at risk of being taken advantage of by the firm.

Some examples of the other critical theme—manager proactivity in creating, scoping, and sculpting a reduced-load position—include examples from a financial services firm and a consumer goods company. In the financial services firm, a lawyer heading up a group of 36 lawyers in Toronto needed to find a replacement for an employee for a fixed period of time and remembered a talented

former employee who was about to move to New York with her husband. She proposed that this person could work from the bank's New York office on a reduced-load basis, which could then lead to a full-time job if it worked out. In the consumer goods firm, a manager talked about how it can be difficult to figure out how to create an appropriate load for someone in a demanding role:

People have to think outside the box in how it's going to work. When they look at the job, if you just look at it straight on, you go oh, clearly there's no way a person could do this at 60%. You have to think about the job differently, and you have to redefine it and mild it around the 60%. And I think sometimes people are very linear in their approach. ... I told her she has to tell me if it wasn't working for her: “Tell me where we can drop something, and we did that quite a number of times ... and it would creep up again and I'd have to remind her to keep me honest, when it's not working for you and you are feeling like your hours are stretching, you have to push back.” [16, 2]

How might these kinds of evidence of supportiveness of RLW on the part of managers be linked to organizational level support? It is possible that these managers are generally expressing concern for employee well-being that comes from a long-standing cultural norm in their organizations of really valuing and caring for people. Or they could be reflecting or mirroring public discourse of senior management talking about the business case for offering customized work arrangements to retain valuable talent. Examples of proactivity in crafting RLW could also be simply building on an existing culture of innovation, responsiveness to change, or “walking the talk” of providing different avenues for people to sustain career commitment and caring for family.

Overall, supportive managers in more embracing contexts spoke of feeling free and empowered to be creative, experiment and adapt organizational systems or norms. Examples might include changing how the team communicated and

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coordinated work and creating supportive norms to implement the reduced load arrangement, or altering or combining job requirements in new ways. Thus, the managers felt they had cultural and structural support to act to implement the arrangement. One example comes from a manager who started to have teleconference meetings for the reduced-load workers, making them feel they could choose to join a face-to-face meeting if they were not in the office.

If we would have a staff meeting on the day when one or the other was out ... we would get them online, it would be a teleconference, so they felt a part of the group. ... So I think they both, I think, felt that they were integrated, contributing members of the group. They didn't feel that they were any lesser in their contributions, or weren't full-fledged members of the group. I think they felt on par with everybody else. [15, 2]

Another example is a manager who felt empowered to negotiate and create a new job to fit the level of employee who wanted to come back to the firm working reduced load after being on leave.

It's not easy just to create a job. ... and sort of the stars have to align, ... because it's not like money comes out of thin air. But I knew she was coming back. So ... there was sort of like half jobs here and there that I ended up being able to put it together. ... It's a lot of negotiation with a number of different people ... but, I ... added two roles in here because I needed to make the scope big enough, broad enough. [16, 3]

Another theme found in more supportive managers' commentary was that sometimes reduced-load work translated into benefits for the managers themselves. For example, one manager shared that in the first phase of a meeting with a new client he mentioned that he was supervising a job share who was covering his office during the meeting. This disclosure helped create an immediate connection with the client as the individual was herself a job share.

I was meeting with one of the biggest banks in the U.S. And we had no relationship, and we were just talking about our mutual organizations and I ended up talking about K and S, about the fact that, when I am not in the office, they are the ones that are running the ship

for me and they are a job share. And the woman I was meeting with, just her eyes lit up at that point and she said, "Wow. I'm a job share." And it was an amazing moment in a cold call where suddenly you had this commonality between two organizations, that we were both receptive to job share positions. [17, 1]

As for the kinds of themes found in less supportive managers, we found managers commenting on employees trying to "abuse the system" or managers such as this one in a pharmaceutical company holding to a traditional ethos of long office hours (i.e., face time) as a signal of employee commitment:

And I kind of maybe am suspicious, maybe by nature, because I like to work hard and I like job satisfaction, and I like to contribute. That is why I always went into it with, "What is this person's deal? Why does this person have to stay home on Tuesdays and Thursdays? ... And you know, "I need to get up and come here every day, why does this person think they don't?" [15, 2]

Another theme involved talking at length about the limitations or restrictions around when reduced-load could work out well—for example, only if the employee were a star or only if the job did not involve managing others or did not involve tight deadlines. Alternatively, some managers talked about how the onus of RLW is really more on the employee than the organization:

Unfortunately, I think in most places in the organization, the onus still is probably more on the employee to figure it out. And if you can figure out how you can get this work done in less time, or you can move some other work to somebody else who's willing to take it on, then, you know, you figure it out. [16, 1]

To summarize the cross-level patterns, our data did suggest that line managers in embracing contexts are likely to be more supportive of RLW arrangements than managers in ambivalent contexts; and managers in ambivalent contexts are likely to be less supportive of RLW than managers in embracing contexts. We could also see clearly that the rationales we derived from line managers' accounts of their experiences with approving and implementing alternative work arrangements were sometimes used in more supportive and less supportive ways. For example, a flex-on-flex rationale can be viewed as supportive as long as the manager

expresses concern or acts on the need to protect the reduced-load employee so he or she is able to meet his or her needs. The rationale of conducive jobs can be construed as supportive when line managers are proactive and strive to find or craft jobs that are conducive versus treat jobs as fixed with rigid boundaries and either doable versus undable on reduced load, thus eliminating individuals from potentially enriching, demanding, and career-enhancing positions. We found the retention of valuable talent/high-performance rationale primarily used in a supportive manner, but it appeared to be utilized commonly by line managers in both embracing and ambivalent organizational contexts. It also seemed to be the politically correct thing to say but without specific implications for managerial behavior. It did not help us to differentiate more supportive and less supportive managers.

Figure 3 presents a sketch of the overall dynamics of line manager and organizational support for RLW emerging from our data. We propose that managers draw on the three rationales derived from our analysis of their accounts of negotiating and implementing reduced-load work, and then that the organizational context influences how they use the rationales in more supportive and less supportive ways.

Discussion

Toward a Theory of Managerial Sensemaking Supporting RLW

RLW represents an ideal empirical phenomenon to study in order to promote greater understanding

of how line managers make sense of when to adapt to employee interest in customized careers and work-life flexibility. In this section, we will discuss our findings and offer several propositions based on the analysis of the managerial cases across the 20 firms.

Propositions

First, our data indicate that most managers with implementation experience see RLW as an inducement to retain and reward talented, productive employees. Thus, RLW can be analyzed as inducements provided by organizations in return for employee contributions such as performance, effort, working time, or commitment. Employees in return will take a pay cut, engage in work intensification, and slow down their career slightly in order to be able to continue on the career track and have more control, at least for a period, over their personal and family life. The psychological contract literature points out the exchanges of implicit promises between organizations and employees, and between line managers and employees (Rousseau, 1995). Although these promises might not be fully articulated and as such explicitly analyzed by line managers in their recollections, we argue that future research should look into RLW, and more generally, customized work and careers, as part of the changing psychological contract at work, particularly between employers and high talent. Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 1: Managers who have experienced RLW as a retention tool for high performers who continue

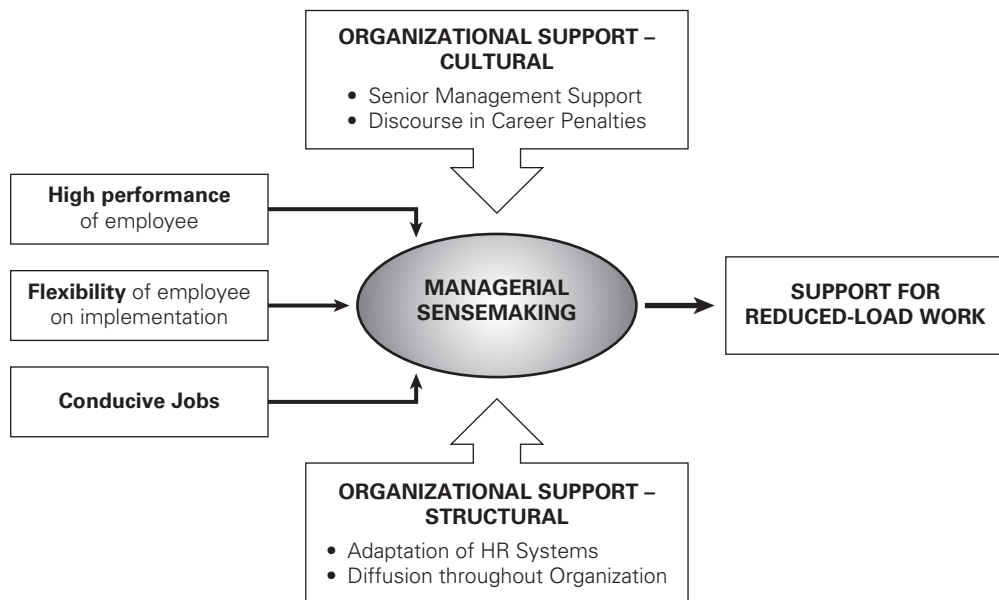


FIGURE 3. Dynamics of Line Manager and Organizational Support for Reduced-Load Work

to provide increased performance effort in exchange for the customized work arrangement are more likely to support RLW than managers who have not had this experience.

Managers identified conditions where they were able to allow RLW without experiencing disruptions to organizational routines for meeting work demands. Townley (1993) points out that HR practices are often designed to “make employees’ behavior and performance predictable and calculable—in a word, manageable.” When coordinating large numbers of people, HR policies are best administered when people are managed “en masse.” Customized work, however, has the potential for creating discontinuities. Without benefiting from experience and learning with customized work, managers construe that it is better and easier to follow performance management processes where everyone is managed the same way. One of the key fears many managers have is that they may not be able to count on the employees’ help when they face unexpected work demands. Employees thus may bear additional costs associated with crafting their work arrangements. Since most managers expect them to remain flexible, that is to respond to work emergencies or occasional demands on days where they are off, they may need to pay for child care or elder care for more hours than they usually need, to guarantee coverage. Since managers are concerned about giving up their managerial prerogative to control working time, and possible work disruptions in doing so, we suggest that:

Work structures may also vary in the degree to which they block opportunities for managers to organize work and distribute opportunities for RLW across jobs, types of employees, occupations, departments, or geographic locations.

Proposition 2: Managers who have experienced RLW with employees who were willing to be flexible in the implementation of the arrangement in exchange for flexibility are more likely to support RLW than managers who have not had this experience.

Work disruptions can also occur when customization is allowed for core jobs with institutionalized career norms, job duties, and work systems. As our data showed, what was seen as a conducive job (often noncore) varied from firm to firm. For instance, in some firms RLW was seen as feasible with managerial jobs, while in others it was taboo. Conduciveness not

only varied by level but by function. In many firms where marketing was a key path to senior management, marketing jobs were not highly acceptable for customized work but financial or research jobs might be acceptable. Yet in other firms that were financially focused in their core businesses, marketing would be acceptable but not financial jobs. Thus, which jobs were seen as “core” was socially created. Managers in our samples were more supportive of RLW for jobs that they viewed as noncore, where there would be minimal disruptions to the organization’s work systems. This leads us to our third proposition:

Proposition 3: Managers are more likely to support RLW for jobs that are construed as not “core” to the organization’s career and work systems.

This proposition is consistent with the empirical fact that many professionals switch out of “core” jobs in order to enjoy RLW, as for instance consultants and attorneys who switch out of client-facing jobs into internal roles (Barnett & Gareis, 2000).

Our study uncovered four main dimensions of organizational support. Our two cultural dimensions are consistent with prior research (e.g., Allen, 2001; Kelly et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 1999). Our findings on structural support add new insights, as structural support has been less studied. We find variation in the degree to which bureaucratic structures can be adapted to support RLW. Furthermore, work structures may also vary in the degree to which they block opportunities for managers to organize work and distribute opportunities for RLW across jobs, types of employees, occupations, departments, or geographic locations. This intraorganizational demarcation can be analyzed as a means to buffer work units, to close off the unit from environmental disturbances and ensure routines are reinforced to continue the status quo (Yan & Louis, 1999). Hence, some jobs, functions, or internal labor markets are organized to segment and localize work rules and job design within the firm, restricting RLW to certain categories of employees (e.g., some business units or subunits only). Our data suggested that in firms characterized by limited cultural and structural support, managers were more likely to limit their support to RLW by using rationales in a less supportive way. Applying a cultural diagnostic approach (Schein, 1985), the cultural artifacts of ambivalent cultural contexts were very detailed HR programs and policies that highly regulated employee activities. These policies were less focused on performance outcomes but more on face time regulation, reminiscent of McGregor’s

(1960) notion of "Theory X" (low trust, high control) leadership styles. In such contexts, managers held fewer supporting rationales.

Proposition 4a: Managers nested in ambivalent organizations are more likely than managers in embracing organizations to see RLW as an employee accommodation benefiting the employee more than the firm. In ambivalent contexts, managers are more likely to use rationales regarding RLW in a less supporting way, that is to restrict RLW to the high and flexible performers only and to a small number of conducive jobs.

Yet not all firms were conservative in their approach to RLW. At least a fourth of our firms embraced many forms of customized work and wanted their managers to have every tool possible to retain and motivate talent. These firms were more flexible, adaptive, less rigid, and less top down in their formal policies, structures, and overall mind-set and culture of how they managed people. They embraced doing whatever it took to motivate talent. For these embracing contexts, the cultural artifacts were the development of broad frameworks of HR programs and policies giving managers and employees a lot of discretion. The values in embracing firms reflected support of personal responsibility to self-manage work effectively. The basic assumptions were that employees can solve customers' problems better when they have the freedom to customize careers and loads and working time. In short, these contexts reflected McGregor's (1960) notion of "Theory Y" (high trust, low control).

Proposition 4b: Managers nested in embracing organizations are more likely than managers in ambivalent contexts to see RLW as a broad motivational resource for talent management. In embracing contexts, managers are more likely to use rationales regarding RLW in a supporting way, that is to support RLW for more employees and more jobs.

Contributions

Our study breaks new ground at several levels. First, we have examined an innovative customized work practice that has been quite understudied compared to flextime and telework. Unlike reduced-load work, telework, and flextime time rearrange hours of work, but do not fundamentally redesign job tasks or alter standardized career models. We hone in on managerial sensemaking around the arrangement, which is important given the lack of research on managerial rationales for and sensemaking of customized work and given the importance of managerial attributions (Leslie

et al., 2012). Despite a relative lack of information on managerial sensemaking around customized work, our findings are consistent with and add to the existing literature in some important ways. We add to multilevel work on flexible working arrangements and in particular to the work of Poelmans and Beham (2008) who proposed three sets of actors as antecedents of supervisor "allowance decisions" to support customized work: (1) supervisor and employee characteristics (difficult to replace), which resonates with our "high performer" rationale; (2) group-level characteristics including disruption potential (less interdependent), which has commonalities with our "conductive job" rationale; and (3) organizational-level characteristics including policies and culture, which correspond to the importance of organizational structure and culture. We extend this work by proposing a more complete (e.g., adding the "flexible-on-flex" rationale) and more detailed (e.g., components of each rationale and dimensions of organizational support) set of rationales and contexts regarding RLW.

Hornung, Rousseau, and Glaser (2009) proposed, from a bargaining perspective, that supervisors are likely to support idiosyncratic arrangements depending on structural conditions (when job constraints are relatively low) and when their evaluation of the worker is positive. Vignette-based research has similarly found that structural conditions are important: managers are more likely to support work-family arrangements that are perceived as relatively less disruptive (den Dulk & de Ruijter, 2008; Powell & Mainiero, 1999) and for employees with relatively "conductive" jobs such as non-managerial (Barham, Gottlieb, & Kelloway, 1998).

Our research demonstrates that managerial perceptions of employee characteristics are indeed important: specifically, they support workers who are evaluated as valuable and difficult to replace, and who are perceived as a fit for the arrangement in terms of being flexible around flexibility. In essence, our research operationalizes what it means for a worker to be a "fit" for reduced-load and perhaps customized work arrangements broadly. Structural conditions are also important: managers are more likely to support arrangements that are perceived as less disruptive. Our study is important, in part, because it clarifies what might lead managers to perceive work characteristics as more or less disruptive. Our research also reveals that managerial perceptions of these

Our research operationalizes what it means for a worker to be a "fit" for reduced-load and perhaps customized work arrangements broadly.

conditions—such as what is noncore work—vary across different organizations with different core business functions. Thus, it is important for researchers and employees to understand the unique business context within which reduced-load work requests are made and how they are supported. Organizational culture plays a key role in allowance decisions—and our study suggests that cultures may be evaluated as embracing or ambivalent when it comes to customized work,

that managerial rationales vary across cultures.

Our data points to the segregation of RLW to certain types of employees (e.g. women) or certain types of business units (depending on the industry), rather than to a uniformed diffusion of change throughout the organization. We thus point to “pockets of organizational change,” that is departments, and work subgroups, where change is happening faster than in the wider organization.

Second, these HR practices are increasingly important in contemporary workplaces and they entail high promises, as they address the core problem professionals and managers face: rising workload and hours. Our study challenges the myth of a full-time, upward, uninterrupted career being the one and only possible way to sustain a professional career (Bailyn, 1993; Valcour et al., 2007). In doing so, our research contributes to the literature emphasizing employee and managerial agency—and more specifically to literature on I-deals (Rousseau et al., 2006), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and protean careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Our study, albeit among innovative organizations, suggests that in contemporary workplaces there is room for employees to craft customized arrangements and careers, and room for managers to make sense of employees’ requests and open the door to flexibility.

Third, our study contributes to the work-family and HR management literatures by adding to our understanding of why and when managers believe it makes sense to support professionals wanting to craft customized work arrangements. This is critical to the successful

implementation of innovative HR practices addressing the needs of professionals, as most employers have institutionalized managerial discretion to determine the ability to work flexibly rather than creating usage rights for employees (Kelly & Kalev, 2006). Our research provides a cross-level perspective suggesting that organizational support and managerial sensemaking regarding employees and jobs are connected,

albeit loosely. While we have focused our study on the embeddedness of managerial rationales within organizational contexts, it is likely that in turn, managers’ experiences and attitudes toward RLW also shape organizational contexts. In a field where multilevel research historically has been underused, our paper paves the way for future research uncovering the interplay of managerial and organizational levels.

Fourth, the dimensions and nature of organizational support that we have identified can be used to assess and anticipate the implementation gaps that often occur for innovative HR practices (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002). Our research identifies four key dimensions of organizational support that are critical for the implementation of customized careers. In addition, our research sheds light on organizational adaptation to change. Our analysis of organizational support dimensions suggests that organizational adaptation to change may be more heterogeneous than previously thought. In particular, our data points to the segregation of RLW to certain types of employees (e.g., women) or certain types of business units (depending on the industry), rather than to a uniformed diffusion of change throughout the organization. We thus point to “pockets of organizational change,” that is departments, and work subgroups, where change is happening faster than in the wider organization. These findings may help explain why career systems are uneven in many organizations (Litrico & Lee, 2008).

Implications for Practice

Our study has important implications for employees who may currently be missing out on talent because of an incomplete or dysfunctional customization of work arrangements. As many as 60% of US mothers said working less than full time was their ideal option (Pew Charitable Trust, 2007). Surveys also suggest many professionals reluctantly quit their careers despite being labeled “high talent” and loving their work, when their employers were not willing to reduce work hours to a manageable 40 hours or less a week (Williams & Boushey, 2010).

An important and novel practical implication of our study is that HR management systems can actually be *adapted* to fit with RLW. This article not only suggests that the adoption of a formal policy is not enough, but must be supplemented by cultural and structural organizational support as well as by managerial support. It also implies that HR departments may actually be able to change the way certain HR policies are used to fit with different customized work arrangements. For instance, they may review their benefits policies to make

sure professional RLW and career customization are encouraged. They may revise headcount metrics to enable professionals to share jobs. They may adapt performance review criteria to ensure objectives are proportionate to workloads and assessments are fair.

Our study suggests that managerial rationales regarding RLW are more likely to be used in supporting ways when there is organizational level support, both cultural and structural, in order to embed the practice. Managerial training and organizational change work is needed to precisely focus on managerial rationales and organizational support factors identified in this article to help firms adapt to the current and future transformation of the workforce. For example, in a given firm, do managers support customized work arrangements only for the very best performers or only for conducive jobs? If so, this firm is likely an "ambivalent" organization in terms of cultural and structural support. As workloads and expectations for career demands rise, serious conversations should be held by change leaders regarding what do "full time" and "professional work" really mean in our culture. Are ambivalent organizations hurting their long term ability to attract new high talent, or new labor market entrants such as Generation X and Y workers who are increasingly interested in being able to have more of a life outside work? Or are they limiting their ability to retain aging but talented senior employees who would like to phase to retirement and can still add value? Research suggests individuals are living nearly 30 years longer than at the turn of the twentieth century and most of this extra life is still added at the end of life, when individuals have retired. However, existing professional career regimes have essentially remained intact, leading to burnout for some talent, or fostering early retirement of individuals who would like to keep working, just not with long hours and high workloads. Reduced-load work allows for under-leveraged career models of talent management to be enacted. Practitioner and scholarly partnerships could be conducted to examine whether an ambivalent implementation of career customization is likely to lead to lower organizational effectiveness in the long run.

Another practical implication of our study is that the implementation of RLW is a journey. It progresses at diverse speeds in different business units, for different types of positions and work interactions (projects, tasks, customer-facing, etc.) and at different rates across different firms, even in a progressive sample. Regular assessments of managerial rationales and organizational changes are needed as employees' expectations and competitive work

pressures shift. In addition, managers' positive experiences with RLW can be shared and used in training sessions for the benefit of managers who lack personal experience with implementing RLW.

Finally, and most importantly, this study suggests that organizations need to draw more deeply from managerial learning on the ground in piloting new ways of working. Fine-tuning policy and addressing cultural and structural barriers to implementation are critical. Most firms fail to draw sufficiently on line managers' experiences in adopting innovative HR practices.

Limitations and Future Research

While a strength of our study is its focus on early adopters, and extreme cases of innovative firms, future research should also examine RLW in firms with managers not as progressive as the ones we interviewed. Future studies should seek to discover other managerial rationales by interviewing non-adopting managers of the work form, which might also lead to identification of processes to combat barriers. Samples might also include nonprofit and government firms, as all of our organizations were in the private sector. It is also possible that managers' views may have changed in the intervening period since our data collection ended in 2006, after which transcription and coding began. However, we believe given the recent media reports of employers such as Yahoo and Best Buy pulling back on flexibility, the issue of managerial and organizational support has not progressed or changed as much as stalled. The organizational level factors and honing of managerial rationales identified in this study may help countervail backlash and help address the prevalent flexibility stigma (Williams, Glass, Correll, & Berdahl, 2013) by identifying specific support barriers through in depth analysis of a specific flexibility practice.

A second limitation of our study is that it focuses on managerial respondents, which may lead to an overestimation of the supportiveness of organizations in our sample. Future research should triangulate managerial respondents' data with employee respondents. Such research should be conducted to link the employee perspective to the manager and organizational perspectives over time to understand the dynamics of implementation and change. While we did not observe enough variation in our data to be able to offer a differentiated analysis of managerial rationales across ranges of reduced loads worked, we recommend that researchers examine whether managerial

Future research should triangulate managerial respondents' data with employee respondents.

rationales vary according to the percentage of load worked by professionals under their supervision.

Given that norms and public supports for career flexibility vary across cultures and public policy systems, future work might include firms from outside North America. Cross-national samples beyond North America would allow RLW to be examined in relation to varying institutional supports for family and diverse pension regimes. More research is also needed that looks at within firm variation to understand the existence of variation across individual work units that vary internally in the degree to which new work practices such as customized work successfully take hold. Finally, future research is also needed linking RLW as a genre of work-life boundary management strategies enacted across organizational contexts, which may vary in their supportiveness of individuals' opportunities to customize work for greater or lower segmentation and integration of work and family roles (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). With the growth of electronic devices and the increasing ability for professionals to work 24/7, RLW may be a valuable and underutilized way to control boundaries to prevent overwork.

Conclusion

Bailyn (1993) argues that prevailing views of careers require major alteration if individuals are going to be as productive in the public professional world and the personal worlds of family and community. Many organizations may have innovative policies to support this dual agenda on paper, but these practices have often stalled or failed to be utilized. Our research suggests two

possible reasons for this. First, it may be that managers' experiences and rationales for supporting customized work arrangements have been poorly understood and underaligned with organizational cultures and structures. The second reason is that career templates and work practices to allow greater customization over the life course and particularly workload adaption and reduction, have not been fully updated in mainstream HR strategies for talent management. RLW, for firms that embrace more flexible professional work forms, may provide a competitive advantage. Customized work arrangements provide a critical pathway to enable more individuals to have sustainable lives on and off the job—and for organizations' career and work practices to be more congruent with the interests and needs of employees and society.

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Note

1. We interviewed 42 managers across 20 organizations. Each quote in our article is identified according to the number of the organization in our sample and the number of the manager within that organization.

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APPENDIX Interview Protocols
Manager Interview Protocol
Your Job

1. Tell me a bit about your current position and the group you are responsible for.
How long in position? ____ How long with company? ____ How long in management? ____
2. What are you held accountable for in terms of business results/performance?
3. What are the biggest challenges you face in managing your people to get the results you want?
4. What are typical work hour patterns in your work unit (yours and your direct reports)? Are heavy work demands an issue? Is this typical or not typical in the rest of the organization?
5. How many different professionals or managers on reduced load have you had reporting to you? In what kinds of jobs? How long did they work on reduced load?

Your Experience Managing Professionals Working Reduced Load

6. So tell me about your experience managing professionals on reduced load.

Let them give their overall account with interviewer laying on as little structure as possible. Build trust through empathic listening and probing to make clear there's no "right" answer and that we are not there to make judgments. We really want to hear about their experiences and learn from them. Gives interviewer a chance to get an overall picture and also to pick up on the language used to refer to reduced load (e.g., part-time, customized work, alternative work arrangements, flexible work arrangements, etc.) so that we can use that language in the rest of the interview. Probes in this section of the interview should be just for clarification, to get the lay of the land. Interviewer should jot down in point form the different professionals mentioned in this section, for later use. Interviewer should also note any emotional or affect-laden material.

Now I'd like to go through and ask you more specifics on a couple of the people you mentioned above. If more than two (2) are mentioned, then ask manager to choose a person who stands out in his or her mind.

- Context
 - What was your position at that time, and how many direct reports did you have in all?
 - Were there other alternative work arrangements in your group?
 - What was the job held by the professional wanting to work reduced load?
 - What percentage reduction did he or she want?
- Initial negotiation
 - How did the reduced-load request/possibility get raised?
 - How did you react and why?
 - Were there any organizational guidelines/policies on reduced load? If so, describe and comment on how helpful or not they were.
 - Were there any barriers that had to be overcome for you to approve or support the reduced load?
 - What was your boss's attitude toward your supporting RLW? To what extent did you need his/her okay, and did the reduced-load arrangement in your work unit have any effect on your relationship with him/her?
- Structuring the reduced load in the overall work unit context
 - How did you approach reducing the actual work load? What were the important challenges of coordination of that particular reduced-load job with the rest of the organization and with clients?
 - How visible was it that the individual was on reduced load?
 - Were there things about the nature of the work, the people, the part of the business, etc., that made it easier/harder to put a reduced-load arrangement in place and make it work?
- Success of the reduced load
 - How did the arrangement work for the professional over time? Did it seem to help him/her achieve whatever the goal was (e.g., more time with family)?

- How long did it last? What was that individual's next career move? How do you think the reduced load affected his/her later career choices and achievement?
- How did the arrangement work out from your perspective as the manager of the work unit? Were there any positive or negative effects on performance/business results? On your workload? Coworker morale/motivation? Explain.
- Challenges and strategies
 - What were the biggest challenges that you can recall with this reduced-load arrangement (e.g., scheduling meetings or other coordination issues, protecting the individual from heavy demands, ongoing fine-tuning of logistics and load, persuading others in organization to allow it, figuring out continued development/career advancement, performance evaluation, etc.)?
 - Looking back, do you recall any actions you took or ways you handled things that were particularly effective? Anything important to look out for or anticipate?
 - Any key events or turning points that helped spark your own learning around how to best manage RLW?

Now go on to second case of RLW. If manager needs to choose from several, suggest he/she choose one that's different from the first one described (in type of job or person or situation, level of success, etc.). Emphasize that we want to learn from their experiences, so maybe they should focus on a case where there were different learnings? Ask Manager to explain choice—how was this case different? Now return to all items under 6 above.

Organizational Perceptions and Personal Reflections

1. Based on what you've told me so far, I gather that ... (*paraphrase their philosophy or values from what you've heard so far, around setting priorities around work and life, etc.*) Are your views typical of most people at your level in this organization? Explain.
2. How would you describe the organization's posture or "attitude" toward professionals working reduced load? (*Ask for evidence, or why they drew that conclusion.*) What about senior management's view of RLW? What do you see ahead for this option in the future in this company?
3. Do you think existing policies or programs provide an appropriate amount of support and discretion for managers with direct reports wanting to work reduced load? How could things be better?
4. What about from the point of view of the professionals wanting to work on a reduced-load basis? Do you think the organization provides an appropriate level of support? What could make it better?
5. Has there been any *change* in your organization's posture toward new ways of working in general over the past five years? If so, describe and explain why there's been a shift. (*Probe on organizational learning, embeddedness of different mind-set if appropriate.*)
6. Are there others you know of in your organization managing professionals on reduced load? Have you talked to them about strategies, or observed their approaches compared to yours? Anything you learned?
7. How would you say your overall approach to managing people is unique compared to your peers? Do you deal differently with professionals working reduced load compared to regular, full-time professionals? Explain.
8. Do you think that over time you've changed your thinking, attitudes, or approaches to managing reduced-load professionals? Explain. Has the experience of managing professionals working on a reduced-load basis had any effect on you personally?
9. Reflecting back on your experiences, how do you feel about RLW being an option for professionals in this organization? Would you like to see it spread? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else you haven't already mentioned that you've learned from your experiences working with professionals on reduced load? What wisdom or advice would you offer to others considering managing professionals on reduced load?

Senior Executive Interview Protocol

Your Job

1. Tell me a bit about your current position and the group you are responsible for.
2. How long in position? ____ How long with company? ____ How long in management? ____
3. What are you held accountable for in terms of business results/performance?

4. What are the biggest pressures you face in your job at the moment?
5. What do you think accounts for your career success in this company? What do managers and executives have to do in general to be a success here?
6. What kind of work-life balance do the people reporting to you have? Would you say this is typical of other units at your organization? Please explain.

Strategic Business Perspective

7. Can you give me an overview of what's happened with your employer over the past five years? Any major events/big changes (e.g., merger/acquisitions, strategic direction, economic outlook, internal organizational structure)? Which companies do you consider to be your main competitors?
8. Currently what are the key staffing or talent development challenges in the organization? In the future? Are these viewed as connected to employee work-life balance issues at all?
9. What are the most innovative things going on in the way work is organized in this firm (e.g., telework, reduced load, self-managing teams, etc.)? Does this have any impact on delivering better results for customers or employees? Do different ways of organizing work tend to crop up more in certain areas of the company than others? Explain.

Managing Work and Personal Life at _____ (Company)

10. How would you describe the overall company philosophy or attitude toward employees at _____?
11. How would you describe the organization's posture or "attitude" toward professionals working reduced load? (Ask for evidence, or why they drew that conclusion)
12. Are you aware of what the formal policy is on RLW for professionals? Any difficulties in implementation, from company or individual employee perspective?
13. What are the norms about work hours in this company? What time do professionals/managers tend to arrive in the morning and leave in the evening? Do they come into the office on the weekends? Do professionals and managers take their full vacation time?
14. Does this company have a reputation around how easy or difficult it is for employees to balance work and life. If so, what is it? Do you think this reputation is deserved? Explain.
15. Do you think it's easier or harder to set up a flexible work arrangement like reduced load than, say, five years ago? Do you think it's more common (less? the same?) than it was five years ago? Explain. (Probe if appropriate on organizational learning, embeddedness of new ways of working.)
16. Are there any departments or areas of the company where you are more likely to find RLW or other alternative work arrangements?
17. Tell me about any direct or indirect (e.g., through a manager reporting to you) experience you've had with professionals working on a reduced-load basis. How did things work out? Any concerns about this way of working from a company perspective?
18. Have you ever been approached by managers, other senior executives, or clients/customers who have concerns about or objections to the practice of allowing professionals to work on a reduced-load basis? If so, what do you say to them? Would you say your attitude is more typical or atypical for a manager at your level in the company? Explain.
19. What conclusions have you drawn from your own experience about effective management of RLW?
20. What do you see as the costs and benefits of allowing RLW in your organization (e.g., work unit performance, recruitment and retention, training and development, career advancement, pay, etc.)?

Senior Human Resource Expert Interview Protocol

Update on Company and Work-Life Initiatives

1. Bring me up to date on the company and work-life initiatives over the past five years. Have there been any big changes? Can you give me a brief overview of the company's work-life initiatives currently (or ask for web link or a packet of materials if seems too much).
2. Fill me in on any critical events or big changes with the company over the past five years? Impact on HR or work-life programs?
3. What's the current rationale in this company for investing in work-life policies or programs? Why does the company support these initiatives?

Current Situation

4. Which work-life initiatives are most popular with the workforce as a whole? With professional and managerial employees? Why?
5. Do concerns about helping employees balance work and personal life reside mainly with people in HR here? Or do you find that line managers share these concerns and are actively involved with these issues in some way? What makes you think so?

RLW among Professionals

6. What's the current policy/guideline/practice on RLW at the professional/managerial level in this company?
 - Has that been the case for some time, or is it recent? If there have been changes recently in formal policies or guidelines governing RLW, what has been the purpose of those changes (e.g., move toward greater entitlement, move toward providing managers with greater discretion, providing more support, etc.) and what has been the impact?
 - How are people counted in the company, by head count or full-time equivalent? Any impact on reduced-load implementation?
 - Are reduced-load policies/practices well integrated with other HR systems (e.g., career development, bonus or other performance-based compensation schemes, performance evaluation methods)? Explain.
7. What are the biggest barriers to employees taking advantage of RLW here?
8. If you could change the policy or practice so that it was used more and helped employees more, what would you do?
9. Do you think there's been a change in the past five years in the climate, or the organizational posture toward professionals working on a reduced-load basis? Why has the change occurred, and what's the evidence?
10. Do you think more professionals are working reduced load than five years ago? What do you see in the future for RLW arrangements in this company? Why?
11. Do you know about other kinds of alternative work arrangements going on at the professional/managerial level in this company—either formal or informal? Describe.