

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Employees' attitudes toward family-friendly policies: An analysis through the lens of social exchange theory

Anna Bagirova* and Anastasia Shvetsova

Department of Sociology and Public Administration Technologies, School of Public Administration and Entrepreneurship, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Russia

Abstract

Amidst declining birth rates, policymakers are urging businesses to implement family-friendly measures. This article presents an analysis of the Russian experience in integrating business into demographic policy and birth rate support systems. The mixed-methods research followed an explanatory sequential design. In the first phase, we identified components of Russian working-age employees' attitudes toward corporate family-friendly measures (factor analysis) and developed profiles of workers with differing attitudes toward these measures (cluster analysis). In the second phase, we elucidated the mechanisms underlying these types and addressed how subjective perceptions of family-friendly policies either trigger or fail to trigger the social exchange process. Data sources included a survey of 2,520 working-age respondents (Phase 1) and 60 semi-structured interviews (Phase 2), conducted in three major Russian regions (North-West, Urals, and Siberia). We identified three perception models. The "Ideal Beneficiaries" cluster (31.3%) exhibited strong trust in employer family-friendly programs, viewing them as natural and fair support for parental responsibilities; this cluster also demonstrated the highest reproductive intentions. The "Pragmatic Skeptics" cluster (42.7%) held ambivalent attitudes—while questioning the appropriateness of business-supported programs, they acknowledged their potential to facilitate reproductive decisions. The "Indifferent" cluster (26.0%) neither endorsed nor responded to employer-implemented measures. We translated these findings into practical recommendations to help employers design differentiated family-friendly policies that target the specific stage at which social exchange breaks down for each perception type, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving desired reproductive and organizational outcomes.

*Corresponding author:

Anna Bagirova
(a.p.bagirova@urfu.ru)

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the most diverse countries, including Russia, have been facing a sustained decline in birth rates, with total fertility rates in most of them consistently below the replacement level (Josipović, 2024; Kalabikhina & Kuznetsova, 2025; Kishenin *et al.*, 2024). In response to these demographic challenges, governments in the region are implementing various demographic policy measures, including financial payments,

tax incentives, the development of childcare infrastructure, and reproductive health support programs (Balbo *et al.*, 2013). Research documents a strong societal demand for the development of comprehensive demographic policy but also reveals that its effectiveness largely depends on the institutional environment and the involvement of various social structures (Rašević & Petrović, 1997). Expanding participation by non-state institutions, including business, can help mitigate demographic challenges.

Today, Russian business occupies a special place in the implementation of family and demographic policy and in achieving objectives aimed at improving the quality of life for families with children. The new state Strategy for Implementing Family and Demographic Policy and Supporting Large Families, which will remain in effect until 2036 (Government of the Russian Federation, 2025), identifies the business community as a key actor, alongside state and local government bodies and non-profit organizations. These actors strengthen the institution of the family, increase birth rates, protect reproductive health, and account for national and socio-cultural specificities in the implementation of family and demographic policy in Russian regions. At the end of 2024, recommendations were approved by the Russian Trilateral Commission on the Regulation of Social and Labor Relations for social partnership parties on the development and implementation of corporate social policy measures to support employees with family responsibilities (Russian Trilateral Commission for the Regulation of Social and Labour Relations, 2024). In July 2025, a national Corporate Demographic Standard came into force (Federal Agency on Technical Regulation and Metrology, 2025), and dozens of Russian regions passed regional laws on the development of responsible business, including support for employees fulfilling parental responsibilities (Russian News Agency TASS, 2026).

However, the prevalence of family-friendly support measures in Russian organizations today cannot yet be described as widespread (Bagirova, 2025). Possible reasons for this lie, on the one hand, in the incomplete institutionalization of the process of engaging business in the demographic agenda, and on the other, in business's own lack of understanding of the expediency of this process and a perception that it does not align with the core interests of entrepreneurial activity, primarily associated with generating financial profit. Employers are far from always responding to calls from government authorities; in some regions, these calls are not clearly articulated. Moreover, even when regional authorities undertake targeted efforts to engage businesses in addressing demographic challenges, businesses do not

always find it feasible to implement social programs to support families and increase births among employees. The economic effects of such investments remain unclear to a large portion of Russian businesses. Another fundamental constraining factor, in our view, is the absence of a well-formed, articulated demand from employees. Businesses often do not prioritize developing support measures for employees with children, partly because current or potential employees do not explicitly voice such demands. In this context, state initiatives for business appear only as "pressure from above," unsupported by any genuine need "from below." This study seeks to identify public demand for family-friendly employer support. Implementing such measures assumes there is a party with a direct interest and a willingness to accept them.

When interpreting results from a study of employers that implement family-friendly policies and the employees they target, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1986; Homans, 1961) provides a useful analytical framework. This theory is widely used in the social sciences and has a long history. Its appropriateness for analyzing workplace interactions has been confirmed by numerous Russian and international scholars (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Efendiev *et al.*, 2014; Gao & Zhang, 2026). In the workplace, the social exchange theory views labor relations as a reciprocal exchange of resources and obligations between employee and employer. From this perspective, the implementation of corporate social responsibility is a resource that, when received by the employee, creates obligations toward the employer in the form of increased loyalty and performance (Han & Bi, 2024; Park & Choi, 2023). A successful interaction outcome, according to sociological exchange theory, should result in satisfaction on both sides. At the same time, exchange is a dynamic and uncertain process, heavily influenced by the individual characteristics of the participants and the ways mutual obligations are negotiated (Madison *et al.*, 2025).

Social exchange theory helps explain and predict the outcomes of interactions based on their information (Cao *et al.*, 2022). This is especially useful for estimating employees' commitment, engagement, and motivation (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2025). The logic of this approach, combined with accumulated empirical evidence on the role of subjective perception, allows us to view employer–employee interaction as a staged process. As Efendiev *et al.* (2014) suggested, social exchange involves several stages: the symbolic-expectational stage, interaction, evaluation of exchange outcomes, and adjustment of expectations. When applied to the implementation of corporate demographic programs by enterprises, this approach can be described through the following stages.

In the first stage, after the employer announces corporate demographic measures or colleagues share information about them, employees develop expectations about their own use of these measures and a perception of the obligations they would assume after receiving them. The employer introduces measures; the employee anticipates receiving them. The employer does not always have a clear idea of the “reward” they might expect from employees. The second stage is the actual receipt of the reward (a specific corporate demographic measure) by the employee. The third stage involves evaluating the outcomes of the interaction. The employee has now received the measures and can assess their effectiveness for themselves and their family. In particular, family-friendly policies contribute to perceived career success, reduce work–family conflict (Kundi *et al.*, 2025), and improve the psychological climate (Garavan *et al.*, 2026). Another important effect is their support for women returning to the labor market after childbirth (Bächmann *et al.*, 2020). The positive effect for the employer is not yet evident; instead, they are likely to incur negative costs in implementing the measures. The fourth stage involves the employer realizing positive effects—“feedback” in the form of increased job satisfaction and loyalty, personnel stability, increased motivation to work, and improved productivity (Bae & Skaggs, 2019; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000; Qu & Zhao, 2012).

At the fourth stage, it becomes clear if both parties' expectations were met and if reciprocity occurred. From the perspective of social exchange theory, these effects arise because employees who receive support from the organization experience a felt obligation and respond with positive attitudes and behaviors (Bagger & Li, 2014; Cheng *et al.*, 2022; Magnavita *et al.*, 2025), increased innovativeness in their decision-making (Phuong Anh *et al.*, 2026), and commitment to the company (Memili *et al.*, 2023; Quade *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, employers gain the opportunity to strengthen their leadership authority and the symbolic capital of the company (Pátkai Bende & Huszár, 2026; Raziq *et al.*, 2025), which ultimately yields positive outcomes for the organization (Shehawy, 2022). A meta-analysis of 1,680 effects conducted by Blom *et al.* (2025) confirms that family-friendly policies and workplace support exert positive effects across a wide range of organizational outcomes, including employee performance, positive behaviors, and intention to stay with the company. At the same time, the key condition for effectiveness remains the employee's subjective perception of the support received as valuable and fairly distributed (Vyas *et al.*, 2022).

The importance of how support measures are perceived

has been repeatedly confirmed in empirical studies. Hong *et al.* (2024), relying on a meta-analysis of 134 studies, found that employee attitudes toward work are primarily influenced not by the availability, accessibility, or usability of benefits, but by employees' subjective evaluation of them. In the same vein, Rajâa and Mekkaoui (2025) found in their review study that employees' perceived organizational support, procedural fairness, and trust influence workplace behavior, including job performance, voluntary turnover, and financial outcomes. It has also been demonstrated that the quality of measures matters more than their quantity, as does accounting for individual differences when designing effective benefit programs (Li & Zhang, 2023; Valmori *et al.*, 2025). The perceived value of support measures is linked to access to them and barrier-free use (Blom & Aarntzen, 2026).

It follows from the above that studying employees' subjective evaluations of measures and their expectations regarding them shapes the effectiveness of the entire exchange process. When employer–employee interactions align with employee expectations, it creates obligations on employees toward the employer. The effectiveness of the reciprocal exchange (from employee to employer) is strongly linked to whether the measures address employees' needs and to the attitudes employees have formed toward these measures. At the same time, to date, the academic literature lacks studies that systematically describe a typology of employee attitudes toward family-friendly policies.

Addressing this gap will help clarify if family-friendly policies are in demand, and, perhaps, assess whether they are related to employees' reproductive intentions. Therefore, drawing on a study of the working-age population in Russia, we aim to describe the structure of employee attitudes toward family-friendly policies and characterize the reproductive intentions of different types of employees. It is important to note that the Russian context—characterized by a period of profound labor market transformations (Ogorodov *et al.*, 2017; Podvoisky, 2025; Yakovleva & Barashkova, 2025) and growing interest in issues of employee satisfaction with working conditions (Chernenko & Semenova, 2026; Potapova & Klimukhina, 2024; Soboleva & Chernykh, 2025)—has specific features with regard to family-friendly policies. However, the goal of support measures—helping employees balance work and family life—is common across most countries that implement family-friendly policies. Thus, our findings may be useful to a wide range of researchers and practitioners, including business owners interested in implementing family-friendly policies and government officials responsible for family and parenting support.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Study sources

We used survey data from the working-age population collected in three major Russian macro-regions—the Urals, Northwestern, and Siberian—in October 2024 ($n = 2,520$; Bagirova *et al.*, 2024). Data collection across 15 Russian regions (5 in each macro-region) was conducted using the OnIN online panel (Russia). This approach ensured equal representation of respondents across the three macro-regions and proportional representation within each region. The gender structure of respondents in each region corresponded to the structure of the regional working-age population. During data collection, several measures were implemented to enhance reliability, including checking completed questionnaires based on survey completion time, eliminating inconsistent answers to logically related questions, analyzing responses to trap questions, and evaluating the linearity of responses to tabular questions.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with employees of Russian companies ($n = 60$). The interviews were conducted between May and December 2025 in the Urals, Northwestern, and Siberian districts of Russia and covered men and women of reproductive age working in small, medium, and large enterprises. Interviews lasted 35 to 90 minutes.

The survey questionnaire and interview guides were approved by the expert council of the School of Public Administration and Entrepreneurship of Ural Federal University (Protocol No. 66-62/001/02-24, September 5, 2024).

2.2. Measures

We selected survey questions that allowed respondents to express agreement or disagreement with a series of statements on a seven-point scale. These statements were arranged along a continuum from negative to positive

(Figure 1). The statements were qualitatively validated through expert assessments and a pilot study. The analysis also included respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, education, having children, having school-age children) and their expected ("How many children do you plan to have?") and desired ("How many children would you like to have under ideal conditions?") numbers of children.

2.3. Study design

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach, specifically an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach involves two consecutive phases: (i) collection and analysis of quantitative data; and (ii) qualitative research designed to explain and deepen understanding of the quantitative findings. In the quantitative phase of our study, we conducted an online survey of employees, which first allowed us to identify the factors shaping employees' attitudes toward corporate demographic measures and subsequently to distinguish corresponding clusters based on these factors. The qualitative phase, implemented through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees, aimed to substantively explain the mechanisms underlying the statistical patterns and to address how subjective perceptions of family-friendly policies trigger or fail to trigger the social exchange process. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior written consent from respondents. The audio recordings were then transcribed using [Speech2Text.ru](https://speech2text.ru) software (Modern Speech Technologies LLC, Russia), followed by manual post-processing. This approach minimized textual distortions and ensured high analytical accuracy.

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data revealed a link between employer support measures and intentions to have a second or third child, but the statistical power and nature of the data did not allow us to prove this link. The qualitative stage focused on the

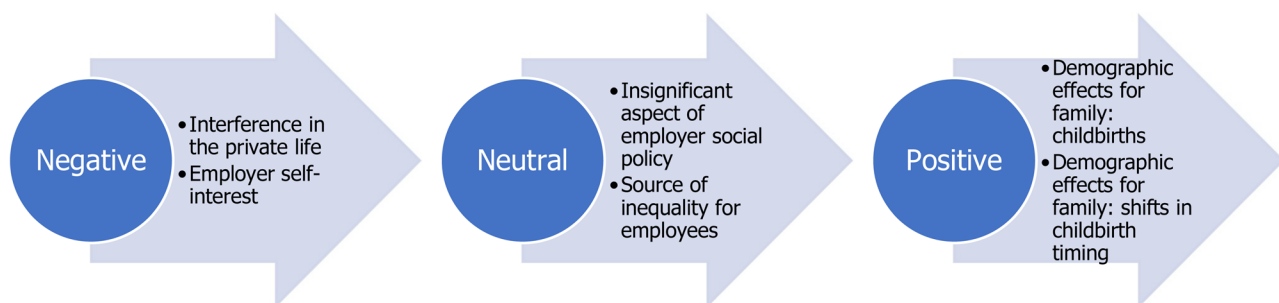


Figure 1. Continuum of statements about corporate family-friendly policies

mechanisms of social exchange that mediate the impact of corporate measures on the decision to have second and third children. Thus, we used the qualitative results to compensate for the objective limitations of the quantitative stage. A summary of the explanatory sequential design of our mixed-methods research is presented in Figure 2.

2.4. Data analysis

The analytical methods used at the quantitative stage included correlation, factor, and cluster analyses, implemented in SPSS 22.0 (IBM, United States of America [USA]). To identify statistically significant differences, we used the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test. At various stages of factor analysis, Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy were applied, along with principal component analysis, scree plot, and Varimax rotation. To construct the correlation matrix and understand the data structure, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used, following Zangieva and Rotmistrov (2018), who justified their appropriateness for ordinal data. We performed principal component analysis on a Pearson matrix and additionally tested the stability of the results using a Spearman matrix and a polychoric matrix. We assessed internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha. For cluster analysis, we used Euclidean distance and the within-groups linkage method (we chose this method because of the greater stability of the data structure formed by it), with clustering quality assessed using various methods, including different distance measurement techniques, clustering of random subsamples, and evaluation of silhouette scores and cluster silhouettes. We conducted cluster profiling using both nominal and quantitative variables, with differences assessed using Cramer's V (significance evaluated via the chi-square test) and the Kruskal–Wallis test. A p -value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

In the qualitative study, we conducted thematic coding

using NVivo 14 software (Lumivero, USA). Initially, we created a list of codes based on research questions and key concepts of the social exchange theory (e.g., “organizational support measures,” “perceived care,” “human involvement,” “sense of obligation,” “loyalty in response to care,” “willingness to work better,” and “reproductive plans”). Subsequently, two researchers grouped the codes into themes based on their semantic proximity and discussed any disagreements until reaching a consensus and agreeing on the final code system. The final list of themes is as follows: (i) the subjective value of support measures for employees (both instrumental and emotional); (ii) the formation of felt obligation toward the employer in response to received resources; and (iii) the influence of measures on reproductive intentions. All interview fragments relevant to these themes were coded accordingly and linked to the clusters identified in the quantitative phase.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Mean values, medians, modes, and standard deviations for the eight statement variables included in the analysis are presented in Table 1.

The correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. It demonstrates the relationships between respondents' opinions regarding various aspects of corporate support measures for employees' families. Notably, the highest positive correlation coefficients (0.518–0.660) were found among positive statements concerning the reproductive effects of support: respondents simultaneously acknowledged the potential of employer support to facilitate reproductive decisions regarding births of different parity (first to third children) and at different life stages (early and late childbearing).

Weaker, yet positive and significant correlations were

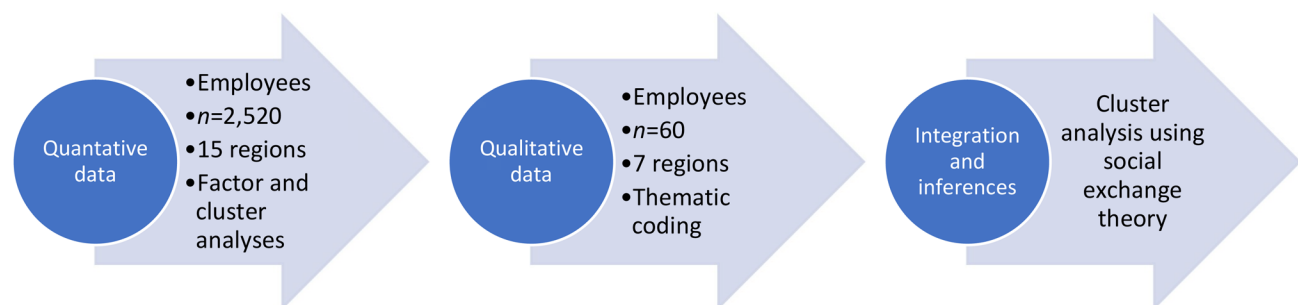


Figure 2. Mixed methods research design

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for variables included in factor analysis

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
V1: Employer support for employees' families is an intrusion into their private lives	2.70	2	1	1.949
V2: Employer support for employees' families addresses some problems of the employer themselves	3.78	4	4	1.993
V3: Employers should not single out families with children, as this places employees in an unequal position	4.30	4	7	2.056
V4: Not all employees want or can have children, so the presence of corporate support measures does not matter	3.85	4	4	2.037
V5: The decision to have a first child is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	5.29	6	7	1.787
V6: The decision to have a large family is easier when there are special support measures for employees with large families at work	5.14	5	7	1.856
V7: The decision to have a child at a younger age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	5.08	5	7	1.849
V8: The decision to have a child at an older age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	4.99	5	7	1.859

Table 2. Correlation matrix of working population opinions on various aspects of family-friendly employer measures

Variable	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7
V2	0.312**	–	0.179**	0.156**	0.153**	0.172**	0.184**
V3	0.291**	0.179**	–	0.428**	–0.044*	–0.060**	–0.053**
V4	0.383**	0.156**	0.428**	–	–0.148**	–0.137**	–0.116**
V5	–0.193**	0.153**	–0.044*	–0.148**	–	0.660**	0.651**
V6	–0.171**	0.172**	–0.060**	–0.137**	0.660**	–	0.623**
V7	–0.159**	0.184**	–0.053**	–0.116**	0.651**	0.623**	–
V8	–0.099**	0.155**	–0.011	–0.082**	0.574**	0.557**	0.518**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

found between variables reflecting judgments about the legitimacy of support and employer motives (0.291–0.428). The judgment regarding the self-interested nature of employer motives in introducing family-friendly policy demonstrated slightly weaker (but still positive) correlations with all variables (0.153–0.184). Finally, negative Spearman correlation coefficients were observed for the expected-effect variables and the legitimacy-judgment variables (ranging from –0.193 to –0.044). This indicates a relationship between perceptions of the illegitimacy and inappropriateness of family-friendly policies and perceptions of their reproductive effects for employees.

3.2. Factor analysis

We justified the applicability of factor analysis to the eight observed variables using two statistical tests: Bartlett's test of sphericity (5,838.606 with $df = 28$ and $\alpha < 0.001$) and

the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (0.787). Following the standard procedure proposed by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), we conducted Harman's single-factor test using an unrotated exploratory factor analysis. According to the results, the first factor accounted for 30.7% of the total variance. Since this indicator is well below the 50% threshold, we concluded that the correlation between items is not driven by the same measurement scale. The total variance explained in Table A1 suggests that extracting two components is justified. Table A2 presents the values of all variables for the two factors; notably, each variable clearly loads onto only one factor. The stability of our results based on the Pearson matrix is confirmed by those from the Spearman matrix and the polychoric matrix.

Following factor analysis, we obtained two components:

- (i) Component 1: Pro-family support as a facilitator of employees' reproductive decisions (35.7% of total

variance);

- (ii) Component 2: Skepticism regarding the legitimacy of corporate family policy (24.0% of total variance).

The first component reflects the effectiveness of corporate family policy at the family and societal level. It captures agreement with all statements related to the effects of measures at the family level—the ability of measures to facilitate decisions about having a child in different scenarios: later and earlier childbearing, first child, and higher-order births.

The second component groups statements that express skepticism about the legitimacy of implementing corporate demographic measures. Specifically, when employer support for families is seen as an intrusion into private life, this skepticism arises from the principle that private matters should remain free from outside involvement. Corporate policy, as a solution to employer problems, reflects instrumental skepticism, where the motive for care is perceived as hidden self-interest, such as gaining loyalty or retaining staff. Viewing corporate demographic policy as exacerbating inequality reflects skepticism based on egalitarian principles. Finally, agreement with the statement that “not all want/can have children, so measures do not matter” demonstrates reductionism, denying the significance of measures for the majority based on their non-universality. Thus, the second component encompasses various facets of skepticism toward corporate demographic policy: doubt about a company's right to intervene in family life, the “purity” of employer motives, and the social justice of such measures.

Internal consistency reliability, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, showed that the scale for Component 1 demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.849$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.839, 0.858]). Average item-total correlations was 0.584, ranging from 0.495 to 0.651. The scale for Component 2 demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.631$, 95% CI [0.607, 0.654]). The average item-total correlation was 0.300, ranging from 0.152 to 0.430.

3.3. Cluster analysis

Cluster analysis, conducted in the next stage incorporating the identified components, revealed three clusters of respondents with significant differences among them. The clustering quality, measured using the silhouette score, showed that this solution is the best among the nearby alternatives: the silhouette score for two clusters was 0.280, for three clusters was 0.346, and for four clusters was 0.329 (calculations performed using Scikit-learn: Machine Learning in Python).

Silhouette plots (Figure 3; created with Matplotlib: Visualization with Python) also demonstrate the optimality

of the three-cluster structure compared to the two- and four-cluster solutions. Although the silhouette widths in all plots exceeded the average silhouette scores, the widest is in Figure 3B, which, in addition to the maximum silhouette score, supports our preference for this solution (Rousseeuw, 1987).

Furthermore, the choice of the three-cluster solution with a silhouette score of 0.346 can be justified by the following considerations: (i) a focus on cluster interpretability: each of the three clusters exhibited stable internal patterns—notably different values on Components 1 and 2 and on a number of non-profiling variables; (ii) high within-group variance of the original variables (Table 1), allowing the obtained partitioning to be considered sufficient; (iii) the dynamic nature of the phenomenon under study—employee attitudes toward corporate demographic measures—allowing for soft cluster boundaries rather than rigid segmentation; and (iv) the presence within each cluster of higher average pairwise proximity among objects than between clusters (otherwise the silhouette score would be near zero or negative).

The main characteristics of the three-cluster solution are shown in Table 3 and Figure 4. Profiling the identified clusters based on clustering variables and additional variables—indicators of preferred numbers of children—revealed statistically significant differences between them (Table A3). Other statistically significant differences between clusters are presented in Table 4.

3.3.1. Cluster 1: “Ideal Beneficiaries”

Workers in this cluster demonstrated the most consistent and positive stance toward corporate demographic measures: high agreement scores for positive statements, and medium to low scores for neutral and negative statements. Such employees accounted for 31.3% of the sample. This cluster had a higher proportion of females and was more family-oriented, more educated, and older than the others. In addition, it had the highest proportion of employees with children. Regarding other socio-demographic characteristics—region, size of settlement, and self-assessed financial situation—this cluster showed no distinctive features. Employees in this cluster perceived the employer as a legitimate and effective actor in demographic policy (for their purposes).

This cluster demonstrated the highest expected and desired numbers of children (2.08 and 3.01, respectively). Furthermore, it showed the most notable difference (among others) between expected and desired numbers of children. Thus, this cluster is likely to have the highest impact from additional, new (including corporate) pronatalist measures.

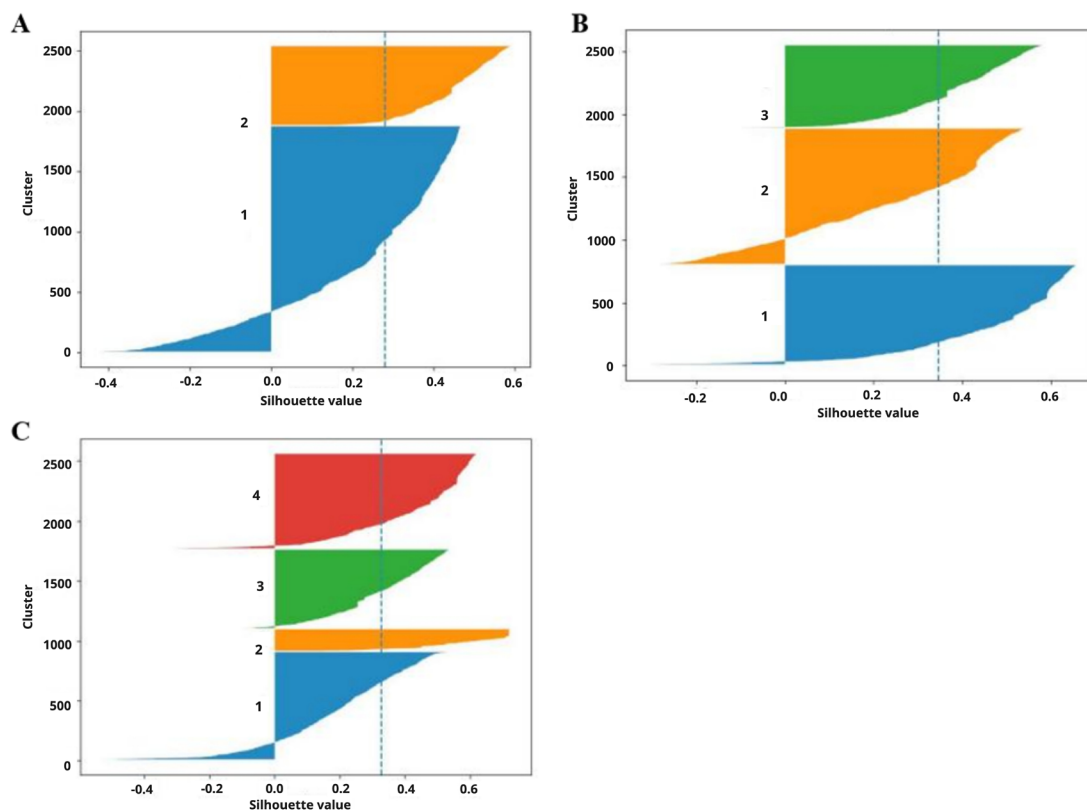


Figure 3. Silhouette plots. (A) $k = 2$. (B) $k = 3$. (C) $k = 4$

Employees in this cluster demonstrated a high subjective valuation of corporate demographic measures and, at the same time, strong reproductive intentions. Qualitative interview analysis revealed a potential mechanism of the relationships between these perceptions. Subjective valuation of measures was determined at both instrumental and emotional levels. At the instrumental level, flexible work schedules and organizational conditions for work-life balance are of primary importance, while at the emotional level, it is the sense of care and human consideration. It is this component—perceiving the company as one that cares—that distinguishes the “Ideal Beneficiaries” from the other clusters:

Support is definitely needed, especially flexible schedules. When you don't have to go on sick leave [with a child], you can work from home. You don't need to take sick leave; you just work remotely. And that's about having the opportunity to earn a normal salary without taking sick leave. You can work normally and balance family matters. (Female, divorced, 1 child, 45 years old, large enterprise)

Another participant (female, married, 2 children, 35 years old, small enterprise) stated, “They help a lot. You realize you're not alone. And it's always nice to think that your management, your immediate supervisors, care about you. They do value you.”

Adopting the logic of social exchange theory, we can expect that receiving privileges in the form of organizational and emotional support generates a felt obligation in the employee. Indeed, drawing on the interview data, we argue that the feeling of gratitude is associated not with the magnitude of the assistance or its rational benefit, but with the very fact of its existence and its targeted nature:

It would be great if I could leave for a couple of hours to drop off or pick up a child, take those breaks during the day. Any financial support from the company would be good. I think moms with kids would be super grateful and work even better. My pain is unexpected situations with children. For example, in the morning, a child says they have a headache, but then it turns out they don't. You can't take

Table 3. Cluster Centroids

Components/Variables	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Component 1: Pro-family support as a facilitator of employees' reproductive decisions	0.5370	0.3585	-1.2382
Component 2: Skepticism regarding the legitimacy of corporate family policy	-1.0126	0.7719	-0.0495
Variables of Component 1			
The decision to have a first child is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	6.24	5.77	3.36
The decision to have a large family is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	6.13	5.62	3.16
The decision to have a child at a younger age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	5.95	5.59	3.20
The decision to have a child at an older age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	5.68	5.52	3.27
Variables of Component 2			
Employer support for employees' families is an intrusion into their private lives	1.28	3.71	2.74
Employer support for employees' families addresses some problems of the employer themselves	3.00	4.83	2.98
Employers should not single out employees with children, as this places employees in an unequal position	2.67	5.42	4.42
Not all employees want or can have children, so the presence of corporate support measures does not matter	2.12	4.97	4.11

Table 4. Key statistically significant differences between clusters by socio-demographic variables (% of respondents within each cluster)

Variables	Cluster 1 (%)	Cluster 2 (%)	Cluster 3 (%)
Sex			
Men	45.8	51.8	48.2
Women	54.2	48.2	51.8
Marital state			
In registered marriage	59.7	51.4	54.3
Not married	15.3	22.0	22.5
Educational level			
Secondary vocational education	28.4	35.6	30.3
Higher education	62.9	53.8	61.3
Age group			
18–29	13.8	18.1	21.4
30–49	86.2	81.9	78.6
Have/Do not have a living child			
Have a living child	80.9	69.4	70.8
Do not have a living child	19.1	30.6	29.2
Have a school-aged child	33.3	26.3	26.8
Share of respondents who consider special support for employees with children from employers necessary	91.4	80.6	73.5
Share of respondents who do not consider special support for employees with children from employers necessary	2.8	10.5	16.2

Note: List of socio-demographic characteristics for which no statistically significant differences between clusters were found: settlement size, macro-region, number of children in the parental family, number of employees at the enterprise, and self-assessed financial situation.

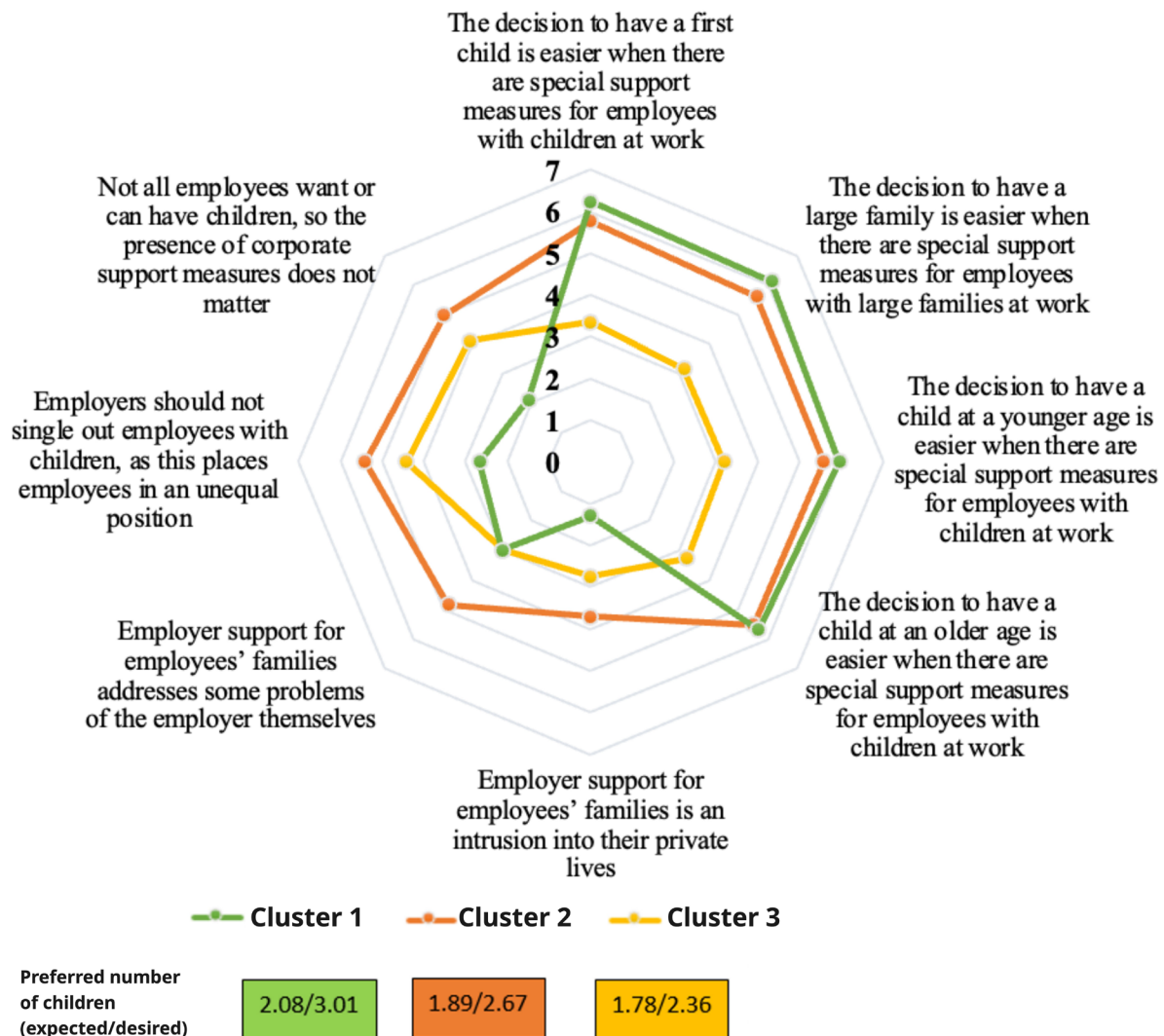


Figure 4. Profiles of respondent clusters with different attitudes toward family-friendly measures of Russian employers

sick leave. It would be great if I could bring them briefly to the office, let them sit with me in a special corner. That would be in the company's interest. In general, any measures that help combine work and raising kids would be wonderful. You could work with much greater satisfaction. You understand that the company isn't faceless—it cares about you, acknowledges that you have a life outside the office door. (Female, married, 2 children, 33 years old, large enterprise)

I think having children is one of the biggest stress factors—not in a bad way, but in terms of human challenges—accompanied by fears and

the most significant, profound experiences. So when someone reaches out a hand, any helping hand, you'll gladly consider it, you'll accept it. (Male, married, no children, 36 years old, medium enterprise)

The analysis of the interviews suggests that in this cluster, support from the company is perceived as a factor that reduces the perceived risks associated with having a child:

If the state is motivated to support demography, then it would be great if both the state and the employer supported people planning to have children. Because without that support, it's much harder to take such a responsible step—a

child isn't a one-time thing; it's for life. And again, the costs of children are huge. And when a woman is pregnant and has given birth, she can't work as much. So a child takes up most of her time. Accordingly, she earns much less than before the child. Support at that moment is very necessary. (Female, unmarried, no children, 35 years old, small enterprise)

3.3.2. Cluster 2: "Pragmatic Skeptics"

Workers in this cluster demonstrated the most ambivalent stance toward corporate demographic measures. While strongly agreeing with positively framed statements about the effects of measures on families, they simultaneously expressed skepticism about employer involvement in this kind of "private," "excessive" support. While rejecting the appropriateness and expediency of such policies, they pragmatically acknowledged that such measures could serve as a trigger for important life decisions. This cluster included a higher proportion of individuals with secondary vocational education than the others, and a slightly lower proportion of employees with higher education. Compared with other clusters, there were slightly more men than women, and a lower proportion of employees with children. This is the largest cluster, accounting for 42.7% of the sample. Given the size of this group and its relatively high average expected and desired numbers of children (1.89 and 2.67, respectively), it is crucial for employers to identify appropriate approaches to engage with this group and shape attitudes toward the relatively new trend of family-oriented programs in corporate social policy.

Representatives of this cluster evaluated measures through the lens of independence and privacy. The value of support measures was not denied, but was influenced by concerns about the need for reciprocal obligations. Pragmatic Skeptics blocked the social exchange mechanism at various stages (less frequently at the stage of accepting measures, more often at the evaluation stage), reserving the option to accept measures if such a need arises. The subjective value of measures is diminished because they do not align with their current needs:

Those things [financial needs for a child]—if you have initiative and desire, it can all be arranged. What's impossible to arrange is the hellish restriction of your life. Not just restriction—hellish. Practically a prison in freedom, especially for women. For men it's tough, but for women it's just... I honestly doubt it. Because, well, having a child is anyway a biological and psychological need of any normal person. I mean, out of 10

people, nine and a half will eventually have children, let's be honest. So why does it need to be rewarded and encouraged? Especially by business. The state's interest is supporting the population, supporting demography. I understand that—new citizens are needed, their quality, education, health, and so on. But regarding business, well, people will have children anyway, so why single them out compared to those who don't? (Male, married, 2 children, 36 years old, medium enterprise)

While the felt obligation in the first cluster was articulated positively ("would be super grateful"), for Pragmatic Skeptics, it was reinterpreted as a form of dependence. Based on the interviews, we observed that the influence of measures on reproductive intentions is either denied or acknowledged only for second or third children. The absence of a need for support (childlessness or uncertainty regarding reproductive plans) acts as a filter that prevents the social exchange mechanism from being triggered:

I think that [employer support measures] will influence the decision to have second and third children. When you already have your first child, you understand what you need. That is, there's probably a difference between me, someone without a child who's still standing on the edge, not knowing if I want to jump. They can promise me any kind of childcare, any support, but I don't know yet if I even want it. But if someone already knows they want it, they can value that support... Probably, if an employer was overly focused on family, it would raise suspicions. As they say, whenever a stranger calls you 'brother,' it means they want to lure you into a cult. Specifically addressing family issues is an attempt to get into your personal time, your personal space. My employer shouldn't know about my family. A New Year's gift—well, thank you—but I probably wouldn't want my boss to know when my child's last school bell rings... It's incredibly nice to have those opportunities, those benefits from the employer. But if you can provide for yourself, that's probably better... I have this feeling that relying completely on the employer is like falling into bondage. You become too dependent. It might create a situation where you don't want to stay after 8 p.m., but they say: you know what, stay because we've given you all these perks. You should stay. It could

be extra pressure on employees. (Female, divorced, no children, 26 years old, large enterprise)

3.3.3. Cluster 3: "Indifferent"

Respondents in this cluster demonstrated both weak belief in the effects of corporate demographic measures on their own reproductive behavior and, overall, instability in accepting the very idea that employers should implement support measures for employees' families. Compared with other groups (10.5% in Cluster 2 and 2.8% in Cluster 1), this cluster (16.2%) was more likely to hold the view that employers should not single out employees with children in their social policies. Among the negative statements, representatives of this cluster most strongly agreed that employers should not single out employees with children, as this places workers in an unequal position, and that corporate support measures are not particularly necessary. The primary outcome of corporate support, in their view, is exacerbating inequality between employees with and without children. This cluster comprised a quarter of the sample (26.0%) and was characterized by relative youth (the proportion of respondents aged 18–29 was the highest at 21.4%) and a smaller proportion of employees with children than in Cluster 1. For all other socio-demographic characteristics, this cluster occupied an intermediate position and did not differ significantly from the other clusters. Given the relative youth of this group and its fertility potential, as well as its lower (compared with other clusters) preferred numbers of children (average expected: 1.78, average desired: 2.36), employers should focus on identifying informational approaches that can foster, without undue pressure, a sense of comprehensive support for their life trajectories should they independently decide to start a family.

Representatives of this cluster demonstrated weak interest in family-friendly policies and low awareness of support measures. Qualitative interview analysis revealed the reasons why the social exchange cycle is not initiated in this group. Subjective valuation of employer support measures was absent; they remained in a blind spot—either due to a lack of information or due to a lack of personal need. A participant (female, married, 1 child, 49 years old, medium enterprise) stated, "Oh, I don't know. I think it's all important, but I've just never thought about it." Another (male, married, 1 child, 43 years old, large enterprise) stated, "I haven't used [the support measures]. I probably just didn't know about those benefits." Meanwhile, another participant (female, married, 2 children, 41 years old, large enterprise) stated, "Well, it's hard to say, but it's more something nice rather than necessary. For example, if they didn't give gifts but the child had health insurance like I

do, I think that would be more effective." Furthermore, one participant stated:

If I had children, I'd probably look at it differently... I think our employees [who have children] use every available opportunity: they can take vouchers to children's summer camps, take a few days off. So any measures that are available get used. (Male, married, no children, 22 years old, medium enterprise)

Since the support measures were not perceived as valuable or relevant resources, reciprocal obligations did not arise. Unlike Pragmatic Skeptics, which reinterpreted obligation as a risk, the Indifferent lacked any evaluation—whether positive or negative. The reproductive plans of informants in this cluster were most likely formulated independently of corporate measures. Even among respondents with children, employer policy was not retrospectively seen as significant to their reproductive choices.

4. Discussion

This study examined how Russian employees' perceptions of corporate family-friendly policies shape the process of social exchange. The findings revealed three distinct perception models—Ideal Beneficiaries, Pragmatic Skeptics, and Indifferent—each characterized by a fundamentally different readiness to engage in reciprocal exchange with the employer. While Ideal Beneficiaries viewed these policies as natural support and reported strong commitment, Pragmatic Skeptics recognized their practical value but resisted full exchange due to concerns over autonomy and life-stage relevance. Indifferent employees failed to perceive the policies as resources, preventing the exchange cycle from initiating.

Cluster 1 (Ideal Beneficiaries) was the most favorable group of employees from the perspective of engaging business in the demographic agenda. The participants in this cluster held positive attitudes toward employer measures and highly valued potential effects on both subsequent births and the flexibility of progestational intervals. From the employer's perspective, this group is a target audience that demonstrates high trust in the employer and positively perceives family-friendly initiatives. There is no internal conflict here: low levels of skepticism indicate trust in the employer, even regarding their indirect involvement in life planning, while strong belief in the facilitative role suggests genuine expectations of employer assistance in such an important matter as having children. They do not perceive family support as an intrusion into private life, discrimination, or driven by hidden motives. Instead, they view corporate measures as a significant resource

capable of influencing their reproductive plans. For them, the enterprise is not merely a workplace but potentially a partner in life planning.

Based on the results, we can conclude that in the Ideal Beneficiaries cluster, there is a cognitive projection of a perceived obligation on the part of the employee: expectation of measures, willingness to take them, and a positive assessment, creating a sense of commitment among employees. According to our analysis, this group represents the scenario in which corporate demographic programs achieve maximum effectiveness. At the same time, the fundamental condition for a full social exchange is the desire and readiness of employees to have children.

Employers working with this cluster would benefit most from involving employees who hold these perceptions in the development and refinement of measures. For employers, the task regarding this group is to leverage their positive attitude toward measures and high subjective valuation to reinforce, based on social exchange theory, the understanding of support as an investment in long-term employees, cultivating a sense of reciprocal obligations toward the employer. This can be achieved, for example, by subtly describing various options for returning to work after parental leave (e.g., flexible hours, remote work, participation in specific projects during leave), forming supports for this decision (e.g., a mentor assigned to the employee upon return), disseminating information about enterprise resources allocated for corporate support measures (reference information on the corporate portal, across the enterprise), and initiating discussions within communities of employee-parents about balancing work and parental responsibilities when supported by the employer.

Representatives of Cluster 2 (Pragmatic Skeptics) exhibited ambivalence toward business involvement in supporting employees' families. A possible reason for the lack of a more unequivocal attitude toward employers implementing family-friendly support measures can lie in the novelty and low prevalence of this phenomenon. It is also plausible that respondents of this type separate public rhetoric from private behavior. In the public sphere, they may espouse norms of self-sufficiency and evaluate corporate paternalism negatively. However, when making life-altering decisions, they are guided by rational motives: to pursue a life strategy where family and children, judging by their high preferred numbers of children, are paramount life values, they are willing to consider corporate support as an additional resource that can be mobilized to improve quality of life and facilitate the decision to have a child. While believing that decisions about having children are purely personal, they simultaneously equate objective

material conditions with barriers to parenthood and pragmatically evaluate any potential support. Employer measures could represent an opportunity to remove constraints, even if they are not personally aligned with the existence of these measures.

Thus, we can assume that the full cycle of social exchange is unlikely to function in Pragmatic Skeptics, despite the partial recognition of the usefulness of the measures. The main blocking factors are the prioritization of autonomy and privacy over the support offered, the reinterpretation of obligations as dependence, and the irrelevance of the measures at this life stage.

The practical implication for Cluster 2 is that corporate demographic measures are likely to affect birth rates only after employee loyalty is strengthened and skepticism is diminished. This can be accomplished by meticulously describing implemented measures—their content and eligibility conditions—allowing for independent assessment of their accessibility (e.g., whether childbirth support is feasible at current salary levels if the measure has income restrictions), demonstrating the integration of family-friendly measures into a comprehensive corporate support system (e.g., for young employees), and incorporating developmental elements into support programs (e.g., co-financing professional development for employee-parents on parental leave, and corporate grants for specific forms of child development). In such cases, representatives of this cluster may shift their perception of business support for parenthood from an intrusive “guardian” to a “new project,” where the employer acts as a “neutral investor.”

Therefore, the employer's task with this group can be divided into two stages. First, it is necessary to enhance the subjective evaluation of family-friendly measures by demonstrating concrete benefits for employees who prioritize family values and having children in their life strategies. Then, the focus shifts to shaping the perception of the employer as an institution supporting the realization of the “family-child” project. This, in turn, lays the foundation for transforming employee attitudes from viewing the employer as interfering with life plans to seeing the employer as an investor providing additional, yet significant, support in implementing those plans.

Given that Cluster 3 (Indifferent) demonstrated both a moderate degree of skepticism toward the legitimacy of corporate family policy and low sensitivity to family support measures, their position is probably the least susceptible to external influence. In corporate demographic policy, they currently perceive neither threat (interference, unfair distribution of employer assistance) nor a significant benefit (personal resources); they do not connect work

and children and do not experience tension between these spheres. This group is unlikely to change their reproductive behavior in response to corporate measures. They do not strongly reject measures (as seen in Cluster 2), nor do they rely on them as a significant resource when making family and reproductive decisions (as seen in Cluster 1), as they perhaps do not believe in the real value of corporate support and/or are confident in the sufficiency of their own or family resources (e.g., help from grandparents).

From the perspective of social exchange theory, we can understand that in this cluster, the social exchange mechanism fails to initiate at the very first stage—the resource perception stage. The reasons for this include a lack of information about measures (or their absence altogether), a mismatch between measures and actual needs, and a lack of reflection. This points to the need for targeted communication with different employee groups to ensure visibility of existing programs.

The practical implication of this finding is that, for this group of employees, developing an enterprise-wide environment that reduces overall anxiety levels and increases life satisfaction may prove more effective, indirectly influencing their preparation for parenthood. Access to psychologist services, stress management training, mandatory days off, combating overtime, creating relaxation rooms, and flexible start times all can contribute to developing internal resources and planning for a future, strengthening the association of the workplace with life comfort for this group, and reinforcing the perception of the enterprise as a supportive environment that considers employees' life needs.

It is important to note some limitations of our study. The main limitations are related to the use of social exchange theory as a tool for interpreting the results, rather than a clear empirical measurement of the data (which would have required a parallel survey of employers); the use of reproductive intentions for a more comprehensive characterization of the clusters, but the inability to establish causal relationships between the attitudes of employees toward corporate demographic policies and their reproductive intentions within the scope of the conducted research; the limitations of statistical procedures applied for the factor and cluster analysis (despite the breadth of their use); and the relatively low level of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.631$), which is common when measuring attitudes and perceptions of a new phenomenon that

are highly dynamic. Future studies should incorporate additional data sources, including survey and interview data with employers, as well as survey data with workers with and without children, to empirically measure the reciprocity effects within the framework of social exchange theory and identify the role of corporate family-friendly measures and attitudes toward them as specific determinants of reproductive intentions regarding children of different birth orders.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how Russian employees' perceptions of corporate family-friendly policies shape the process of social exchange and their reproductive intentions. The findings demonstrate that employee responses to such policies are not uniform but fall into three distinct perception clusters—Ideal Beneficiaries, Pragmatic Skeptics, and Indifferent—each characterized by a different readiness to engage in reciprocal exchange with the employer. These clusters revealed that the social exchange cycle can be blocked at different stages: some employees fully reciprocate; others recognize the practical value of support but resist full exchange due to concerns over autonomy and life-stage relevance, and still others fail to perceive the policies as resources at all. By locating these breakdown points, the study refines the application of social exchange theory to the domain of corporate demographic policy and provides a framework for understanding the cognitive conditions under which family-friendly measures translate—or fail to translate—into reproductive outcomes. In practical terms, the findings suggest that employers should move beyond uniform policy design and develop differentiated strategies that target the specific barriers to reciprocity characterizing each perception cluster. Such an approach can increase the likelihood that corporate family-friendly initiatives yield both organizational commitment and tangible demographic benefits. Although we conducted the study in three major Russian regions and its generalizability is limited, the perception models and the associated mechanisms of exchange breakdown offer analytical tools that can inform employer practices and policy development in comparable settings.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Anna Bagirova

Data curation: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Formal analysis: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Investigation: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Methodology: Anna Bagirova

Project administration: Anna Bagirova

Supervision: Anna Bagirova

Validation: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Visualization: Anna Bagirova

Writing—original draft: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Writing—review & editing: Anna Bagirova, Anastasia Shvetsova

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the ethical review committee of the School of Public Administration and Entrepreneurship, Ural Federal University (classification number: 66-62/001/02-24). Written and/or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

Consent for publication

Written and/or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants. All data were anonymized prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Appendix

Table A1. Total variance explained

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	Percentage of variance (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)	Total	Percentage of variance (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
1	2.879	35.984	35.984	2.858	35.721	35.721
2	1.905	23.808	59.792	1.926	24.071	59.792
3	0.846	10.570	70.363			
4	0.616	7.703	78.066			
5	0.534	6.679	84.744			
6	0.508	6.346	91.091			
7	0.375	4.685	95.776			
8	0.338	4.224	100.000			

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis.

Table A2. Rotated component matrix

Variable	Component	
	1	2
The decision to have a first child is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	0.856	−0.061
The decision to have a large family is easier when there are special support measures for employees with large families at work	0.844	−0.060
The decision to have a child at a younger age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	0.828	−0.036
The decision to have a child at an older age is easier when there are special support measures for employees with children at work	0.763	0.019
Employer support for employees' families is an intrusion into their private lives	−0.074	0.755
Employer support for employees' families addresses some problems of the employer themselves	0.334	0.551
Employers should not single out families with children, as this places employees in an unequal position	−0.059	0.707
Not all employees want or can have children, so the presence of corporate support measures does not matter	−0.150	0.737

Table A3. Assessment of statistical significance of differences between clusters using the Kruskal–Wallis test

Parameters	Chi-square	df	Asymptotic significance
Clustering variables			
Component 1	1,305.823	2	<0.0001
Component 2	1,623.993	2	<0.0001
Profiling using preferred number of children variables			
Expected number of children	39.464	2	<0.0001
Desired number of children	118.361	2	<0.0001