

# SUPERVISOR SUPPORTIVENESS:

*Global Perspectives*

by Rucha Bhate

Findings from:  
*The*  
**Generations of Talent**  
*Study*



## INTRODUCTION

Supportive supervisors care about employees' career goals, give credit for work well done, and help employees develop job-relevant skills and competencies. A supervisor like this can make all the difference in employees' everyday work experiences.

Strong supervisor support improves the quality of employment and is associated with increased job satisfaction, perceptions of a better fit between the employee and the organization, and reduced turnover.<sup>1</sup>

A significant connection exists between employees' perceived supervisor support (PSS) and employees' perceptions of organizational support (POS), overall.<sup>2</sup> Supervisors are the agents of the organization. As such, they are responsible for monitoring the performance of their subordinates, conducting periodic assessments of their subordinates' work, and giving feedback to enhance their subordinates' contributions and commitment to the organization. Therefore, it is natural for employees to interpret their interactions with their supervisors as indicators of the organization's judgment of their work and career promise.

*Supervisor support is defined as the extent to which leaders value their employees' contributions and care about their well-being.<sup>3</sup>*

Evidence suggests that supervisor support can mitigate the degree of work/family conflict that employees experience and the consequences of such conflict. Research has shown that employees who have highly demanding jobs and family responsibilities and who also have supportive supervisors tend to experience greater job satisfaction, stronger job commitment, more loyalty to the organization, and a better balance between work and family life. Supervisors act as effective mediators as well as "primary implementers of work and family policies initiated by various organizations." Given the prominence of work/family issues among employees today, having a supportive supervisor is a characteristic of effective family-friendly workplaces.<sup>4</sup>

➤ In this brief, we present findings about supervisor support drawn from data that we collected from 8,784 employees working in seven countries: Brazil, China, India, Japan, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

We highlight:

- cross-national differences in employees' perceptions of supervisor support
- key sociodemographic indicators related to variations in employees' perceptions of supervisor support
- the relationship between the presence of a supportive supervisor and the degree of satisfaction with work/family balance that employees report

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<sup>1</sup> Among others: Eisenberger et al., 2002; Qiu L (2010); Newman & Thanacoody (2010).

<sup>2</sup> The positive relationship between PSS and POS (and job retention) has been found in numerous studies (e.g., Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988; Malatesta, 1995; Rhoades et al., 2001; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003; Yoon et al., 1996; Yoon & Lim, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scontrino-powell.com/2011/supervisor-support-a-key-ingredient-in-effective-leadership/>

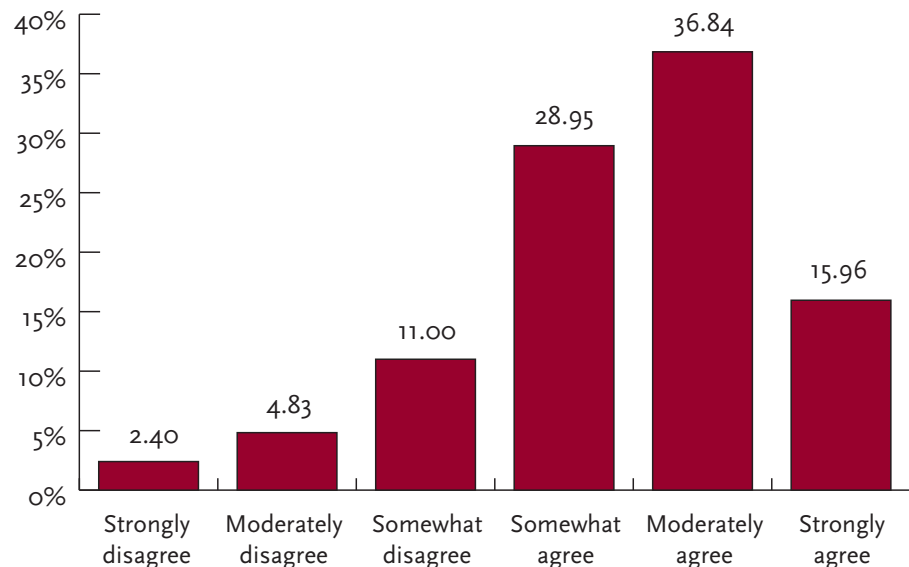
<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.change-management.com/tutorial-job-roles-mod4.htm>

### How common is the view among employees that their supervisors are supportive?

In our study, we attempted to assess perceived supervisor support, by asking employees to rate their agreement with six statements. Each statement was framed as an indicator of a different dimension of supervisor support.<sup>5</sup> We asked employees to rank the accuracy of each statement, on a scale ranging from one (“strongly disagree”) to six (“strongly agree”). The higher the total score, the more positive was an employee’s reported perception of his or her supervisor’s support.

Overall, more than 80 percent of the employees in our seven-country sample occupied the upper tier of our scale (average responses ranging from “somewhat agree” to “strongly agree”), indicating that the vast majority of the respondents perceived their supervisors to be supportive.

Figure 1. Employee Perceptions of Supervisor Support  
(N = 8784)



<sup>5</sup> The Supervisor Support Scale reflects responses to the six core items included in the Generations of Talent Survey [Cronbach’s alpha=0.93].

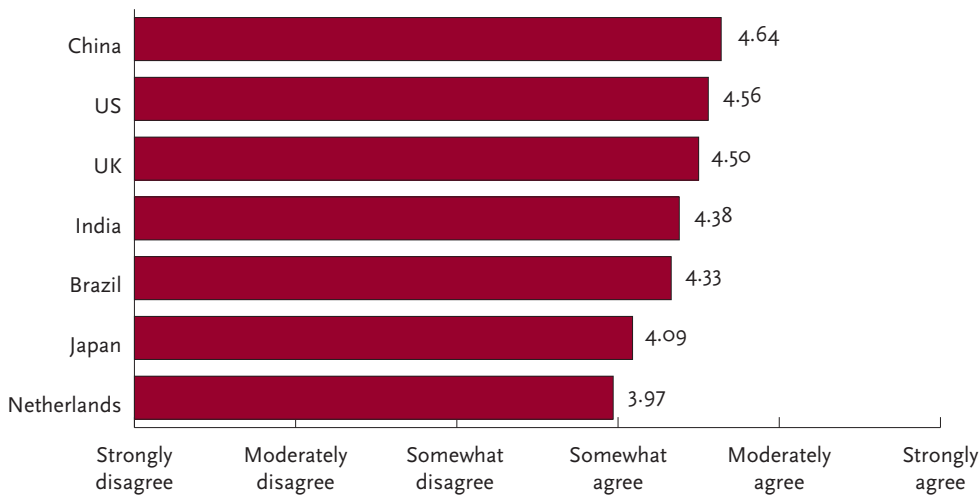
- i. My supervisor gives me helpful feedback about my performance.
- ii. My supervisor assigns tasks that offer opportunities to develop skills.
- iii. My supervisor cares about whether or not I achieve my career goals.
- iv. My supervisor makes sure I get the credit when I accomplish something.
- v. My supervisor often asks for my opinion before making important decisions.
- vi. My supervisor gives me clear instructions.

The first four statements were taken from Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990; the fifth one from Mor Barak, 2005; and the last one was adapted from Scarpello & Vandenberg, 1987.

## Do employee perceptions of supervisor supportiveness vary by country?

Employees working in two of the four developed countries in our sample (Japan and The Netherlands) rated the supportiveness of their supervisors at the lowest end of our scale. Employees working in the other two developed countries (the United States and the United Kingdom) rated the supportiveness of their supervisors at the top of the scale. This indicates a broad divergence in employee perceptions of supervisor supportiveness among these four industrial nations. Notably, employees in China signaled maximum agreement with supervisor supportiveness—a significantly higher level of enthusiasm, on average, than employees in the other countries.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. Average Perceptions of Supervisor Supportiveness, by Country  
(Mean scores; N = 8784)





<sup>6</sup> We ran a series of regressions predicting supervisor support using six country dummies, sequentially omitting one country dummy at a time in order to assess the pairwise country differences. The values indicate that all of the country coefficients are significantly different (at  $p < .05$  in one or more equations) from (and lower than) China's. The US, UK, Japan and Netherlands are each significantly different from the remaining six countries in our sample. Moreover, India and Brazil differ significantly from the remaining five countries but not from each other.

## Which groups of employees tend to perceive their supervisors as being more supportive?

As the table below shows, some groups of employees in our sample viewed their supervisors as being more supportive than other groups did.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Determinants of Supervisor Support  
(Mean scores; N = 8784)

	Higher Perceived Supervisor Support 	Lower Perceived Supervisor Support 
Gender	Female employees (4.41)	Male employees (4.36)
Career Stage	Early career (4.36)	Mid-career (4.22), late career (4.11)
Child Care	Employees with child-care duties (4.44)	Employees without child-care duties (4.36)
Marital/Partner Status	Married/living with partner (4.46)	Single (4.36)
Occupational Type	Service/sales (4.55)	Professional/technical (4.18), Other job (4.12)
Context of National Economic Development	Employees living in developing economies (4.50)	Employees living in developed economies (4.36)

Note: The reference categories used in the regression were: Male (Gender), Early career (Career Stage), Employees with no child-care responsibilities (Child Care), Single employees (Marital/Partner Status), Manager (Occupational Type), and Developed country (Context of National Economic Development).

## How does supervisor support relate to employees' sense of satisfaction with their work/family balance?

Previous research has provided consistent evidence of a significant relationship between supervisor support and employees' satisfaction with work/family balance.<sup>7</sup> We asked the survey respondents five questions to gauge their satisfaction with work/family balance.<sup>8</sup>

- In line with prior research, we found that supervisor support has a significant, positive effect on employees' work/family balance.
- However, the relationship between supervisor support and satisfaction with

<sup>7</sup> Among others: Casper et al., 2011; Kossek et al., 2011; Muse and Pichler, 2011; O'Driscoll et al., 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Our measurement of satisfaction with work/family balance is based on responses to the following five core questions from the Generations of Talent Study (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). The first three questions are measured on a six-point scale and the last two on a seven-point scale; a higher number signifies a more positive response to a specific question. We standardized all the scores before averaging them to create our Work/family Balance Satisfaction Scale.

- i. How satisfied are you with your division of time between work and personal life?
- ii. How satisfied are you with how well your work and personal life fit together?
- iii. How satisfied are you with the opportunity to perform well at work and at home?
- iv. What impact does your personal life have on job performance?
- v. What impact does your job have on your family or personal life?

work/family balance varied by gender. At every level of perceived supervisor support (low, medium, and high), men reported higher satisfaction (and relatively lower degree of dissatisfaction) with work/family balance than women did. This gap in men's and women's satisfaction with work/family balance was widest among workers with a high degree of perceived supervisor support.<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to investigate the reasons why men tend to be more satisfied than women with the balance between their work and family lives, regardless of the level of support they perceive from their supervisors, and why the divergence in satisfaction with work/family balance is greatest between men and women who perceive a high degree of supervisor supportiveness.

- Although perceptions of supervisor supportiveness increased the degree of satisfaction with work/family balance that early-career employees reported, they do not seem to impact mid-career and late-career employees in a similar (positive) way.

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<sup>9</sup> We created three levels of supervisor support (low-medium-high) based on one standard deviation distance from the mean supervisor support value (0) and calculated the work/family balance satisfaction scores for each level, sorting them by gender.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

### **About the Generations of Talent Study**

To gather business-relevant information about the work experiences of employees of diverse ages who work in different countries, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College conducted the Generations of Talent (GOT) Study.

From May 2009 through November 2010, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work collaborated with seven multinational companies. In total, 24 worksites in 11 countries participated in the study, and 11,298 employees responded to the survey. Employees were invited to complete one 30-minute online survey during work time, which they were able to access on a secure website. The survey was translated into Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Spanish. It should, however, be noted that our sample is not representative of the entire population or the workforce in the participating countries.

The survey consists of core questions (questions that were included in the surveys made available to each respondent) and module questions (additional, complementary questions, a subset of which was randomly assigned to the respondents). The survey focused on employees' perceptions of their work experiences, workplace-based resources, demographic information, and employees' assessments of their health and well-being at work and in their lives in general.

Dr. Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Dr. Natalia Sarkisian were the co-principal investigators of the GOT study and worked with an international group of 17 colleagues.

### **About the Author**

Rucha Bhate is a doctoral candidate in the Economics Department at Boston College and a graduate research assistant at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work. Her primary research interests include macroeconomics, international economics, and applied econometrics. At the Center, she has been a part of the Country Context studies and most recently the Generations of Talent project.

## About the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Established in 2005, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

Since our founding, we have conducted more than 20 studies in collaboration with employers: for example, studies on “Age & Generations,” “Talent Management,” and “Generations of Talent.” Studies under way are “Assessing the Impact of Time and Place Management” and “Engaged as We Age.”

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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