

WORK–FAMILY BALANCE AS A POTENTIAL STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE: A HOTEL GENERAL MANAGER PERSPECTIVE

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This qualitative study is an exploratory attempt to investigate hotel general managers' (GMs) perceived work–family balance/interface issues from a strategic perspective. Based on 49 in-person, in-depth, in-office, interviews with full-service hotel GMs, the authors identify current strategic issue perceptions (SIPs) of hotel GMs and explore potential relationships between these SIPs and work–family issues in the hotel industry. Findings suggest that work–family issues, including workplace flexibility, turnover, knowledge management, and career advancement are influenced by hotel culture and the GM's management style; and when human resources are perceived as a competitive advantage by the hotel GMs, the work–family issues are indeed related to the hotel GM's perceived strategic issues.

KEYWORDS: *perceived strategic issues; hotel culture; work–family balance; human resources management*

Strategic management is critical to an organization's success. In the strategic management process, organizational executives scan their operating environment, surmise strategic issues from their direct observation of their environment, and then formulate and operationalize strategy based on the identified strategic issues (e.g., David, 2001; Hambrick, 2004; Mintzberg, 1990). Strategic issues usually include external opportunities and threats, and when linked with organizational strengths, lead to strategic advantage for the firm. In the literature of strategic management, strategic advantage is commonly referred as the ability of the firm to favorably distinguish itself from its competition (e.g., Christensen & Fahey, 1984). Among organizational resources, human resources and organizational culture are regarded as important sources of sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, the literature suggests that organizational culture and human resources are closely related because organizational culture significantly affects the behavior and actions of a firm's members (Lado & Wilson, 1994).

Because an organization's strategic plan and actions are largely affected by the strategic issues perceived by its top managers, strategic issue perceptions (SIPs), or managerial perceptions of strategic issues that would affect an organization's long-term success, have received considerable attention in the literature.

It is recognized that management jobs in the hotel industry are noted for having characteristics known to be detrimental to family life, such as long and irregular hours, emphasis on face time, frequent relocation, and so on (Harris, O'Neill, Cleveland, & Crouter, 2007). Such detrimental characteristics are regarded as significantly related to some of the most important human resources issues in the industry, such as turnover. Realizing that helping employees to balance their work and family lives can strengthen an organization's human resources quality, several hotel companies have started to implement family-friendly programs and practices such as job sharing. It has been suggested that implementing family-friendly policies and practices into organizational strategic management and changing to a more family-friendly culture could enable hotel organizations to gain competitive advantage through reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover, and superior retention and productivity of employees (Crouter, O'Neill, Almeida, & Cleveland, 2004; Harris et al., 2007). However, because of the lack of rigorous research and a guiding framework, the effectiveness of hotel companies' work-family practices, and relationships between their work-family practices, organizational culture, and strategic management processes are not well-understood. How such work-family practices may affect hotel organizational context, be a component of hotels' strategic management processes, and whether leaders of hotel companies factor work-family issues into their SIPs/consider them as sources of competitive advantage are among the important but unanswered questions.

Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to identify the current SIPs of hotel general managers (GMs) and to explore the potential relationship between work-family issues and the SIPs of hotel GMs. The fundamental question the authors set out to answer is, how do hotel GMs identify work-family issues as they relate to strategic issues? Moreover, this study investigates whether hotel culture plays a role in the relationship between work-family issues and SIPs. Based on the data collected from in-person interviews regarding these topics with 49 full-size hotels' GMs across the United States, this qualitative study proposes a conceptual framework that outlines the relationships between SIPs, represented as competitive advantages, and several work-family issues, including workplace flexibility, turnover, and career advancement. In the following sections, a literature review is presented to introduce the key constructs of the study, specifically strategy, SIPs, organizational culture, and work-family issues. These key constructs are then further discussed in the setting of the hotel industry and the research questions are provided. Following the theoretical background and research questions, the research method and information regarding data collection and data analysis are presented. Then the results of the study, both first- and second-order analyses, are offered, and several key findings are discussed. Finally, conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for future research are presented.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Strategy, Competitive Advantage, and SIPs

Since Chandler's (1962) cornerstone work regarding the importance of strategy, the topic of strategy has been widely recognized as fundamental to an organization's success, and numerous strategy researchers have indicated that strategic analysis, more generally referred to as "SWOT" analysis, which systematically investigates an organization and its environment, is essential for an organization to develop and execute sound strategies. That is, the organization must develop the strategies through a process of executive management matching an organization's internal strengths and weakness with external, or environmental, opportunities and threats facing the organization, in an effort to achieve long-term organizational coping and survival (e.g., David, 2001; Harrison, 2003; Mintzberg, 1990). It is generally accepted that internal strengths and weakness can be examined through internal resources, including financial, human, physical, knowledge, and general organizational ones, whereas external opportunities and threats can be categorized broadly as economic, social and cultural, political and governmental, technological, and competition- and customer-related forces (e.g., David, 2001; Enz & Harrison, 2005).

In the strategic management literature, competitive advantage normally refers to the ability of a firm to favorably distinguish itself from competition (e.g., Christensen & Fahey, 1984). Rooted in the resource-based view of strategy, previous research revealed that analysis of internal resources can enable managers to determine an organization's potential or realized sources of competitive advantage (Harrison, 2003; King, Fowler, & Zeithaml, 2001). The original resource-based view of strategy suggests that organizational resources that are rare, valuable, nonsubstitutable, and imperfectly imitable form the basis of an organization's sustained competitive advantage (e.g., Barney, 1991). In addition, King et al. (2001) propose that four characteristics are essential to determine whether a resource is a sustainable competitive advantage: Tacitness reflects the extent to which the resource resists imitation; robustness characterizes the resource's insensitivity to environmental change; embeddedness of the resource affects its transferability to the competitors; and consensus reflects shared understanding or common perceptions within a group. Among all organizational resources, human resources are regarded as an important source of sustainable competitive advantage because successful human resource management can facilitate the development of competencies that are firm specific, produce complex social relationships, are embedded in a firm's history and culture, and generate tacit organizational knowledge (Lado & Wilson, 1994).

Strategic management researchers and practitioners have generally agreed that the strategy development process includes managers scanning their operating environment, surmising strategic issues from their direct observation of their operating environment, and then operationalizing a strategy based on the identified strategic issues (e.g., Hambrick, 2004; Mintzberg, 1990; O'Neill, Beauvais, & Scholl, 2004). It is therefore clear that managers, as a result of their environmental

scanning, form their perceptions of strategic issues (SIPs) before developing the strategies. An important assumption of this conceptualization of strategy formulation is that organization management can and does accurately assess its external environment. However, evidence suggests that management does not consistently do so (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994). It has been revealed that the managers' environment scanning, issue identification, and interpretation process are of critical importance because the managements' SIPs significantly influence the development of an organization's long-term organizational strategies for growth and survival (e.g., Hambrick, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2004). As a focal interest of our research, a SIP has been defined by Dutton, Fahey, and Narayanan (1983) as "an emerging development which in the judgment of some strategic decision makers is likely to have a significant impact on the organization's present or future strategies" (p. 308). It is suggested that SIPs relate particularly to opportunities, threats, strengths, weaknesses, and competitive advantages (Mintzberg, 1990; O'Neill et al., 2004). It is suggested that SIPs may be developed either directly from one's experiences, or indirectly by being passed along by members of a reference group or culture (O'Neill et al., 2004). Previous research indicates that the external environment, composed of factors located outside of the organization, affects managers' SIPs regarding what is important in relation to such factors as economic, social, technological, political, and competitive trends (O'Neill et al., 2004).

As in other industries, SIPs play a critical role in the development of strategies for hotel companies (O'Neill et al., 2004; Simons & Namasivayam, 1999). O'Neill et al. (2004) suggest that hotel managers tend to choose to selectively ignore certain issues while focusing their attention on other issues. The primary reason for this selectivity is that managers are confronted with substantial amounts of information regarding the environment, and much of this information is ambiguous. Therefore, the formulation of certain SIPs can be affected by a number of factors, such as the hotel managers' perceptions regarding which type of hotels they are in, which competitive set their hotels belong to, and their previous employment background (O'Neill et al., 2004). Some empirical research in the hotel industry has explored the SIPs of hotel executives with a general interest in the application of the environmental scanning process in the hospitality industry (Costa, 1995; Costa & Teare, 1994). More specifically, Olsen, Murthy, and Teare (1994) and Simons and Namasivayam (1999) have explored the threat and opportunity perceptions of hospitality executives. O'Neill et al.'s (2004) research, although focusing on the effect of macroculture on hotel executives' SIPs, incorporates a study in which hotel managers provided information regarding their opinions of the most important strategic issues facing the lodging industry. One of the most striking results of this research is the dominance of employee-oriented issues: three out of the top five more important strategic issues are "hiring qualified people," "training employees," and "motivating employees." However, no empirical research in the hotel industry has examined SIPs from the perspectives of competitive advantage and human resources management, or specifically work-family issues.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has been used as a holistic construct describing the complex set of knowledge structures that organization members use to perform tasks and general social behavior (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990). According to Schein's (1985) widely cited definition, organizational culture is,

A pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems. (p. 17)

Organizational culture is affected by and affects many aspects of the organization, including structure, role expectations and job descriptions, how to act on the job, how to solve problems, who makes decisions in various situations, how to think about and behave toward coworkers and supervisors, and industry norms and practices (e.g., Hofstede et al., 1990). Researchers have also suggested relatively clear and direct relationships between business strategy and organizational culture. For instance, Saffold (1988) views strategy formulation as an outcome of organizational culture, whereas Weick (1985) suggests that business strategy and organizational culture are essentially synonymous, because they are both "deeply ingrained patterns of management behavior," and they both emerge "out of the cumulative effect of many informed actions and decisions taken daily and over years by many employees" (p. 381).

Organizational culture has also long been revealed as directly linking to competitive advantages and SIPs (Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Snell, 1992). According to Jones (1983), organizational culture may contribute to firm's competitive advantage by reducing the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in strategic decisions and actions. In addition, it is suggested that organizational culture may reduce the transaction costs entailed in human resources management by articulating a set of broad, tacit rules and values that serve to unify and regulate the behavior and actions of organizational members (Lado & Wilson, 1994; Williamson, 1981). Barney (1986) argued that an organizational culture can be the source of competitive advantage because it is valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and nonsubstitutable. King et al. (2001) specifically proposed that resources that are located in employees or physical systems are inherently easier to imitate than resources residing in managerial systems or organizational culture. The relationship between organizational culture and work-family issues is presented in the following section.

Work-Family Issues

Issues of work and family have been extensively studied by scholars in sociology, psychology, and organizational behavior. Work-family issues are generally categorized into two ways: Work-family conflict and work-family facilitation (e.g., Frone, 2002; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Literature on organizational

behavior has shown that the reason for organizations to be interested in work and family issues is due to the important outcomes of such issues at organizational, individual, and family levels, and ultimately, all levels have the potential to influence one another. The most widely studied organizational-level outcomes of work and family issues include absenteeism (e.g., Kossek & Ozeki 1999), turnover (e.g., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins 2001), organizational commitment (e.g., Kossek & Ozeki 1999), and performance (Netemeyer, Maxham, & Pullig, 2005). It has been suggested that work–family conflict is positively associated with absenteeism and turnover, whereas negatively related to organizational commitment and performance (Harris et al., 2007). At the individual level, work–family conflict is suggested to be negatively related to job satisfaction and mental and physical health, and positively related to substance abuse (Harris et al., 2007). Finally, there is substantial evidence across industries that stress and conflict originating from the workplace may affect the family. Literature suggests that work–family conflict is negatively related to marital quality and relationships with children (Harris et al., 2007).

Previous research reveals clear connections between work–family issues and organizational culture (e.g., Hammonds, Furchgott, Hamm, & Judge, 1997; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). It is suggested that organizations have a unique cultural lens through which they view an employee's family life. Consequently, organizations differ significantly on the family-friendliness of the culture, or the work–family culture. Warren and Johnson (1995) defined a company with a family-friendly culture as one where “the overarching philosophy or belief structure is sensitive to the family needs of its employees and is supportive of employees who are combining paid work and family roles,” (p. 163) while Allen (2001) described “family supportive organization perceptions” as the “global perceptions that employees form regarding the extent to which the organization is family supportive.” Building on the concept of organizational culture, Thompson et al. (1999) developed the most widely cited definition of work–family culture: the “shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives” (p. 394). According to Thompson et al. (1999), work–family culture consists of three dimensions: managerial support for work–family balance, career consequences associated with using work–family benefits, and organizational time expectations that may interfere with family and other nonwork responsibilities. Using survey data from managers and professionals in a variety of industries, they found that perceptions of a supportive work–family culture were related to greater use of work–family benefits, lower work–family conflict, and higher commitment to the organization.

Literature on work–family issues has revealed that industry context plays a critical role in shaping the relationships between employees, their jobs, and their families (Harris et al., 2007). Aside from the work-related strains and conflicts that tend to occur across industries, there are a number of specific characteristics, cultural norms, or expectations in the hotel industry regarding behavior or attitude that are particularly relevant to employees' work–family interface. For instance,

many positions in hotels require long and irregular hours because of the 24/7 nature of the hotel business. To balance the needs from guests, employees, and owners, labor scheduling can be particularly challenging for managers (Thompson, 1998). Hotels companies often have norms that encourage employees to work as many hours as possible, including weekends and holidays. However, using a national sample of married couples working in a variety of industries, Presser (2000) found that working evening or night shifts, or working rotating schedules and weekends, significantly increased the likelihood of marriages ending in separation or divorce within 5 years. In addition, it has been reported that hotels have a "culture of face time," which refers to an expectation that employees, especially managers, must be physically present at virtually all times, regardless of the actual necessity of them being there (Munck, 2001). Closely related to this norm is a widespread belief in the hotel industry that employees must "pay their dues" to get ahead (e.g., Eder & Lundberg, 1990). If career dedication and employee value are measured by hours present at work, employees will be reluctant to leave early or take time off for family reasons (e.g., Thompson et al., 1999). Moreover, the hotel industry is also well-known for the frequent relocation of managers. As a major part of career advancement in the hotel industry, relocation has been reported as a major contributor to work-family conflict because it is disruptive and stressful to family (Lu & Cooper, 1990; Martin, 1999).

Previous research recognized that management jobs in the hotel industry are noted for having characteristics known to be detrimental to family life, for example, long and irregular hours, emphasis on face time, frequent relocation, and so on (Harris et al., 2007). In fact, Presser (2004) found that lodging management is one of the United States's top 10 occupations with nonstandard work schedules, as well as having the highest percentage of working varying shifts and weekends. Such characteristics are regarded as related to some of the most acute human resource issues in the industry, including turnover. According to a study conducted by Smith Travel Research (2003), turnover rates average 50% for hotel hourly employees and 21% for hotel managers. Moreover, it has been shown that the problem for the hotel industry is employees leaving the industry altogether, more so than employees leaving one hotel company for another. Participants in Stalcup and Pearson's (2001) study mentioned long hours as a major reason for quitting the industry. The hotel industry, indeed, has been said to have a "turn-over culture" (Deery & Shaw 1997, p. 377).

It is reported that several hotel companies have implemented policies and programs to address work and family issues. For instance, to emphasize the importance of a balanced life, the Day Hospitality Group adopted a program that required a 90-day sabbatical leave for GMs with 5 years at the company (Enz & Siguaw, 2000). The management of one Ritz-Carlton hotel decided to allow the front office employees to set their own work schedules as part of an effort to increase employee empowerment (Enz & Siguaw, 2000). Another example is the MGM Grand and Stations Casinos, which offered its employees 24-hour, 7-day-a-week, on-site child-care centers (DeLoretta, 1999). Some hotel companies are also experimenting with job-sharing. It has been reported that Sheraton's

job-sharing practices among sales managers has created flexibility allowing managers to handle changing work and family needs and has had positive outcomes for guests (Dittman, 1999; Enz & Siguaw 2000).

Enz and Siguaw (2000) suggested that family-friendly practices may be beneficial to the hotel industry because among companies using human resources best practices, which included a number of family-friendly practices, employee satisfaction increased, productivity increased, and turnover decreased. Recent research suggests that, from a strategic human resources perspective, hotel organizations should recognize that family-friendly practices have potential strategic value and are not a liability (Harris et al., 2007). However, there is evidence showing that work-family programs and policies designed to mitigate the difficulties of employees may have a greater impact on the organizational image and reputation than on the employees' well-being (Blum, Fields, & Goodman, 1994). Recent studies have strongly argued that the enactment of family-friendly policies and their translation into day-to-day operations require a positive work-family culture (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Swanberg, 2004). Particularly, in the hotel industry, because only a few hotel companies appear to have embraced family-friendly approaches to organizing work, implementing family-friendly policies and practices into organizational strategic management and changing to a family-friendly culture has the potential of enabling hotel organizations to gain competitive advantage through reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover, and better retention and productivity of employees (Crouter et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2007). Unfortunately, because of the lack of rigorous research and a guiding framework, how hospitality companies incorporate work-family issues into their strategic planning processes and their organizational culture has not been revealed, and little evidence of the effectiveness of hotel companies' work-family practices is known. How such work-family practices may affect the organizational context and may contribute to hotel companies' strategic management and organizational culture, and whether the leaders of hotels factor work-family issues into their SIPs and relate them to maximize their hotels' competitive advantages remain unexplored. Previous research has advocated that rigorous and systematic research should be carried out in this regard (Crouter et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2007).

Summary and Research Questions

To summarize, previous research indicates that SIPs are critical to organizations' success because SIPs affect the formulation of business strategies. In the hotel industry, human resources-related factors, including work-family factors, are widely regarded as important concerns and sources of competitive advantage for industry leaders. Work-family issues are also associated with organizational culture, and functional work-family practices are proposed to be sources of competitive advantage for organizations. However, in the hotel industry, it remains unknown whether or the extent to which GMs factor work-family issues into their SIP thinking. Furthermore, there is no established theoretical framework

that outlines the relationship(s) between work-family issues and hotel executives' SIPs. In addition, the hotel industry has been shown to have a culture supporting long and irregular hours, emphasis on face time, and frequent relocation. Therefore, this study, seeks to propose a framework that could address the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do hotel GMs identify work-family issues as components of their strategic issue perceptions, or SIPs (specifically, strategic opportunities, threats, and competitive advantages)?

Research Question 2: How does hotel organizational culture, as perceived by hotel GMs, relate to the work-life issues perceived by them?

METHOD

Data Collection

Realizing the infancy of theory linking work-family and strategic issues in the hospitality industry, this study applies a qualitative research method in an attempt to build theory. Specifically, this study collected data through audiotaped, in-depth interviews with hotel GMs and then proposed a framework to outline the merging of concepts generated from the interviews. It is believed that a qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study, in that it can help to develop a better understanding of a relatively new subject and to "provide greater insight into reasons underlying various behaviors, practices, attitudes and decision-making processes, and provide greater depth of knowledge on a given subject" (Hampton, 1999, p. 287).

This study is part of a larger-scale research project funded by a research grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The overall project aims to explore work-family issues at all levels in the hotel industry, including the corporate executives, hotel GMs, hotel departmental managers and hourly employees. In this study, hotel GMs were identified via referrals from an Advisory Council of hotel industry executives, the President of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, and the alumni network of a large, east coast university. Interviews with hotel GMs involved visiting hotels across the country and conducting approximate 1-hour, on-site, in-person interviews with each GM.

A total of 49 GMs were interviewed by at least two researchers, which consisted of both the authors and trained PhD students. The interviews were semi-structured with a number of specific questions, as shown in Table 1, having been prepared in advance. These questions were developed based on several fundamental concepts that this research aims to investigate, while in the meantime to minimize the possibility of misleading or "suggesting" any directions to the interviewees. The concepts explicitly addressed in the interview questions include SIPs (opportunities, threats, and competitive advantages), hotel culture, career advancement, turnover, and family life. Moreover, as revealed in the literature, workplace flexibility plays a critical role in work-family issues and human resources. Therefore, two specific questions were developed to address this topic, and all interviewers were trained to ensure these two questions would be asked if they

Table 1
General Manager (GM) Interview Questions

How would you describe the culture you have tried to create in your hotel?

How have you evolved your management style since you became GM?

In terms of your hotel's long-term growth and success, can you describe two or three strategic opportunities in which you believe your hotel is most interested?

Could you also please describe two or three strategic threats about which you are most concerned as it pertains to you hotel? How have your opportunities and threats changed over the past few years?

Regarding your hotel's competitive advantages, what does your hotel do better than its competitors?

What do you perceive as the primary reasons for managers leaving the hotel industry? And, what are the turnover issues at this hotel?

Please tell us the degree of flexibility you have as a GM in planning your own work. How do you feel such a degree of flexibility affects your family life?

How much flexibility do you think the department managers have in scheduling their work? How do you perceive such a degree of flexibility to affect their family life?

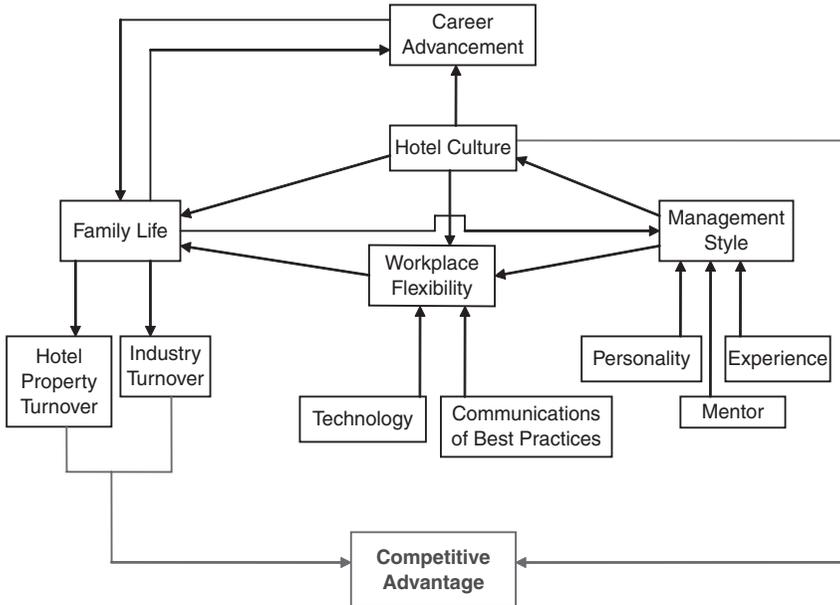
Would turning down a promotion or transfer for family-related reasons affect one's career progress in your company?

What do your company and your hotel do to help managers in the relocation processes?

were not mentioned earlier in the interviews. Therefore, the GMs were given freedom to express their own thoughts and concerns first, and when they did mention human resources or work–family related issues, the interviewers then followed up with more specific questions to further explore those issues. For example, a number of GMs first provided “people” or human resources as their hotels’ competitive advantage, and, when answering the workplace flexibility related question, explained various work–family policies and practices to justify their perceived high level of workplace flexibility. In this case, the interviewers followed up with questions such as: “do you think these work–family policies and programs contribute to your hotel’s competitive advantage? Why?” Also, when a hotel GM mentioned family issues as a reason of turnover, the interviewer would ask question of whether anything had been done in this particular GM’s hotel to minimize the turnover caused by family reasons.

Among the 49 GMs, 45 were male and 4 were female; they were aged between 37 and 62 years, with 13 to 45 years overall employment experience in the hotel industry, including 1 to 25 years as GM. All GMs supervised large and full-service hotels, ranged between 218 and 2,000 guest rooms and had 105 to 1,200 employees. Large, full-service hotels were the subject of our study to focus on GMs who both have some strategic responsibilities and who have multiple managers reporting to them. Among all GMs, 46 were employed by one of the major international hotel companies, including Accor, Marriott, Starwood, Hilton, InterContinental, Fairmont, Hyatt, Kimpton, and Wyndham, while three other GMs were with independent properties. Hotels were located in a number of major U.S. metropolitan areas, including New York, Washington, DC, Kansas City, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Orlando.

Figure 1
A Framework: Work-Family Issues and Human Resources as a Competitive Advantage



Data Analysis

The 49 interviews were transcribed from tape recordings, and each interview produced 7n to 13 single-spaced pages of text. The analysis then proceeded in two major steps with NVivo7 software. First, the authors coded the data with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open-coding technique, in which the themes and subthemes were identified from the raw data and efforts were made to discover their properties and dimensions. Then, with the axial-coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), previously identified themes and subthemes were analyzed. Spradley's (1979) definitions of semantic relationships were applied to facilitate this coding process. As shown in the First-Order Analysis section, the themes summarized from the raw data were highlighted with a number of quotations. Second, following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) selective coding methodology, the links between emerged themes were further examined with a view to create a conceptual framework that would, at minimum, develop focuses for future research regarding this topic. Relationships were uncovered between a total of 13 themes that emerged from the data, and a conceptual framework outlining such relationships is presented in Figure 1.

It should be noted that because of time, financial, and other resource constraints, many techniques commonly used to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985) were not applicable or feasible in this research. However, whenever possible, efforts were made to minimize the potential threats to trustworthiness in the study. For instance, because a large, experienced research team (with 6 faculty members and more than 10 PhD students) was specifically formed to conduct the larger-scale grant research regarding work–family issues in the hotel industry, this study took advantage of this team and effectively conducted the “peer debriefing” technique recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): The authors presented the raw transcripts and the results of their interpretations, coding, and analyses to this group of researchers in their weekly meetings and obtained their input and comments. Based on their feedback, the authors revised the interpretation and analyses. Such peer debriefing was continued weekly for more than a month to ensure the group’s agreement regarding the interpretation and analyses of the interview data. Moreover, an internationally recognized work–family researcher was invited to audit and review the design, the data, and the process of interpreting results generated from this research, and his recommendations formed many of the bases of the present research.

In addition, although member check was not appropriate in this study because it was not feasible to request the GMs to review the transcribed texts for accuracy, all four interviewers frequently followed up with the interviewees to clarify their meaning and intent during the interviews, and the transcribed texts of all interviews were proofread for accuracy by the other interviewer who also attended the interview. Finally, the authors reread the interview data, recoded the themes, and redeveloped the links between the themes at two different times for the purpose of trying to code and to interpret the data with “fresh eyes.”

RESULTS

First-Order Analysis

In the first-order analysis, the raw interview data were examined and categorized, and certain themes were drawn from the data. This section provides a summary of such themes as well as representative quotes. As reflected in the research questions, three key concepts are among the focuses of this study: strategic issues, work–family issues, and organizational culture. In addition to the themes related to these concepts, other themes that emerged from the data are presented in this section, as well. Please see Table 2 for a summary of major themes reported in this research.

Perceived strategic issues. The GMs’ *perceived strategic opportunities* were largely market oriented, including competition, general economic growth/decline, and market demands. For example, one GM indicated that a weak competitor creates an opportunity for his hotel:

It has a dead brand in (a hotel’s name), which is clueless as to what it wants to be . . . It has no stick, so you can get a very good (hotel brand name) and you can get a very bad (hotel brand name). (GM-3)

Table 2
Major Themes and the Number of Times They Appeared in the Interviews

Themes	Number of Times Appeared in the Interviews
Strategic issues	
Strategic opportunities	49
Weak competition	6
Growing market demand	29
General economic growth	17
Strategic threats	49
Increasing competition	17
Changing market demand	32
General economic environment	8
Competitive advantages	49
Location	11
Facilities	15
Brand/parent company	12
People	21
Management style	49
Personality	11
Mentor	12
Experience	41
Organizational culture	49
Pay your dues	11
Face time	9
Family friendly	19
Caring, fun, warm, and others	15
Workplace flexibility	49
Communications of best practice	26
Technology	31
Career advancement	49
Family life	49
Turnover	49
Hotel turnover	49
Industry turnover	49

Similarly, the GMs *perceived strategic threats* were closely related to the market, as well. Competition and changing market demand were of greatest concern. For example,

Economy is the biggest issue. Other industry partners, airline industry, you know, XXX Airlines (airline name), if they go under, you would be in trouble because they serve this market and the number one advantage to YYY (city name) is XXX (airline name). (GM-29)

In terms of *competitive advantages*, location, facilities, and brand were frequently mentioned by the GMs. For instance:

[This hotel] is changing from a non-branded property to a XXX (brand name). (GM-44)

We have an iconic exterior, so it has the ability to draw people used by the way it looks, so it has that over our competition. We have a wonderful meeting space layout . . . and that's a real plus. (GM-1)

A total of 21 GMs discussed human resources as a source of competitive advantage. Particularly, most of them were being proud of having good managers and/or low turnover:

You know, to me, the biggest thing that has allowed us to be successful is that we have great people. (GM-1)

Our people are better than when you go across the street or when you drive up the road. (GM-42)

Hotel culture. GMs provided different descriptions to their hotels' *culture*. "Pay your dues" and "face time" were among them:

Absolutely, it's a pay your dues type of attitude . . . Even though we would like to get to (a) family-friendly (culture), I think it is in most of hotels, which have all been large full-services, the department heads all want to be general managers, so everybody is hugely focused on their discipline and their operation. . . so I think it is a professional team, but not a family culture. (GM-3)

In terms of work, the people feel they need to be here, we still have face time . . . This is the problem with the 24/7 operation. (GM-32)

I think you need to be out and be seen . . . I think it's important to let people know that you're there and I think they take a cue from the leadership. (GM-9)

However, many other GMs believed their hotel cultures to be more family friendly:

Family friendly is one of my biggest philosophies. Family comes first, their jobs are always there, and the family is really the most important thing that you do. That being said, I always tell my managers that I hire professionals but I don't hire people looking for face time. I don't hire people who hang around 10 o'clock and send me an email just so I know they are there 10 o'clock. (GM-44)

I think it's a family-friendly culture in terms of how we interact and in terms of the different things we do throughout the year, whether it be the associate picnics or blood drives or Christmas parties or different things that we may give our associates during our different functions so they can spend more time with their families. (GM-19)

Our company logo, although evolved, has always been a symbol of work-life balance . . . such as my son's basketball game is very important to them as it is to me, because they realize that if I am happy personally and I got to meet my personal needs, then I will be a better performer coming in on Monday morning. (GM-22)

Moreover, "caring" and "fun place to work" were also used to describe the hotel culture:

For our associates, (we created) an environment that is welcoming, inviting, as well as one that they enjoy coming to every day. (GM-11)

I would describe it as a participative environment and one that is a caring environment, one that is—we emphasize whenever we possibly can, that we are taking care of guests, but we are also taking care of one another. (GM-1)

Work-family issues. GMs suggested there is increased *flexibility* in today's workplace compared to a few years ago, but that such flexibility varies by department:

When I worked my way up to GM, there was very little flexibility. In my old days, it was like, "here I need you; you do it or I will find someone else to do it." (GM-3)

I believe the sales group and the F&B (food and beverage) group enjoy the most flexibility. I believe the rooms group enjoys the least (flexibility). (GM-11)

Some GMs also believed that managers need to learn how to manage their flexibility and work-life balance. For instance:

The industry, since it's open 24-7, there is an opportunity to work yourself as hard as you want. Most managers, including myself, will stand aside and smile and let you work yourself as hard as you want because it gets things done. At some point, the individual and/or good manager will realize that there are some balance issues and you need to... you can only work so many 14-hour days in a row . . . So you learn to balance things better. (GM-9)

It was also revealed that having a spouse working in the hotel industry helps the managers balance their work and family:

Hoteliers always hang out together, you know, you work all night and then you go out drinking . . . That's why there are so many marriages in hotels. (GM-5)

I have the benefit that my husband not only works in the industry but that he's extremely mindful that we both have to contribute 50 percent or 100 percent in, but collectively we balance very well and we talk about this openly. (GM-7)

Internal communications of best practices and *technology* were frequently cited as beneficial to workplace flexibility:

I think it (internal communications) creates a lot of efficiency . . . absolutely, the departments that use the (communication) tools more effectively are the departments that have more flexibility and create more balance in the workplace, and will ultimately affect their personal balance, as well. (GM-8)

I think some of the mid-level managers now are recognizing the fact that they can be a little more flexible with their family life or whatever and still be able to get the job done because a lot of what we do is revolving around computers. (GM-7)

Technology does make life more flexible. (GM-4)

Interestingly, although GMs realized the benefits of technology, they also indicated that technology may have a negative impact on workplace flexibility:

The interesting thing that I find is that we attempt to provide the laptop flexibility for some of our frontline managers and they want nothing to do with it . . . they see it as “Oh, now I have to do work at home,” as opposed to maybe “I can get out at 5 o’clock in the afternoon instead of 6.” (GM-7)

Regarding *management turnover*, several factors, such as low pay, scheduling conflicts, and lack of advancement opportunities, were suggested by the GMs to explain hotel employees switching to competitors. For example,

For our first (entry) level managers, money and scheduling are important (reasons). There is a lot of work for little money. For the next level . . . department heads, a primary reason there (for turnover) is realizing they may not have the opportunities to advance any further. (GM-4)

In addition, low pay, burnout and family conflict were mentioned as particular reasons for hotel employees leaving the industry:

I did my 70-, 80-hour weeks, staying to work until 11 o’clock at night . . . and it got to where I was completely burned out and actually gave my notice—I decided to go with another company.” (GM-10)

Some of it (turnover) will be quality of life issues . . . And money. Those are the two things that really come to mind. (GM-6)

Other important themes. GMs indicated that their *Management style*, as related to the hotel culture and workplace flexibility, evolved to become more family-friendly and flexibility-friendly. For instance,

I believe I am one who has shifted from being an individual that felt “face time” was much more important than it is. Flexibility is much more obvious now. (GM-1)

Reasons suggested for the evolution of management style include *personalities*, *experiences*, *family life*, and the GMs’ *mentors*. For example,

I think you’ll find me to be a more nurturing type of general manager, part of that is from my experience in this business . . . there is a broad spectrum of how you can get things done, that maybe 10 years ago or 20 years ago I wasn’t aware of. (GM-12)

I think my approach (to workplace flexibility) changed when I had children. I used to not have to go home, you know, and I didn’t need to be at any games or any school events, and things like that, so for me, it changed when I had children. (GM-2)

My management style evolves from what I learned everyday and from the people around me and from the wonderful leaders that I’ve been exposed to in the company through the last 21 years. (GM-8)

Interestingly, many GMs believed that their particular management style, in terms of emphasizing family-friendly culture and/or work-family balance, was not commonplace in the industry. For example:

There are a lot of GMs that I know who aren't like me, I tell you, I may be the exception to the rule in some, my family comes first, work comes second. And I preach that to every single manager I have in this hotel. (GM-2)

Moreover, *career advancement*, usually associated with relocation, was mentioned as having been influenced by hotel culture. Most GMs believed that turning down a promotion due to family related reasons is less harmful to a manager's career advancement today than it was years ago:

10, 15 years, ago, everyone in their positions that promoted you and moved you had gone through the process of moving every year or every 18 months. If you told them "I can't move," it would be major negative, because "why can't you move? If I could move, you should be able to move, too." Now, it's much more of "what's your family situation? How comfortable for you to move?" You don't see that pressure anymore. (GM-46)

Concomitantly, GMs suggested that there is a limit to use family related excuses for not relocating:

I think if they keep asking, and you keep saying no, there isn't going to be a place for you. (GM-5)

Relocation-related career advancement was suggested to affect a hotel manager's *family life*, as well. For example,

It was horrible on my wife because she meets friends and she gets friends for two, three years, and all of a sudden I say "you gotta say goodbye," and she hates it. And I can't blame her now. Before, when we were without kids, it was a little bit easier to bounce around the country. Now, my children, it tore me apart to move from Connecticut to New Jersey. (GM-2)

On the other hand, *family life* could also influence relocation-related career advancement issues. For instance:

But that has changed. I don't think there are much more folks saying "you know, I have family in the Northeast. I am not really interested in opening this new hotel in Chicago for you. I don't know anyone in Chicago." In my era of growing up, that wasn't the case. And you can do that now in (hotel name). You can stay at a place eight, ten, eleven years. (GM-3)

Second-Order Analysis

A second-order analysis goes beyond the first-order themes, and aims to further link the previously presented themes, and to integrate and refine them to form

a theoretical scheme. To achieve this objective, the authors reexamined each of the identified themes to investigate the underlining relationships between them based on the interview data. The results of this process are presented as Figure 1, which incorporates a total of 13 themes, starting from *management style*. As previously discussed, a GM's management style may be affected by a number of factors, including his or her *personality, experience, mentors, and family life*. It should be noted that the effect of GMs' family life on the GMs' and their subordinates' workplace flexibility comes from various aspects, including their spouses and children. The data also reveal that *management style* influences a *hotel's culture* and the *workplace flexibility* within a hotel because, as previous quotes have suggested, a more family-friendly GM may be more likely to be willing to create a family-friendly culture in the hotel and to promote flexibility for his or her department managers.

As previously discussed, *hotel culture* affects hotel managers' *family lives*. First, it directly affects hotel managers' *career advancement*, particularly regarding relocation-related career advancement. As hotels' cultures shift from focusing on work only to allowing managers to turn down promotions/relocations for family reasons, managers may feel they have greater freedom and flexibility to design their career paths. Second, *hotel culture* is related to *workplace flexibility*, in that hotel managers have more flexibility in a culture they perceive as more family friendly. For example,

I don't think we have even ever denied someone time off, "I need to be away this weekend, I need to do this on that day," as it relates to a personal matter or family matter. Because that's really the whole core of anyone's existence, I believe. I guess that's because that's what I expect for myself, that that's how we hold our associates as well. (GM-1)

GMs suggested *workplace flexibility* has improved significantly in the past decade, at least partially attributable to the availability of *technology* and the *communications of best practices*. Although it is recognized that *technology* may have negative impact on *workplace flexibility*, as well, GMs agree that *workplace flexibility* has a positive effect on the quality of *family life*. For example, a GM described that his employees like the way he communicates the value of family:

We work on a five-day work week with (hotel name) and it's something that I really, really try. Now there are days where that won't happen, and I understand that and they (managers) understand that. But they are happy because now they know that if they worked a 6th day, they get an extra day off somewhere down that the line that's paid. So they understand this going into the orientation that I am a firm believer in family. (GM-1)

As previously discussed, a hotel manager's *family life* affects, and also is affected by, his or her *career advancement* actions. Furthermore, *family life* is a factor that affects the hotel managers' decisions regarding switching to another hotel and/or leaving the hotel industry, and when the resulting *turnover* rate is

lower than the competition, it is regarded as an important part of the people-related *competitive advantage*.

It is important to point out that the GMs believed "people" to be one of their most critical *competitive advantages*, and many of them explicitly stated that low *turnover* rate was evidence of having such competitive advantage. One GM explicitly attributed this *competitive advantage* to the *hotel culture*:

It does start with the culture of the hotel. We're very fortunate, we're very fortunate with the people and their passion. I mean, Mr. (founder of the company), he's a great guy and he's instilled (the culture) in a lot of people. (GM-4)

Taking into consideration of all concepts together, Figure 1 suggests that "people," or human resources, are an important strategic issue perceived by hotel GMs. The work-family issues, which are affected interactively by hotel culture, management style, and family life, are related to this strategic issue. In general, management style, hotel culture, workplace flexibility, and family life work together to have effects on a hotel's competitive advantage.

DISCUSSION

This study was commenced with a desire to better understand how hotel GMs factor work-family issues into their strategic thinking. Particularly, the authors sought to explore whether hotel GMs perceive work-family issues, such as workplace flexibility, communications of best practices, career advancement, and turnover, as related to their perceived strategic issues, including strategic opportunities, threats, and competitive advantage. In addition, this research explores the relationship between the GMs perceived hotel culture and their perceived work-family issues. As shown in Figure 1, a model emerging from the data suggests some answers to the proposed research questions. Taken as a whole, work-family related issues, such as workplace flexibility, communications of best practices, turnover, and career advancement, interact with hotel culture and the GM's management style, and are also related to technology; and all these relationships together provide an overall work-family-related domain that is closely related to competitive advantage. Therefore, this model suggests that, when a hotel is perceived by a GM as having a family-friendly culture and a low turnover rate, work-family issues could be regarded as part of strategic issues. In addition to the results that were presented in previous sections, the following are regarded as particularly important to understand work-family issues from a strategic perspective.

One of the most important findings is that a large number of hotel GMs regarded people as their organizations' essential competitive advantages. Literature has revealed that human resources-related issues were three of the top five most important strategic issues according to executives in the hotel industry (O'Neill et al., 2004), and the findings of this study appear to support previous research, as the results suggest that "people" was among "top of mind" issues

of GMs. However, on the other hand, it is important to note that “people” is not perceived by all hotel GMs as a competitive advantage. As shown in Table 1, more than half of the 49 hotel GMs did not regard “people” as their hotels’ competitive advantage. Taking into consideration the findings from both this study and O’Neill et al. (2004), it is clear that, although “people-” related issues were widely cited strategic issues, “people” appeared to bring competitive advantage to some hotels, but not others. Therefore, unlike market conditions that were almost universally accepted as important SIPs, work–family issues may be regarded as related to a hotel’s strategic management process only by those GMs who perceive people as their competitive advantage. Although it is understandable that not all hotels have developed the best human resources that contribute to the competitive advantage, a key contribution of this study is to provide a guiding framework that demonstrates how a number of human resources–related issues (i.e., work–family issues) could contribute to a hotel’s competitive advantage. Therefore, a direct managerial implication is that, when a hotel GM would like to develop human resources practices into a competitive advantage, the proposed framework may provide several directions for him or her to pursue.

Moreover, hotel culture, as expected, appears to affect the relationship between work–family issues and people as a perceived competitive advantage in many ways. Hotel culture could be perceived by GMs as a “pay your dues,” “family friendly,” and/or “caring” type of culture. First, hotel culture is suggested to directly influence hotel employees’ relocation-related career advancement opportunities, because a more family-friendly oriented hotel/company might be more tolerant of a hotel manager’s request not to relocate for family reasons. Second, a hotel’s workplace flexibility is also related to the culture of the hotel because it is reasonable to expect more flexibility in a more family-friendly hotel. However, it is interesting to note that, based on our interviews, although there were many GMs who insisted that his or her hotel had a “pay your dues” and “professional” culture, rather than a family-friendly culture, no differences were detected between the workplace flexibility perceived by these GMs and the flexibility perceived by the other more “family friendly” GMs. Three explanations could be provided. First, the GMs may understand “culture” differently. For example, the GMs may interpret “culture” as what they believe is the most important value that should be perceived by all hotel employees, whereas other GMs may have a less concrete definition of “culture” and in turn, regard all values and perceptions that they believe could benefit the hotel as part of their perceived culture. Second, management style may have a more significant effect on workplace flexibility than hotel culture. As the model suggests, management style affects workplace flexibility and hotel culture. However, it is reasonable that at least part of an organization’s culture might be the result of other property level employees, previous employees, or from the parent company, whereas a current GM could only influence the hotel’s culture to a certain extent. On the other hand, the GM may have more influences on workplace flexibility than on hotel culture. That is, although a GM may not be able to fundamentally change a hotel’s culture from “pay your dues” to “family friendly,” he/she may be able to adopt

some programs and/or practices to improve workplace flexibility. Therefore, even within different hotel cultures, when GMs have a similar level of concern for flexibility issues, they may be able to achieve a similar degree of workplace flexibility. A third reason might be that the interviewees (GMs) tried to provide the “best” answers (as perceived by them) instead of “real” answers. Although this research tried to minimize this effect by emphasizing confidentiality and by encouraging their real feelings, the nature of live interview research makes it difficult to totally eliminate such possibility.

As discussed, management style plays a critical role in shaping a hotel’s organizational culture and workplace flexibility. Several factors affect hotel GMs’ management styles, including their personalities, experiences, mentors, and family lives. The findings of this study suggest that hotel GMs’ management style appears to evolve in a more family-friendly direction as GMs’ tenures and experiences accumulate. Specifically, GMs’ personal family lives influence the involvement of their management style and suggest that the more flexibility a GM needs for his or her own family life, the more flexibility he or she is willing to give to the other managers of the hotel because “leading by example” is highly valued. The results of this qualitative research suggest that many aspects of work-life balance, such as workplace flexibility and career advancement, have improved due to greater attention to work-family culture and/or practices in recent years. On the other hand, several GMs explicitly pointed out that such improvements in opportunities for greater work-life balance only occurred in their respective hotels and were largely because of their unique management styles, and consequently may not be commonly found across the industry. An interesting question then arises, were these GMs really unique, or has the overall hotel industry actually changed? Although more future research is needed to address this question, it is now safe to draw one conclusion: These GMs believed that the work-family culture of the hotel industry in the earlier days was not appropriate, and therefore, they tried to improve the opportunities for work-life balance in their respective hotels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is an attempt to investigate hotel GMs’ perceived work-family issues from a strategic perspective. Based on 49 interviews of hotel GMs, a conceptual framework is proposed to outline the relationships between hotel culture, GM’s management style, work-family issues, and human resources as sources of competitive advantage. This framework suggests that work-family issues, including workplace flexibility, turnover, communications of best practices, and career advancement, are influenced by hotel culture and the GM’s management style. Although not all hotel GMs factor work-family issues into their strategic thinking, this study reveals that when human resources are perceived as a competitive advantage by hotel GMs, work-family issues are related to hotel GM’s SIPs. Therefore, for hotels that have not yet achieved competitive advantage

based on human resources, the findings of this research may provide certain directions regarding how to enhance their competitive advantages by addressing a specific type of human resources issue: work–family balance.

As shown in Figure 1, a total of 18 relationships were proposed among the 13 themes identified from the data. As qualitative research, this study is not able to statistically test such relationships. Rather, it suggests the directions for future study to empirically examine the magnitude of these relationships. For example, regarding hotel culture, future researchers may investigate to what extent it affects employees' family life, career advancement, and workplace flexibility. Another question is, how does a GM's management style relate to hotel culture and employee family life? Answers to these questions are expected to make significant theoretical and practical contributions, not only to the further development of work–family research but also to industry practitioners who seek applicable knowledge regarding improving human resources management and enhancing their organization's competitive advantage.

Moreover, as this study is exploratory, certain limitations should be considered in the interpretation of our findings, and in the meantime suggest directions for future research. First, although a number of informative themes and concepts emerged from the data, and the relationships among them could be established as the proposed model, it is acknowledged that the data may not represent saturation despite our efforts to have a stratified sample. Second, emphasis on work–family balance may not yet be popular practice in the industry. Third, social desirability may be a confounding factor of the interviewees' discussion of work–family issues. Consequently, further research comparing the answers of the hotel GMs with their respective department managers is needed. Finally, because this study was part of a large-scale grant project that required data from multilevel management positions, all 49 interviewed GMs represent full-service hotels, most of which are part of large hotel chains and/or large hotel management companies. Therefore, other types of hotels, such as small and/or limited service properties, could be studied in the future to reveal a more complete picture of the industry.

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