Considerations of top managers regarding organizational work-life support during a time of economic crisis: The Dutch case

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Introduction

Over the last several decades, organizations have introduced organizational work-life support such as flexible working arrangements, part-time work, leave policies and childcare to help employees combine responsibilities at home and at work (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2005; Den Dulk, Peters, Poutsma & Ligthart, 2010; Den Dulk & Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007; Plantenga & Remery, 2005). Organizational work-life support is, explicitly or implicitly, part of the organizational strategy that is decided by top managers (Elbanna, 2006; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Ginsberg, 1988). Nevertheless, relatively few researchers studying organizational work-life support have focused on top managers (Warmerdam et al., 2010). The research focus has mainly been on either Human Resource (HR) managers, who are most knowledgeable regarding formal HR policies (e.g., Den Dulk, 2001; Remery, Schippers & Doorne-Huiskes, 2002; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009), or supervisors, who make the decisions to allow the use of such support (e.g., Casper, Fox, Sitzmann & Landy, 2004; Den Dulk & de Ruijter, 2008; Poelmans & Beham, 2008). Although HR managers and supervisors are central to employees’ access to organizational work-life support, focusing on them provided little insight into the reasons behind the general organizational direction toward
organizational work-life support. Understanding the general direction determined by upper management is important because it establishes the boundaries regarding how HR managers and supervisors should approach organizational work-life support. Additionally, top managers’ attitudes facilitate or limit employees’ access to support (Lee, MacDermid & Buck, 2000). For government policies concerning work-life balance it is important to connect to the approach of organizations, as this is the place where many policies are actually implemented. Hence, it is important to understand the considerations of top managers. Therefore, we seek to explore and understand top managers’ considerations toward organizational work-life support.

Top managers do not act in a vacuum. Previous research has suggested that society, governmental policies, employees and other organizations affect organizational work-life support (e.g., Lewis & Smithson, 2001; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Additionally, previous research has demonstrated that considerable organizational differences exist in the extent of the organizational work-life support provided (e.g., Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2010, 2012; Wood, Menezes & Lasaoa, 2003). As top managers determine the direction of organizational work-life support, their decisions are likely affected by the institutional and organizational surroundings. Therefore, we adopted a contextual approach to understand the attitudes of top managers concerning organizational work-life support. The specific context of this study is the Netherlands, which is especially interesting because it provides a mixture of government and organizational involvement in work-life support. This setting allows a focus on top managers’ considerations around the entire spectrum of organizational work-life support: that which is required by law and that which is an extension of government regulations. Furthermore, the Netherlands is unique in its extensive use of part-time work by employees (e.g., Den Dulk & Spenkelink, 2009; Portegijs &
Keuzenkamp, 2008). In addition, flexible working arrangements such as telecommuting, flexible working hours and flexible desks are gaining in popularity often integrated in the ‘the new way of working’\(^1\), which has rapidly gained popularity in the Netherlands (Oeij et al., 2011). These arrangements are framed by government and organizations as possible ways to reduce costs, increase productivity and, simultaneously, potentially strengthen employees’ work-life balance (Bijl, 2007). Hence, the first question addressed in this study is the following: 1) *What are the considerations of Dutch top managers regarding organizational work-life support, and how can these considerations be understood?*

Organizational work-life support is not static; it changes over time (Kelly, 2003; Lee et al., 2000). Nevertheless, studies of organizational work-life support generally do not take a dynamic approach. Consequently, we know little regarding changes in organizational work-life support or how these changes occur. Nevertheless, understanding changes in considerations of top managers regarding organizational work-life support is important to understand how changes can be achieved or pushed for. As a first step toward filling this knowledge gap, we adopted a dynamic approach. As an observation window, we focus on two points in time: the beginning of 2008 and the second half of 2011. These time periods are interesting because they provide a setting in which an economic crisis hit and was subsequently followed by recessions. At the beginning of 2008, the economic crisis was not really felt yet in the Netherlands, having started slowly. In 2011, the recessions following the economic crisis were still ongoing (Josten, 2011). Hence, the second question is as follows: *Did the*

\(^1\) The ‘new world of work’ (Gates, 2005) is a closely related management concept.
considerations of Dutch top managers regarding organizational work-life support shift between 2008 and 2011, and, if so, how can such a shift be understood?

Theoretical approach

Broadly, three theoretical approaches can be distinguished to understand the provision of organizational work-life support: the managerial interpretation approach, the neo-institutional theory and business case argumentation. Researchers have previously proposed that no single theoretical approach creates the best insight, but that all approaches have some added value (Bardoel, 2003; Lewis, 2003). Therefore, we use an integrated framework as a starting point. The managerial interpretation approach (e.g., Goodstein, 1994; Kossek et al., 1994; Morgan & Milliken, 1992; Oliver, 1991) emphasizes the idea that decision-makers regarding organizational work-life support make decisions with limited knowledge and limited time. Hence, before organizational work-life support is introduced into their organization, top managers must interpret the environment and deem such support relevant to the organization (Milliken et al., 1998). Differences in interpretation account for differences in organizational work-life support.

The managerial interpretation approach emphasizes the perceptions and beliefs of top managers as the basis for organizational work-life support. However, the managerial interpretation approach does not provide a clear understanding of the conditions under which top managers interpret organizational work-life support as being relevant to the organization. A combination of Neo-institutional Theory (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Osterman, 1995) and Business Case Argumentation (e.g., Den Dulk et al., 2010; Dex & Scheibl, 2001; Osterman, 1995) provides insight.
Business case argumentation adds to the integrated theoretical framework the perspective of balancing costs and benefits against one another. There is a business rationale for organizational work-life support when the benefits outweigh the costs. Neo-institutional theory adds that institutional pressures affect costs and benefits. Studies indicate different sources of institutional pressure: (potential) employees, the government and other organizations (e.g., Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). These sources apply pressure to align organizational work-life support with societal norms. For example, societal norms may enhance the ‘sense of entitlement’ of (potential) employees to organizational work-life support (Lewis, 1997; Lewis & Smithson, 2001). Responding to this sense of entitlement may benefit the organization by attracting and retaining a high quality workforce (Barney, 1991; Den Dulk, 2001; Osterman, 1995) or increased commitment and productivity (Haar & Spell, 2004; Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Lambert, 2000; Muse et al., 2008). The government, as another source of pressure, places pressure on organizations by implementing laws. These laws are costly for organizations to ignore. Finally, organizations that provide organizational work-life support force other organizations to do the same; being less supportive than competitors may be costly, causing losing the competition for the best employees. Organizational characteristics are observed to affect the responsiveness of organizations to institutional pressures: organizations in the public sector and larger organizations tend to be more sensitive to institutional pressures (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2010, 2012; Wood, Menezes & Lasaosa, 2003).

Data and method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with top managers of organizations in the Netherlands. The managers held positions in the highest ranks of their organizations,
such as CEOs, CFOs and members of the board of directors. In the beginning of 2008, 24 top managers in the Netherlands were interviewed regarding organizational work-life support (for an extensive description, see Warmerdam et al., 2010). In the second half of 2011, the same managers were approached for a follow-up interview. Not all of these top managers still held identical positions. If there was a new person in the position, we requested an interview with the original manager’s replacement. When analyzing the data, we paid specific attention to whether it made a difference if the interviewee were the same person. We observed that although different top managers’ expressed different considerations, including the replacement did not make a large difference for shifts in or the stability of considerations which occurred both in the interviews with the same top manager and in interviews with replacements.

Our approach resulted in 26 interviews in 13 organizations. Different reasons for declining were given, ranging from lack of time and interest to organizational shut down (2 organizations). Of the resulting 26 interviews with top managers of 13 organizations, 9 interviews were with the same top manager, and 4 interviews were with their replacements. Table 1 gives an overview of the characteristics of the participants. Previous research showed that relevant organizational characteristics for the provision of organizational work-life support are sector and size (e.g., Den Dulk et al, 2010). Table 1 shows that top managers from public and private sectors are represented, as are organizations ranging from small (10-50 employees) to large (over 5000 employees).
Table 1: Characteristics of the participants and their organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Same person in 2008 and 2011?</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Law firm</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 IT company</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>50-99</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Investment company</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Health care</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>&gt; 5000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Law firm</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>50-99</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Consultancy</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>&lt; 50</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Bank</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>&gt; 5000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Research organization</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>100 - 499</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2008: Male; 2011: Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Telecommunication</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>1000 - 1999</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2008: Male; 2011: Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Municipality</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>1000 - 1999</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Ministry office</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>50 - 99</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2008: Male; 2011: Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Production company</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>&lt; 50</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Insurance company</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>1000 - 1999</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2008: Male; 2011: Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main goal of the interviews was to explore the considerations of top managers regarding organizational work-life support. A topic list, including probes, was brought to the semi-structured interview to ensure that all topics were discussed. Topics covered the following areas in both 2008 and 2011: 1) the extent to which changes in the relationship between work and one’s private life in society are relevant to the organization, 2) the views of the top managers regarding several types of governmental and organizational work-life support (e.g., leave policies, flexible working hours, part-time work and telecommuting) 3) the considerations regarding providing/ refraining from organizational work-life support and 4) the conditions under which organizational work-life support is provided. Before the interview began, the managers were assured that everything they said would be anonymous and confidential. The interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.
Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed using Nvivo 9.2. We started with an ‘open coding’ phase to allow topics and considerations to emerge from the data. After the open coding phase, we compared the codes among several researchers to check for inconsistencies and slightly adjusted the coding accordingly. Next, we entered ‘axial coding’, in which we grouped codes and made connections among categories. The resulting categories concerning considerations are as follows: 1) intrinsically important, 2) output based, 3) efficiency, 4) commitment, 5) costs, 6) attracting and retaining good employees, 7) adhering to governmental regulations, 8) being a modern employer, 9) expectations of employees, 10) customer expectations and 11) employee productivity. In addition, several strategies to reduce the negative consequences of organizational work-life support for the organization emerged from the data: 1) block hours, 2) flexibility for flexibility, 3) being reachable and 4) a minimum number of work days. After categorization, we connected considerations to the different types of organizational work-life support and returned to the original data. This process allowed us to answer the first research question.

To answer the second research question, we concentrated on changes in the considerations around organizational work-life support. To systematically investigate changes, we followed two processes. First, we counted how often considerations were mentioned in 2008 and in 2011, using matrix coding query as a tool. We indicated when something was mentioned in one year and not mentioned at all in the other year or when something was mentioned many more times in one year than in the other year. The goal of this process was merely to distinguish changes in the considerations of top managers regarding work-life policies. We revisited the quotes regarding the considerations that
appeared to change between 2008 and 2011 to observe whether there was indeed a change. Second, we created a schedule of the considerations around the different types of organizational work-life support in each organization in 2008 and 2011. We used these schedules to determine whether there were organizational or within-person changes in the considerations around work-life support. Ultimately, we went back to the original data to check whether our results still resembled the interviews.

**Results**

In this section, the results of the analysis of the semi-structured interviews will be discussed. First, we will discuss the considerations of top managers toward organizational work-life support in 2011, making a distinction between considerations of top managers toward non-required organizational work-life support and considerations around required support. We will link these considerations to organizational and institutional contexts. Next, we will discuss shifts in the considerations of top managers between the 2008 interviews and those of 2011.

*Non-required organizational work-life support*

Flexible working hours and telecommuting are forms of work-life support that are not strictly regulated by law in the Netherlands. Twelve of the thirteen top managers participating in this study allowed flexible working hours and telecommuting to some extent in 2011. Top managers also found it important to be flexible in going beyond what is dictated by government regulations. Some top managers indicated that they found it intrinsically important to support employees in difficult times such as when a child was in the hospital. Other managers said that they regarded being supportive of
employees to be intrinsically important in all situations.

Top managers stated that in addition to being supportive of employees, organizational work-life support that extended beyond the requirements of the law should benefit the organization. Top managers indicated several organizational benefits related to flexible working hours and telecommuting. They could, for example, attract, retain and motivate employees by meeting the expectations of employees and by being a modern employer, showing sensitivity to pressure emanating from employees and other organizations. Other reasons to feel positively toward organizational work-life support were perceiving it as more efficient or allowing better customer service. However, for other top managers, efficiency and customer service were reasons to feel negatively toward flexible working hours and telecommuting and hence a reason to limit their use. These top managers perceived organizational work-life support as causing a loss of efficiency and customer service. We will now discuss these considerations in more detail.

Expectations from employees. A central consideration of top managers was the perceived expectations of employees. Top managers indicated that they perceived flexibility as something they had no choice but to provide, especially because younger generations expected flexibility. By being an attractive employer, they believed that they would have a wider choice of potential employees and the possibility to attract, hire and retain talented employees, which was perceived as beneficial for the organization. Furthermore, the top managers perceived flexibility as enabling them to increase employee commitment.
‘If you force yourself out of the market by being inflexible… […] If you want to attract young employees, you will need to meet their expectations. Especially when you want enthusiastic new people who are good, you have no choice.’

Male, research organization, interview from 2011

*Being a modern employer.* Meeting the expectations of employees by providing flexibility is closely linked to the desire to be a modern employer. By following the latest developments in the labor market, top managers tried to be perceived as modern employers. According to them, more flexibility – whether integrated into the new world of work or not – was an undeniable trend.

‘We have a pilot project testing the new world of work. […] Increasingly, the generations after us will want to work in a different way than we are used to. […] This has to do with technological developments, but also employees want to design their lives differently […] Well, you see these developments and at a certain moment you want to put them to the test in your own organization’.

Male, bank, interview from 2011

*Efficiency.* Another central consideration was efficiency. Some top managers perceived the effect of flexibility on efficiency to be negative, whereas others perceived the effect to be positive. All but one organization provided flexibility to employees. A perceived loss of efficiency was the reason why this one organization did not provide flexibility. This perception was related to the nature of the work in this organization. Because it was a production company, employees needed to be present and to work together; therefore, telecommuting was considered to be impossible. Furthermore, being

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2 Quotes are translated from Dutch. Original quotes available on request.
open longer hours as a consequence of flexible working hours was perceived as financially costly.

‘If you switch on the lights and the machinery, people need to work with them because having them switched on costs really a lot of money. […] These types of costs can better be shared among the entire group’.

Male, production company, interview from 2011

Perceived loss of efficiency was only expressed by other top managers in the study regarding telecommuting. Concerns regarding productivity focused on employees’ being less productive at home, the limited means of measuring the productivity of employees working outside the office and a perceived loss in productivity as a consequence of less interaction between colleagues.

‘People tend to underestimate how important meeting your colleagues is to doing your work well. […] People tend to think that they can do their work in isolation, and I disagree. I think isolation comes at the expense of their productivity. […] The work you do here tends to be linked to the work of at least 17 colleagues. […] You can have contact through the Internet, but it is preferable to just walk into the offices of your colleagues’.

Female, municipality, interview from 2011

A final group of top managers considered both flexible working hours and telecommuting to contribute to efficiency, perceiving such flexibility to increase the productivity of employees and allowing a more efficient use of machinery. For example, medical equipment could be used for longer hours, and employees could work during their most productive hours, resulting in a net gain of productivity. Central to
considerations around being supportive of flexibility was an approach based upon performance rather than working hours.

‘Whether you prefer to do that at the office or from home, whether you do it early in the morning or during the night, I don’t care. As long as you meet the goals we agreed upon’.

Female, consultancy company, interview from 2011

Another perceived efficiency gain from flexibility among this final group of top managers was that flexibility allowed the organization to provide less office space. This argument was especially used in combination with the concept of the ‘new world of work’: less office space is required because employees make less use of the office, share office space and work flexible hours, meaning that different employees can use the same desks during different hours. Consistent with public debate in the Netherlands, flexibility in relation to the new way of working was framed by the top managers as a cost-saving option. The new way of working was mentioned only by top managers in large organizations, indicating that large organizations are more sensitive to pressure resulting from society and other organizations.

‘We are convinced that the new world of work leads to a reduction in costs, you need less office space and desks and there are studies showing a productivity gain in employees’.

Male, insurance company, interview from 2011

Customer service Some top managers perceived the effect of flexible working hours and telecommuting on customer service as positive, whereas others perceived it as
negative. Top managers perceiving the effect as positive argued that such flexibility allowed businesses to stay open longer if some employees started early and finished early and if others started late and finished late. This situation was perceived as beneficial to the organization. Top managers who perceived the effect to be negative argued that as a consequence of flexibility, the customary service hours are not necessarily covered and that customers are unable to reach employees when they are needed. Nevertheless, these top managers still provided flexibility to some extent. However, to reduce the perceived negative consequences for the organization, they introduced conditions under which flexibility could be utilized: ‘block hours, ‘reachability’ and ‘flexibility for flexibility’. Block hours are fixed hours of the day that employees need to be present in the workplace. Around these hours, employees can decide for themselves when to work, ensuring that customers can reach employees at least during certain hours. The same assurance was achieved by requiring reachability by phone and e-mail when the employee is not present in the workplace. Also common was the requirement that employees show flexibility toward the employer in return, which indicates that the employees were expected to be present when needed by customers or for meetings.

‘I think flexible working hours are fine, as long as they are really flexible and employees are also here when needed. You know, I really support flexible working hours: flexibility for the employee so he or she can shape things that work for him or her, but also in a way that works for the organization’.

Female, municipality, interview from 2011

Different from other types of organizational work-life support that extends beyond the law, top managers did not consider childcare to be their responsibility (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009). The organization of a childcare system was deemed to be a
government responsibility, and the arrangement of childcare was considered to be the private responsibility of employees.

‘We don’t have any specific policies or provisions [regarding childcare]. We treat this as the responsibility of the employees themselves’.

Male, telecommunication, interview from 2011

Organizational work-life support required by law

Organizational work-life support that is required by law in the Netherlands includes maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave and part-time working hours; these benefits are considered by the top managers as things you ‘just provide’. This consideration is especially true for maternity leave and paternity leave because the interpretation of the law is straightforward: employees are completely absent from work. Top managers also indicated that they perceived required organizational work-life support as being integrated into society and therefore something they took for granted that was common in their own organizations.

‘Part time work is something that is just very normal. […] I believe that on average, men tend to work 90 per cent of full time hours in our organization and women 79 per cent’.

Male, insurance company, interview from 2011

Parental leave and particularly part-time work were regarded as provisions that are always allowed because ‘we obey the law’. However, the law is less specific regarding parental leave and part-time work; consequently, interpretations and approaches differed. One group perceived it as most beneficial to be lenient toward the use of parental leave and the option to work part time. For this first group, the
perception that these policies could attract and retain employees by *having a reputation of being an attractive employer* was most central. A second group of top managers was reluctant toward the use of parental leave and part-time work because they perceived the most benefit if employees used these policies as little as possible. For this second group, the perceived *financial effect* and *reduced service for customers* were central arguments. These top managers established conditions for the use of these policies that centered around minimizing the perceived effect. We will now discuss the perceptions separately.

*A reputation for being an attractive employer.* Some top managers argued that organizational work-life support required by law was most beneficial if treated flexibly, meaning that they supported employees’ requesting parental leave or part-time working hours. They thereby intended to acquire a reputation as an attractive employer. This argument was mainly used by top managers of organizations desiring to attract highly skilled women. The identical argument was used for specific jobs that are highly feminized, for example, a secretary position. Top managers believed that their only option was to be flexible regarding part-time work and parental leave for employees in these jobs or else they would not be able to attract good (female) employees. This approach indicates sensitivity to pressure from employees.

‘We need to make sure that it is easy for women to work here; otherwise, we don’t have employees. In our institute, 70 per cent of the employees are female. […]. We do that by making it easy to work part time as this is how you combine work and family life’.

**Male, research organization, interview from 2011**
Financial effect. The second group of top managers was reluctant toward the use of part-time working hours and parental leave. Their central perception was its being financially costly. They preferred employees to work full time. Nevertheless, these managers would allow part-time working hours and parental leave because they wanted to obey the law. To reduce the financial effect, top managers said they allowed the use of these policies, but preferred employees not to use them too much. They attained this goal by discouraging employees from working fewer hours or by establishing a minimum number of working hours. This minimum varied by position, with generally a higher number of working hours for higher positions.

‘It is relatively expensive to have a case manager for 20 hours. He needs to have a certain level of knowledge, which means that he spends 5 to 6 hours in meetings, training, etc. This means he is only productive for 13 hours. For me, that is not beneficial. I would rather have an investment of 6 hours and productivity for 20 hours, or preferably 30’.

Female, municipality, interview from 2011

Customer service. The perceived negative effect of part-time work and parental leave on customer service was caused by the perception of top managers that customers want service to be readily available, preferably offered by the same employees. Therefore, top managers regarded part-time work and parental leave as customs that should not be too obvious and that should stay hidden from customers. One way to attain this goal was by regulating the days employees took off.

‘People always take Monday or Friday off. However, this is more difficult for customers as they want to be able to contact the employees seven days a week. Taking a day off work in the middle of the week is less obvious to clients’.

Male, law firm, interview from 2011
Another way to reach this goal was by requesting and expecting flexibility from the employee. For example, employees should still be present at meetings with colleagues or clients on the days they are officially not at work.

‘I am fine with people working part time if those people make sure that they are here when needed. Most of the time, this works; we treat it very flexibly’.

**Female, municipality, interview from 2011**

**Shifting considerations**

Shifts in considerations of top managers regarding organizational work-life support were visible when comparing the interviews from 2008 and 2011. In general, organizational work-life support appeared to be more integrated into these organizations in 2011 than in 2008. In addition, society, as perceived by the top managers, appeared to have changed between 2008 and 2011, with top managers’ perceptions and considerations changing accordingly. We will discuss these developments separately.

*More integrated.* Top managers indicated that they themselves increasingly perceived organizational work-life support as something accepted. These two quotes from the same manager show a shift from work-life support that is generally accepted to work-life support being so accepted that it is hardly worth discussing.

**2008:** ‘I think nowadays people are much more aware [of the balance between work and private life]. As an organization, we have always contributed to a healthy combination of work and private life. […] You see some regulations that are just very normal nowadays’.
2011: ‘[Work-life support] is just standard procedure. I think that it is already so 
normal that in three years’ time, nobody will discuss it anymore. […] Then it is just 
part of regular business. I think this topic is passé’.

Male, hospital

Consequences which are often associated with organizational work-life support 
are reduced face-to-face contact and reduced presence at the office. These outcomes 
were decreasingly perceived as negative. In 2008, the loss of face-to-face contact as a 
consequence of telecommuting and flexible working hours was perceived as negative, 
but was perceived as less so in 2011. Furthermore, in 2008, telecommuting was 
regularly mentioned as less productive because employees were not working as 
productively from home as they worked within the office. In 2011, this perception was 
less central.

More cost awareness. Regarding the economic crisis and the recessions, top 
managers appeared to be more aware of costs in 2011 than in 2008. In 2011, top 
managers emphasized that part-time work was perceived as relatively expensive 
because it decreased the productivity of employees and resulted in more overhead costs. 
In 2008, these perceived financial and productivity drawbacks of part-time work were 
not mentioned. More cost awareness did not result in denying part-time working hours 
because part-time work was perceived as a right of employees. However, in 2011, 
considerations aimed at reducing perceived negative consequences appeared to be more 
central.

Customer expectations. A central consideration in both 2008 and 2011 was 
customer expectations. However, the nature of the expectations as perceived by the top 
managers changed. In 2008, some top managers mentioned that customers expected 
them to be available during regular working hours. This perceived expectation caused
the top managers to be more critical of policies that changed the availability of employees during these hours such part-time work, parental leave or flexible working hours.

‘We aim to have people working here for 40 hours. Here, people generally work on a project basis for customers. It is really uncomfortable if a customer calls and you have to tell him, no, Dave works only on Wednesday afternoon, Thursday and Monday afternoon, because the customers himself works 40 hours’.

**Male, IT company, interview from 2008**

In 2011, top managers no longer indicated that customers expected them to be available in the office during regular working hours. Instead, they perceived that customers expected them to be available 24/7. This perceived customer expectation led to considerations regarding the conditions under which organizational work-life support could be used by employees while simultaneously meeting these customer demands, for example, reachability by phone.

*The new way of working.* Another important shift in the interviews from 2008 and 2011 is the prominence of the ‘new way of working’. This concept was not as evident in 2008, but was quite central in 2011. Top managers wished to be a modern and attractive employer and to save money. This consideration coincides with the debate in the Netherlands in which the new world of work is framed as an option to reduce overhead costs and to optimize employee productivity. Some top managers in this study closely followed this debate and expressed the wish to keep up with these developments.

‘You see developments [in the society] that, at a certain moment, you also want to implement in your own organization’.

**Male, bank, interview from 2011**
Conclusion

Focusing on the considerations of Dutch top managers toward organizational work-life support, we first asked what these considerations are and how they can be understood. Second, we focused on how perceptions and considerations changed between 2008 and 2011, a period in which an economic crisis began and was followed by recessions. The findings indicate that top managers believe that organizational work-life support should benefit both the individual and the organization, as top managers will put the interest of the organization first. As a first policy recommendation, we state that promoting organizational work-life support among organizations by the government is most likely to be successful when a situation is created that benefits both employees and the organization or when very strict rules are set. Organizations need to be either seduced or forced to support the work-life balance of employees.

A distinction was made between organizational work-life support required by law and that offered beyond what the law requires. As expected, all top managers adhered to the law. However, the effect of government regulations went one step further: top managers perceived policies determined by law as something ‘normal’. This implicates that determining policies by law helps integrate such policies into organizations, or vice versa, policies that have previously been integrated find their way into law. However, this study also shows that top managers express a tendency to want to stay in control of policies. When the law was less specific, top managers used that freedom to establish conditions for the use of workplace work-life support to limit perceived negative effects of the use of workplace work-life support on the organization. Furthermore, if top managers perceived that the government, not organizations, is the responsible entity to provide a certain type of work-life support,
they will not supplement the government policy, which was the case with childcare. As a second recommendation we state that when the government perceives certain work-life support essential for citizens they should either be very specific in the law or provide the work-life support themselves.

As a theoretical starting point, an integrated framework of the managerial interpretation approach, neo-institutional theory and business case considerations was used. In line with the business case considerations, top managers in this study indeed considered both benefits and costs of organizational work-life support. Consistent with the theoretical framework, these perceived costs and benefits were affected by their perceptions of sources of institutional pressure. Top managers indicated that what made organizational work-life support beneficial was a willingness to meet expectations from employees, adhering to the law (pressure from governments) and a desire to be a modern employer (pressure from other organizations). However, top managers’ perceptions regarding institutional pressures varied and were related to organizational costs and benefits, which emphasizes the importance of the subjective interpretation of top managers in setting the framework for organizational work-life support. As a third policy recommendation we therefore state that top managers should be an important discussion partner for the government as it are, among other things, their perceptions that determine work-life support. When their perceptions can be altered, support to employees may increase.

During the recent economic crisis and the ensuing period of recessions, cost awareness became more central to the considerations of top managers regarding organizational work-life support. Nevertheless, at the time of the interviews, the increased cost awareness did not cause top managers to refrain from providing organizational work-life support. This finding is consistent with other studies of Dutch
organizations during the economic crisis that show that managers did not want to respond too strongly (Josten, 2011). Future research must determine whether this phenomenon remains ongoing after 2011 or whether organizations started cutting organizational work-life support as the recessions continued.

Some limitations must be mentioned. First, as this is a study of 13 organizations, future research must show whether the considerations of top managers and the shifts occurring in these considerations are generalizable. Furthermore, future studies must include more time points to detect whether changes are indeed ongoing processes. Nevertheless, this study is an indication that organizational work-life support is increasingly perceived by upper management as being integrated into both organizations and society. Top managers thus perceive the consequences of such support as less negative, which in turn allows further integration. However, we should keep in mind that upper management places the interest of the organization first, which can be problematic if individual and organizational interests do align. This issue emphasizes the need for government regulations to protect the interests of employees.
References


