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Dutch top managers and work-life arrangements in times of economic crisis

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This paper investigates the considerations of top managers regarding work-life arrangements. A dynamic and contextual approach is taken, using data from 26 semi-structured interviews with top managers from 13 organizations in 2008, before the economic crisis began, and again in 2011, when the ensuing recessions were well under way. Analysis shows that work-life arrangements are increasingly perceived by top managers as integrated into their organizations. However, they indicate that such arrangements should benefit both the employees and the organization. If the consequences of work-life arrangements are perceived by top managers to be negative for their organization, they establish conditions for their use by employees so as to reduce the effect on the organization, rather than refrain from providing the arrangements altogether. During the economic crisis, top managers grew more cost-aware and expressed more concern about negative consequences for their organization. Government regulations are perceived as 'only normal,' but in the end top managers wish to remain in control of arrangements. If the law leaves room for interpretation, the Dutch top managers in this study used this freedom to bend the arrangements to suit their own ideas.

Keywords: work-life arrangements; top managers; qualitative; changes; economic crisis

Este ensayo investiga las reflexiones de los altos directivos sobre los pactos relativos a vida personal y laboral. Se parte de un planteamiento dinámico y de los resultados de veintiséis entrevistas semiestructuradas con los altos directivos de trece organizaciones. Estas entrevistas se hicieron en 2008, antes de que comenzara la crisis económica, y en 2011, cuando la recesión ya estaba muy avanzada. El análisis nos muestra que los altos directivos conciben estos pactos cada vez más como parte integrante de sus organizaciones, aunque señalan que deberían beneficiar tanto a los trabajadores como a la organización. Si los altos directivos consideran que los efectos de estos pactos perjudican a su organización, antes que abstenerse totalmente de aplicarlos, condicionan su uso por los trabajadores para reducir su efecto negativo en la organización. Durante la crisis económica, los altos directivos se han vuelto más conscientes de los costes y están más preocupados por las consecuencias negativas para su organización. La normativa se percibe como "lo normal", pero, al final, los altos directivos desean controlar los pactos. Si la ley deja margen para la interpretación, los altos directivos de los Países Bajos utilizan esta libertad, en este estudio, para acoplar los pactos a sus propias ideas.

Palabras claves: los pactos relativos a vida personal y laboral; los altos directivos; investigación cualitativa; cambios; la crisis económica

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Introduction

Many organizations have introduced work-life arrangements in recent decades to help employees combine responsibilities at home and at work. Examples include flexible work arrangements, part-time work, leave policies, and childcare (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2005; Den Dulk, Peters, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2010; Den Dulk & Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007; Plantenga & Remery, 2005). Explicitly or implicitly, such work-life arrangements are part of the organizational strategy decided by top managers holding positions in the highest ranks of organizations, such as CEOs, CFOs, and members of the board of directors (Elbanna, 2006; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Ginsberg, 1988). Nevertheless, relatively few researchers studying organizations' work-life arrangements have focused on top managers. Instead, their focus has mainly been on either Human Resource (HR) managers, who are most knowledgeable regarding formal HR policies (e.g., Den Dulk, 2001; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Remery, Schippers, & Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2002), or supervisors, who decide whether employees can use such arrangements (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 work-life arrangements, focusing on them has provided little insight into the considerations underpinning an organization's general approach toward such arrangements. Understanding that approach, which is determined by top management, is important because it establishes boundaries for how HR managers and supervisors implement and handle work-life arrangements. Another reason to study top managers is their power to facilitate or limit employees' access to arrangements; after all, they are the ones who determine whether formal policies are there as window dressing or are actually meant to support employee work-life balance (Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2000). Finally, understanding top managers' considerations helps explain why organizations do or do not provide work-life arrangements. Previous research has revealed considerable organizational variation in that respect (e.g., Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Den Dulk, Peters & Poutsma, 2012; Den Dulk et al., 2010; Wood, Menezes, & Lasaosa, 2003). So far, research on top managers and work-life arrangements has focused on attitudes rather than underlying considerations (Warmerdam, Den Dulk, & Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2010). As a result, we know little about why top managers' decide to provide work-life arrangements or not. This study thus adds to the literature by focusing on top managers' underlying considerations concerning work-life arrangements.

Previous studies have observed that organizational work-life arrangements are not static but change over time (Kelly, 2003; Lee et al., 2000). This suggests that top managers' considerations change over time as they make decisions regarding such arrangements. This study therefore examines the top managers' considerations regarding work-life arrangements over time. In addition, we adopt a contextual approach to understand their considerations, as previous research has suggested that society, governmental policies, employees, and other organizations affect work-life arrangements within organizations (e.g., Den Dulk et al., 2010; Lewis & Smithson, 2001; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As top managers ultimately make the decisions about these arrangements, these findings suggest that such decisions are shaped by the institutional and organizational surroundings. Previous research has shown that the macro level is important for work-life arrangements because it determines whether employers can legitimately involve themselves in employee work-life issues, and that the meso level is

important because employers' (i.e. top managers') awareness determines how involved they are in work-life arrangements (Kossek, Dass, & DeMarr, 1994; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009). The specific context of this study is the Netherlands, a country where both government and organizations are involved in work-life arrangements. Government stimulates organizations to provide work-life arrangements beyond government provisions by establishing a legal framework that leaves organizations room for expansion (Remery, Van Doorne-Huiskes, & Schippers, 2003). For example, the Dutch law on work and care states that statutory parental leave is unpaid; organizations may decide to continue some or all of their wages, however.[1] Organizations can therefore be legitimately involved in employee work-life arrangements because government explicitly encourages them to do so. Furthermore, the Netherlands offers a good context for focusing on top managers' considerations concerning the entire spectrum of work-life arrangements, i.e. those required by law and workplace arrangements that go beyond government requirements. In addition, top managers in the Netherlands are likely to understand the need for work-life arrangements within organizations because of the prevalence of part-time work (e.g., Den Dulk & Spenkelink, 2009; Portegijs & Keuzenkamp, 2008) and the growing popularity of flexible work arrangements there (Bijl, 2007). In this sense, the Netherlands exemplifies the conservative model, with relatively limited government regulation and an emphasis on employer involvement (Den Dulk & Spenkelink, 2009). The first question addressed in this study is therefore: *What are the considerations of Dutch top managers regarding organizational work-life arrangements, and how can these considerations be understood?*

To understand changes in the considerations of top managers, we use an observation window with two points in time: early 2008 and the second half of 2011. These time points are interesting because they frame a period in which Europe was hit by an economic crisis and then suffered recessions. The economic crisis had not really affected the Netherlands yet in early 2008; in 2011, the recessions following the economic crisis were still ongoing (Josten, 2011). The second question is thus: *Did the considerations of Dutch top managers regarding organizational work-life arrangements shift between 2008 and 2011, and, if so, how can such a shift be understood?*

We sought to answer the research questions by conducting semi-structured interviews with top managers at 13 different organizations in the Netherlands at two points in time (early 2008 and the second half of 2011), for a total of 26 interviews. Top managers are among society's elite and therefore generally difficult to involve in research (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2002). In this study, we interviewed members of this elite group not once but twice. Unlike other studies, this study does not focus on a particular sector; the participating top managers came from a wide range of sectors, giving us as broad a range of considerations as possible. The organizations were located in different cities in the Netherlands, ranging from small to large (the national capital), which also helped us capture a broad range of considerations.

Summarizing, this study adds to the previous literature in several ways. First, it gains access to a group that is normally hard to reach (top managers). By focusing on top managers, it concentrates on the actors that make the decisions about work-life arrangements within organizations. As top managers are rarely the focus of studies concerning such arrangements, it offers us a more complete picture of how these arrangements are provided. Second, by focusing on the considerations underlying the provision of work-life arrangements and doing so in relation to the context, we gain a

deeper understanding of why organizations do or do not provide work-life arrangements. Third, little is known about how work-life arrangements within organizations are developing over time. Our dynamic study of the considerations of top managers marks the first step toward understanding these trends over time. Fourth, studying these changes during a period of economic crisis allows us to link considerations about organizational work-life arrangements to the context of economic crisis and to study how economic crisis affects such considerations. Fifth, our in-depth exploratory approach provides a more nuanced understanding; it allows us to focus on considerations concerning both statutory arrangements and arrangements that go beyond government requirements. Furthermore, we can focus on considerations regarding both formal and informal work-life arrangements within organizations, often considered important for understanding employee access to them (e.g., Lee et al., 2000; Lewis, 2003).

Theoretical approach

Most studies on work-life arrangements within organizations focus on why organizations differ in providing such arrangements. Although these studies do not focus on decision-making actors within organizations, the theories developed in these studies implicitly assume decision-makers. These theories will also therefore apply in this study.

Initially, research on work-life arrangements offered by organizations was grounded in *institutional theory,* based on the idea that institutional pressures influence organizations to react similarly to the environment and to provide work-life arrangements (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Traditionally, institutional theory treats the organization as a passive actor that responds to institutional pressures in the environment, implying that decision-making actors merely respond to such pressures without having free choice. However, the observation that some organizations did not develop any work-life arrangements while others in the same institutional context did suggested an element of free choice, leading to *neo-institutional theory.* This new approach included the strategic choice perspective in institutional theory (Bardoel, 2003; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Oliver, 1991; Osterman, 1995) and assumed that decision-making actors within organizations are free to choose their response to institutional pressures. As neo-institutional theory did not explain how these choices are made, more recent studies have integrated *business case argumentation* with *neo-institutional theory* (Den Dulk, 2001). *Business case argumentation* (e.g., Den Dulk et al., 2010; Dex & Scheibl, 2001; Osterman, 1995) adds a cost–benefit perspective. There is a business rationale for work-life arrangements within organizations when the benefits outweigh the costs. In an integrated framework of *neo-institutional theory* and *business case argumentation*, institutional pressures affect costs and benefits.

Studies indicate that norms, laws, and social expectations affect cost–benefit considerations because organizations need to keep up with other organizations, meet the demands of (potential) employees, and respond to government regulations (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995). Organizations that provide work-life arrangements force other organizations to do the same; being less supportive than its competitors may cause an organization to lose the battle for the best employees. Furthermore, providing better work-life arrangements than competitors gives an organization a good social reputation which, in turn, might attract good personnel. In the Netherlands, 'the new way of working'[2] – which has rapidly gained popularity and

became central to public debate – has recently given organizations a way of standing out and showing that they are open to new developments (Oeij, De Vroome, Kraan, Van Den Bossche, & Goudswaard, 2011). In this new approach to work, the physical workspace is an open space with shared desks to encourage interaction and creativity. Work has become less time- and space-dependent (Bijl, 2007), allowing more flexibility for employees to shape their own work. The debate concerning 'the new way of working' and its growing popularity may have made top managers more positive about this concept between 2008 and 2011.

When (potential) employees have a 'sense of entitlement' to work-life arrangements, organizations are pressured to align such arrangements with societal norms: if a certain work-life arrangement is seen as normal by society, employees might feel entitled to it (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). This increased commitment and productivity can be explained by reciprocity, meaning that when employees get something (e.g. work-life arrangements) from their employer they are willing to do something back (Lambert, 2000; Osterman, 1995). Organizations may therefore gain from giving employees benefits because employee commitment and work effort increase as a result. Vice versa, not giving employees work-life arrangements to which they feel entitled may harm the organization, as employees might feel demotivated and leave the organization. Employees in the Netherlands are likely to feel entitled to work part time because the country has a long history of part-time work (Portegijs, Cloïn, Keuzenkamp, Merens, & Steenvoorden, 2008). In fact, it has the highest proportion of part-time workers in Europe (Portegijs & Keuzenkamp, 2008), and employees are entitled by law to reduce their work hours.[3] Dutch employees might also feel entitled to flexible work hours and telecommuting because they are common in the Netherlands: a quarter of employees have access to flexible work hours, and approximately one-third of businesses and organizations offer telecommuting (Oeij et al., 2011). Although employees' sense of entitlement may cause top managers to feel pressured to provide part-time or flexible hours options, such pressure might not have increased between 2008 and 2011 and may have even decreased. Given the economic crisis, employees might just be happy to have a job and agitate less for additional benefits.

The government puts pressure on organizations by implementing laws that are costly for organizations to ignore. The government can also help create a normative climate favorable to work-life arrangements within organizations by highlighting the need to support employees' work-life balance. Rejecting this climate might be costly for an organization because it may harm their reputation (Osterman, 1995). Organizations in the public sector and larger organizations tend to be more sensitive to a normative climate because they are more visible (larger organizations) or have to set a good example (government organizations; Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2010, 2012; Wood et al., 2003). Organizations in the Netherlands are required by law to let women go on maternity leave, provide paternity and parental leave, and adjust work hours at an employee's request. Table 1 presents an overview of government regulations at the time of the interviews. As the laws and regulations regarding work-life arrangements have not changed in the Netherlands between 2008 and 2011, government pressure cannot have caused top managers to reconsider the work-life arrangements within their organizations.

Table 1.   Governmental regulations concerning work-life arrangements in the Netherlands.

Policy type	Dutch law
Maternity leave	16 weeks fully paid by the government[a]
Paternity leave	Two days fully paid by the employer[a]
Parental leave	Parental leave for the duration of 26 times the weekly work hours can be used to work part time. Unpaid unless otherwise agreed to in a collective agreement[a]
Part-time work hours	Part-time work and full-time work should be treated equally. People who have been employed by the same employer for at least one year have the right to request reduced or extended work hours. This request can only be refused by the employer if it would severely threaten the work process[b]
Flexible work hours	Not overall defined by law. For the period of one year after parental leave ends, the employee can submit a request to the employer for adjustment of their standard work hours[c]
Telecommuting	Not defined by law
Childcare	Organizations contribute to the childcare system by taxes. The state and individuals also contribute[d]

[a]Wet Arbeid en Zorg [Law Labor and Care] §BWBR0013008 (The Netherlands, 2001).
[b]Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur [Law adjustment of Working Hours] § BWBR0011173 (The Netherlands, 2005).
[c]Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 2012 nummer 152 [Bulletin of Acts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2012 number 152] (The Netherlands, 2012).
[d]Wet Kinderopvang en Kwaliteitseisen Peuterspeelzalen [Law Childcare and Quality Requirements of Playgroups] § 2010BWBR0017017 (The Netherlands, 2010).

What may have changed, however, is the normative pressure created by government's attitude toward such arrangements; government attention was diverted elsewhere during the economic crisis, with its focus shifting to financial issues and cost control. We can therefore argue that the normative pressure on organizations to provide work-life arrangements has eased.

In summary, based on an integrated framework of neo-institutional theory and business case argumentation, we can expect top managerial considerations concerning work-life arrangements to focus on their costs and benefits, which are influenced by (potential) employees, other organizations, government regulations, and norms. This means that our interviews with the top managers looked specifically at why they did or did not provide work-life arrangements. However, we were careful not to refer to costs and benefits but to leave the question open, to avoid pressuring top managers into a cost–benefit frame of mind.

Data and method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with top managers of organizations in the Netherlands. As they held the highest ranking positions in their organizations (e.g. CEO, CFO, and member of the board of directors), this required 'elite interviewing' (Morris, 2009). One difficulty of elite interviewing is gaining access to the interviewee (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2002). To find a way around this problem, top managers were approached through personal networks and the networks of top managers who were already participating (snowball sampling). This made it easier to access top managers and convince them to participate. Maximum variation sampling was attempted by including organizations of varying sizes, sectors, types, and employee characteristics. This resulted

in 24 interviews with top managers from a broad spectrum of organizations conducted in early 2008 (for a detailed description, see Warmerdam et al., 2010).

After the first interview in 2008, it was easier to approach the interviewees for a follow-up interview in 2011. We first sent them a letter explaining the purpose of the follow-up interview and announcing a phone call in which we would invite them to participate. We announced the phone call to give them time to recall the previous interview, but calling rather than asking them to respond themselves increased the response rate. By calling, we could tell them personally why their participation was so important for the study and reduce the risk of their simply forgetting to respond. It was, however, time-consuming to call the top managers and call them back several times. Not all top managers took part in the follow-up study, for reasons ranging from lack of time and interest to organizational shut down (two organizations). We ultimately conducted 13 follow-up interviews in 2011, allowing us to compare 13 interviews from 2008 with 13 interviews from 2011, resulting in a total of 26 interviews that provide the data for our analysis. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the participants, showing that they vary with regard to gender and organizational type, size, and sector. In addition, the organizations were located in different cities in the Netherlands, ranging from small (around 40,000 inhabitants) to large (around 800,000). All organizations were located in the western part of the Netherlands, the main center of industry.

Not all of our interviewees were still in the same job. If the original interviewee had been replaced, we requested an interview with his or her replacement. Of the 13 follow-up interviews in 2011, 9 were with the same person and 4 were with their replacements. When analyzing the data, we looked specifically at whether interviewing the same person made a difference. We found that although different top managers' expressed different

Table 2.   Characteristics of the participants and their organizations.

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

considerations, including a replacement did not affect the *shifts* in or the *stability* of considerations found both in interviews with the same manager and in interviews with replacements.

The main goal of the semi-structured interviews was to explore the considerations of top managers regarding work-life arrangements within their organization. A topic list (including probes) based on the theoretical framework served to ensure that all topics were discussed. Topics covered the following in both 2008 and 2011: (1) the extent to which societal changes in the relationship between work and private life are relevant to the organization, (2) top managers' views regarding several types of governmental and workplace work-life arrangements (e.g., leave policies, flexible work hours, part-time work, and telecommuting), (3) considerations regarding providing/refraining from work-life arrangements (why?), and (4) the conditions under which work-life arrangements are provided. The interviews were at a location chosen by the top managers, which in all cases meant their own offices. Before the interview began, the managers were told how the results would be communicated. They were assured that everything they said would be anonymized and treated confidentially. The interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. After gaining the interviewee's consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

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. Several researchers then compared the codes 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 of considerations were: (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) employee expectations, (10) customer expectations, and (11) employee productivity. In addition, several strategies emerged for reducing the negative consequences of organizational work-life arrangements: (1) block hours, (2) flexibility for flexibility, (3) being reachable, and (4) minimum number of work days. After categorization, we linked considerations to the different types of work-life arrangements 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 managers' considerations concerning work-life arrangements. 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, or when something was mentioned many more times in one year than in the other year. The goal of this process was to distinguish changes in the considerations of top managers. We revisited the quotes regarding considerations that appeared to change between 2008 and 2011 to ascertain whether there was indeed a change. Second, we created a schedule of the considerations concerning the different types of work-life arrangements in each organization in 2008 and 2011. We used these schedules to determine whether there were organizational or within-person changes in these considerations. Finally, we went back to the original data to check whether our results still resembled the interviews.

Results

This section discusses the results of our analysis of the semi-structured interviews. First, we discuss the considerations of top managers in 2011. We link these considerations to organizational and institutional contexts (research question 1). Next, we discuss shifts in the considerations of top managers between the 2008 and 2011 interviews (research question 2).

Considerations of top managers

The top managers in this study provided work-life arrangements because (1) they found it intrinsically important, (2) it was a statutory requirement, or (3) they perceived it as beneficial for the organization from a cost–benefit perspective.

Intrinsically important

Top managers who found it intrinsically important to provide work-life arrangements within their organization felt they had a social duty to support employees, especially in difficult times. It was the moral thing to do. They believed employers had a responsibility to take care of employees, for example by providing organizational work-life arrangements:

> This is just how we do it. Why? We call it the human measure: what you do to treat one another normally. Look, the fact that this is a company doesn't change anything; we feel it's simply normal to try to make the best out of every given situation together. Something good for everyone.[4] (Female, law firm, 2011 interview)

Statutory requirement

Statutory work-life arrangements within organizations in the Netherlands include maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, part-time work hours, and a contribution to childcare costs through taxes (see Table 1). The law is very specific about maternity and paternity leave: employees are entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave and 2 days of paternity leave and employees are completely absent from work during this time. Top managers saw these benefits as something they '*just provide*'. They also perceived all statutory work-life arrangements as part of the social fabric and therefore something they took for granted and had to provide. Top managers did not question the statutory arrangements, but they also did not feel they had to offer more than the law required. This was also true of childcare: they did not see it as their responsibility to furnish childcare, for example by offering on-site crèches. They viewed the organization of a childcare system as a government responsibility and considered childcare arrangements 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, 2011 interview)

Dutch law leaves more room for interpretation regarding parental leave and part-time work: basically, the employer must permit them (unless they conflict with major business interests) but the details, for example which days are involved and how many hours, are left to the employee and employer to decide together. Top managers stated that they do not question the law with regard to these statutory rights and that they 'obey the law'.

Basically, then, they grant employees access to statutory work-life arrangements. However, because the law is less specific about take up and therefore open to interpretation, the analyses show that top managers tend to bend the rules toward their own views, their attitude being that the take up of statutory work-life arrangements should do as little harm and as much good as possible for the organization.

Beneficial for organizations

How top managers perceived the consequences of part-time work and parental leave for their organization differed: some restricted take up by employees in order to minimize what they perceived as a negative impact, while other were lenient because they felt it had a positive outcome for the organization. Top managers expressed the same views concerning nonstatutory flexitime and telecommuting arrangements. They believed that work-life arrangements that went beyond statutory requirements should benefit the organization. The perceived costs and benefits of work-life arrangements were central to their considerations, which we discuss in more detail below.

Considerations concerning benefits of organizational work-life arrangements. Top managers perceived several benefits of work-life arrangements. By offering them, they were able to (1) attract and retain employees, (2) enhance their reputation as a modern employer, (3) reduce costs, and (4) increase efficiency.

Attracting and retaining employees. Top managers felt work-life arrangements benefited their organization because meeting employee expectations, being known as an attractive employer, and showing sensitivity to employee pressure attracted and retained employees. They believed being an attractive employer gave them a larger pool of potential employees and a better chance of attracting, hiring, and retaining talented people, which they perceived as beneficial for the organization. They felt that not giving talented employees the leave or flexibility they wanted caused these employees to resign, with the organization losing the battle for the best employees, which the managers perceived as costly:

> If you force yourself out of the market by being inflexible […] If you want to attract young employees, you need to meet their expectations. Especially when you want enthusiastic new people who are good, you have no choice. (Male, research organization, 2011 interview)

Top managers who wanted to attract young people and female employees specifically showed the most sensitivity to employee needs and wishes concerning flexibility or reduced work hours. They had 'no choice' but to provide such arrangements, especially because younger generations expected flexibility and particularly because female employees expected to be able to work part time. It was therefore top managers at organizations seeking to attract highly skilled women or fill highly feminized jobs (e.g. secretary) who said they needed to allow part-time work to attract and retain employees. Top managers believed that their only option was to be flexible regarding part-time work or they would not be able to attract good (female) employees:

> We need to make sure that it is easy for women to work here; otherwise, we won't have employees. At our institute, 70 percent of the employees are female. […] This indicates that we should make this an attractive place to work, including for people with young children.

[…] We do that by making it easy to work part time as this is how you combine work and family life. (Male, research organization, 2011 interview)

Enhancing the organization's reputation as a modern employer. Top managers mentioned integrating telecommuting, flexitime, and flexible work arrangements into 'the new way of working' because they wanted to follow the latest trends in the labor market. This helped them ensure their organization's reputation as a modern employer that responded sensitively to pressure from public debate and other organizations. Top managers of larger and public sector organizations were particularly keen to follow the latest trends and to have their organizations perceived as modern:

We have a pilot project testing the new world of work. […]. Increasingly, the generations who come after us will want to work in a different way than we are used to. […] A 40- hour work week at the office will become less common. It will also be less common to have your own desk at the office. This is down to technological advances, but employees also want to design their lives differently […]. Well, you see these trends and at a certain point you want to put them to the test in your own organization. (Male, bank, 2011 interview)

Cost reduction. Another consideration of top managers concerning flexibility and the 'new way of working' was that they allowed the organization to reduce the amount of office space because employees made less use of the office, shared office space, and worked flexible hours, meaning that different employees could use the same desk at different times. 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 and hence a benefit for the organization:

We are convinced that the new world of work reduces costs; you need less office space and fewer desks and studies show a productivity gain in employees. (Male, insurance company, 2011 interview)

Greater efficiency. Another argument mentioned by top managers was that time and spatial flexibility contributed to efficiency by increasing employee productivity and allowing a more efficient use of machinery and space. Central to such efficiency-related considerations was an approach based on performance rather than work hours. Employees were seen as responsible for their own work-life balance and their performance at work:

Whether you prefer to do something at the office or from home, early in the morning or at night, I don't care. As long as you meet the targets we agreed on. (Female, consultancy company, 2011 interview)

Top managers also found it beneficial that flexitime allowed businesses to stay open longer. Having some employees start and finish early and others start and finish late made flexitime beneficial for both the organization and the employee. They saw this as more efficient because it extended customer service hours. According to the top managers, this was what customers expected nowadays; they wanted to be served immediately at all times of the day. Hence, organizations had to be sensitive to customers alongside other sources of pressure (employees, other organizations, and the government).

Considerations concerning costs of work-life arrangements

Top managers mentioned that they associated several costs with work-life arrangements, in particular (1) increased expense and (2) reduced efficiency.

Increased expense. Some top managers were unenthusiastic about part-time work and parental leave because they perceived reduced hours as financially costly and preferred employees to work full time. Nevertheless, these managers allowed part-time work and parental leave because they wanted to obey the law; however, they discouraged employees from cutting their hours too much:

> It is relatively expensive to have a case manager work 20 hours. He needs to have a certain level of knowledge, which means spending 5 to 6 hours in meetings, training, etc. So he is only productive for 13 hours. That is not beneficial in my view. I would rather invest 6 hours and get 20 hours of productivity, and preferably 30. (Female, municipality, 2011 interview)

Reduced efficiency. Some top managers felt flexibility had a negative effect on efficiency. According to them, it had negative consequences for the productivity of employees and the organization at large. Top managers who held this view argued that due to flexibility, customary service hours were not necessarily covered and that customers were unable to reach employees when needed. They felt that customers wanted service to be readily available, preferably offered by the same employees, and that this was not possible when employees worked part time, took parental leave, worked flexitime, or telecommuted. They also expressed concerns about employees being less productive at home, the limited means of measuring the productivity of employees working outside the office, and a perceived loss of productivity owing to less interaction between co-workers:

> People tend to underestimate how important meeting your co-workers is to doing your work well. […]. People tend to think that they can do their work in isolation, but I disagree. I think isolation comes at the expense of productivity. […] The work you do here tends to be linked to the work of at least 17 co-workers. […] So you need to be in constant touch with others […]. You can communicate on the Internet, but it's better to just walk over to someone's office. (Female, municipality, 2011 interview)

Reducing negative consequences of work-life arrangements

To reduce perceived negative consequences for their organization, top managers introduced conditions for utilizing organizational work-life arrangements: 'a minimum number of work days,' 'regulating days employees are absent,' 'block hours,' 'reachability,' and 'flexibility for flexibility' were mentioned. To moderate the perceived negative consequences of reduced hours, they set a minimum number of hours or days to ensure employee productivity. This minimum varied by position, with generally a higher number of work hours for higher positions. In addition, they regulated the days employees could take off to soften the perceived impact on customer services and to hide the work time reduction as much as possible from customers:

> People always take Monday or Friday off. However, this is more difficult for clients as they want to be able to contact employees seven days a week. Taking a day off work in the middle of the week is less obvious to clients. (Male, law firm, 2011 interview)

To reduce the negative consequences top managers associated with flexibility, they set block hours, i.e. fixed hours of the day that employees must be present in the workplace. This ensured that customers could reach employees at least during certain hours; outside these hours, employees could decide for themselves when to work. The same assurance was achieved by requiring absent employees to be reachable by phone and email. Another common requirement was for employees to show flexibility toward the employer in return for flexibility, indicating that the employees were expected to be present when customers needed them or for meetings:

> I think flexible work hours are fine, as long as they are really flexible and employees are also here when needed. You know, I really support flexible work hours: flexibility for the employee so he or she can make things work for him or her, but also in a way that works for the organization. (Female, municipality, 2011 interview)

Shifting considerations of top managers 2008–2011

Comparing the 2008 and 2011 interviews revealed shifts in top managers' considerations concerning work-life arrangements. These shifts seem to have kept pace with changes in society at large. Societal changes to which top managers appeared to be sensitive were: (1) the economic crisis and recessions; related to this, (2) societal norms regarding work-life arrangements, and (3) changes in the service economy. We discuss each change separately.

The economic crisis and recessions

An important change in society between 2008 and 2011 was the start of the economic crisis followed by recessions. This change was reflected in the considerations of top managers concerning work-life arrangements. The biggest consequences of the economic crisis and recessions for these considerations appear to have been an increased awareness of costs and an increase in an employer-led focus. We have already shown that one of top managers' main considerations was the increased expense associated with employee use of such arrangements, making them reluctant to provide them. Top managers mentioned the increased expense regularly in 2011, while that was not the case in 2008. In 2011, for example, top managers emphasized perceiving part-time work as relatively expensive because it decreased employee productivity and raised overheads. In 2008, they did not mention financial and productivity drawbacks of part-time work. More cost-awareness did not cause them to deny employees part-time hours because they perceived part-time work as a statutory employee right. In 2011, however, considerations aimed at reducing perceived negative consequences of part-time work hours appeared to be more critical. Overall, the considerations seemed to be more employer-led in 2011. In 2008, top managers framed work-life arrangements more as something they did to support employees, whereas in 2011 they focused more on what it would bring to the organization and how negative consequences for the organization could be reduced. Work-life arrangements were weighed against what it would do for the organization's goals. Hence, during the economic crisis the considerations of top managers around work-life arrangement became increasingly employer-led.

A specific example is 'the new way of working.' Between 2008 and 2011, this concept grew popular as a new way to reduce costs while providing employee work-life arrangements and increasing ones image of a modern employer. 'The new way of

working' was not as evident in the 2008 interviews but by 2011 had become pivotal (three companies were introducing it). The rush to adopt it can be understood both in the light of the economic recession and public debate in the Netherlands. Top managers saw it as a way to save money because shared desks require less office space; it therefore gave them a budget-friendly way to improve both the flexibility and work-life balance of their employees and their organization's financial situation. This coincided with a debate in the Netherlands in which the government framed the new world of work as a way of reducing overheads and optimizing employee productivity. Some top managers, especially in larger organizations and public sector organizations, followed this debate closely and expressed the desire to keep up with these trends, showing themselves sensitive to pressures emanating from public debate. They saw it as a way to show the world that they were modern employers following labor market trends while at the same time reducing costs:

> You see trends [in society] that, at a certain moment, you also want to implement in your own organization. (Male, bank, 2011 interview)

Although costs seemed to be more critical to top managers in 2011 than in 2008, the crisis and recession did not appear to affect the actual work-life arrangements offered to employees: both formal and informal work-life arrangements had not (yet) been reduced. When asked at the end of the 2011 interview whether the economic crisis had affected work-life arrangements in their organization, top managers indicated that this was not the case, because (1) the economic crisis had not affected their company (yet), (2) they did not perceive work-life arrangements as something that involved major costs but mainly as relatively inexpensive changes in their organizational culture, or (3) they did not want to change their approach to work-life arrangements because they saw that as a short-term reaction to circumstances, whereas they believed an organization should be consistent about work-life arrangements as part of its approach to work.

Societal norms regarding work-life arrangements

Top managers themselves perceived a growing acceptance of work-life arrangements within organizations. They linked this to societal developments at large, indicating that society had rising expectations of work-life arrangements and showing their sensitivity to societal pressure. These two quotes from the same manager show a shift from a general acceptance of work-life arrangements to taking work-life arrangements for granted:

> *2008:* I think people nowadays are much more aware [of the work-life balance]. As an organization, we have always contributed to a healthy combination of work and private life. […] You see some regulations are just very normal nowadays.
> *2011*: [Work-life arrangements] are just standard procedure. It's already so normal that in three years' time, nobody will discuss it anymore. […] It will just be part of regular business. I think this issue is passé. (Male, hospital)

The previous section showed that top managers viewed financial expense and reduced efficiency as negative consequences of work-life arrangements. In connection with organizational work-life arrangements being perceived as increasingly normal, top managers were less inclined to see efficiency losses as resulting from work-life arrangements. This is most apparent concerning time and spatial flexibility (flexitime

and telecommuting). For example, in 2008 top managers saw the loss of face-to-face contact owing to telecommuting and flexible work hours as negative and something that should be limited, but that was less so in 2011. Furthermore, in 2008 they regularly mentioned telecommuting as less productive because employees did not work as productively from home as they did at the office. In 2011, this perception was less critical. Findings suggest that as flexibility became more normal, so did the consequences for the organization of work. Top managers increasingly mentioned trusting employees to work as efficiently from elsewhere as they did at the office and to keep track of their own work hours. Nevertheless, they still found face-to-face contact essential for employee productivity. However, instead of perceiving flexibility as generally negative, they set conditions for employee flexibility while simultaneously minimizing its negative consequences for the organization. To avoid negative consequences, they set conditions to ensure team spirit, teamwork and productivity. For example, in exchange for flexibility, they required employees to also be flexible when the organization needed them and obliged them to be present in the workplace at set times (block hours) in order to promote teamwork. This shows that top managers increasingly chose to micro-manage work-life arrangements: whereas at first they simply provided flexibility or did not, they later increasingly set conditions for using flexibility in order to reduce the negative consequences for their organization. This allowed top managers to follow the trend of increasingly flexible work while at the same time controlling how that flexibility was used within their organization; the productivity of the organization remained their number one priority especially during this time of economic crisis and recessions.

Changes in the service economy

One key consideration in both 2008 and 2011 was customer expectations. However, the top managers believed that the nature of those expectations had changed, reflecting changes in the service economy. In 2008, some top managers mentioned that customers expected them to be available during regular work hours. This perceived expectation caused the top managers to be more critical of policies that reduced the availability of employees during these hours, such as part-time work, parental leave, or flexible work hours:

> We aim to have people work 40 hours. Here, people generally work on a project basis for customers. It's 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, 2008 interview)

In 2011, top managers no longer indicated that customers expected them to be available during regular work hours. Instead, they felt that customers expected them to be available 24/7. This perception led to considerations regarding the conditions for employees using work-life arrangements while simultaneously meeting customer demands, for example reachability by phone. In conclusion, we can say that top managers appear to be responsive to societal changes in their considerations concerning work-life arrangements. Their considerations changed in line with changes in the economy, societal norms, and customer and employee expectations.

Conclusion

Top managers are the actors within organizations who make the decisions about implementing work-life arrangements and how they should be handled throughout the organization. This study contributes to the work-life literature by exploring the top managers' considerations concerning the provision of work-life arrangements and by studying how their considerations changed between 2008 and 2011, a period that saw the start of an economic crisis and subsequent recessions. We utilized a theoretical framework common in the work-life literature that combines business case argumentation with institutional pressures (Den Dulk, 2001) and applied this to top managerial considerations concerning work-life arrangements. We deduced from the combined theories that top managers' considerations will center on the costs, benefits, and institutional pressures that make work-life arrangements more beneficial. Recently, scholars have called for studies investigating whether institutional pressures or economic arguments cause employers to provide organizational work-life arrangements (Ollier-Malaterre, McNamara, Matz-Costa, Pitt-Catsouphes & Valcour, 2013). The results of this study suggest that this is not an 'either/or' question but that employers (top managers) provide work-life arrangements based both on economic arguments and in reaction to institutional pressures: institutional pressures give top managers reasons for regarding work-life arrangements as beneficial for their organization. The results of this study suggest that there may even be an additional motivation beyond the economic arguments and institutional pressures: top managers provide work-life arrangements because they believe it to be their social duty (in line with findings among middle managers: Den Dulk & De Ruijter, 2008).

Between 2008 and 2011, when the economic crisis hit followed by a period of recession, top managers became more cost-aware in their considerations concerning work-life arrangements. This awareness seems to have had limited consequences – they did not stop providing work-life arrangements – but they did impose more conditions on employee use of such arrangements in order to reduce perceived costs. Top managers claimed that they did not wish to respond too sharply to the economic crisis because work-life arrangements were part of their organizational strategy. They needed to take the long view of organizational strategy and would therefore not respond to short-term circumstances, which is how they perceived the economic crisis and recessions at the time of their interview. This is consistent with other studies of Dutch organizations during the economic crisis showing that managers did not want to respond too sharply (Josten, 2011). Nevertheless, this study also shows that although the economic crisis and recession had little consequences for the prevalence of work-life arrangements within organizations, the considerations of top managers about these arrangements became more employer-led. Top managers were more considerate about how work-life arrangements would affect their organization and through micro-managing the work-life arrangements available in their organization they tried to avoid negative consequences. This meant that they increasingly set conditions to the use of work-life arrangements by employees to control possible negative outcomes for the organization.

Related to setting conditions to the use of work-life arrangements to control negative organizational consequences, what the results of this study show on a practical level is that top managers put the organization's interests first and have a tendency to want to maintain control of policies. Also when legislation was less specific, top managers used that freedom to set conditions for the use of work-life arrangements so as to limit possible perceived negative consequences for the organization. Top managers still allowed

employees to use work-life arrangements, but set limits on such use. This implies that work-life arrangements find their way into organizations when top managers believe the organization can benefit or when the law is very specific. The results of this study furthermore show that between 2008 and 2011, work-life arrangements became more accepted among top managers, but only very slowly. Hence, when government wants to accelerate work-life arrangements within organizations, it should either show top managers how their organizations can benefit or make it a statutory requirement. However, if government wants to ensure access to a certain kind of work-life arrangement for all employees, the relevant legislation must be very specific, because otherwise top managers will use the existing leeway to bend the rules to suit their views.

Consistent with previous large-scale quantitative studies on the provision of work-place work-life policies, organizational context and sensitivity to institutional pressures appear to be related to differences between top managers' considerations. Top managers from organizations wanting to attract young, talented, or female employees were especially responsive to the expectations of (potential) employees (in line with: Den Dulk, 2001; Osterman, 1995). In addition, top managers in the public sector and larger organizations appeared to be responsive to societal trends. Only top managers of these types of organizations expressed the wish to pioneer new trends such as the new way of working, consistent with the common explanation that those organizations must uphold a public image (e.g., Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2010). However, the results of this study show that the considerations of top managers vary much more than can be explained by the organizational characteristics familiar in the work-life literature, suggesting that future research should consider the decision-makers in addition to the organizational context, as it seems to matter who is leading the organization. The results of this study further reveal an additional source of pressure affecting decision-making about work-life arrangements: customer expectations. Previous large-scale quantitative studies on work-life policies overlooked this source of pressure. As the present research is a small-scale qualitative study, future large-scale studies should reveal whether customer expectations are indeed a source of pressure that explains variations in work-life arrangements.

This study has some limitations. First, as it involves only 13 organizations, future research must show whether the top managers' considerations and the shifts in these considerations can be generalized. Future studies must also include more time points to detect whether any changes are indeed ongoing. Additionally, this study focused on the Netherlands, a country where top managers are likely to be aware of the need for work-life arrangements because flexitime, telecommuting, and part-time work are common, and where organizations can legitimately support employees in their work-life balance because government actively promotes their involvement. Research in other countries or cross-country comparative studies are required to better understand how top managers' considerations vary between national contexts where these contextual circumstances differ. Nevertheless, this study does indicate that work-life arrangements within organizations are increasingly perceived by top managers in the Netherlands as being integrated into both organizations and society. Top managers perceive the consequences of such arrangements as less negative, which in turn allows further integration. However, we should bear in mind that top managers place their organization's interests first, a potentially problematic attitude if individual and organizational interests do not align. This issue thus emphasizes the need for government regulation to protect employee interests.

Notes

1. Wet Arbeid en Zorg [Work and Care Act] §BWBR0013008 (The Netherlands, 2001).
2. The 'new world of work' (Gates, 2005) is a closely related management concept.
3. Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur [Dutch Working Hours (Adjustment) Act] § BWBR0011173 (The Netherlands, 2005).
4. Quotes are translated from Dutch. Original data and quotes available on request.

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