

THE FAMILY-FRIENDLY UNIVERSITY: WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS, WHERE ARE THE ANSWERS?

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Abstract

The issue of family-friendly policy implementation in higher education affects not only women, but men, families, universities (as employers), and our students. Higher education in the United States is experiencing pressure and the need to diversify its faculty, staff, and student body. There is a greater need for diversity in the areas of engineering, science, and mathematics compounded by the underrepresentation of qualified women and minorities in our current undergraduate and graduate programs.

Several social trends will be considered which motivate a reexamination of university family-work policies. The cost of failure to develop family-work policies will be identified. Necessary financial resources, most often cited as the barrier to these initiatives, are generally less than anticipated, and the cost/benefit ratios of their investment in contexts which account for recruitment, retention, and morale are favorable. The experience of those organizations which have implemented family-friendly changes will be examined.

Where do we begin? What is the current level of support throughout higher education? Who is/can/should initiate these programs? How do we identify behaviors and characteristics that encourage a family-friendly environment? A discussion of these questions is addressed in this presentation.

INTRODUCTION

Whether we call them "family-friendly issues," "work-life or work-family issues," or "lifecycle issues", we still are looking at the need for new methods, policies, and solutions to the transformations taking place within our homes and our organizations. The Work-life umbrella includes varied topics: flexible work schedules; child care, elder care, and adoption assistance; job shares; employee assistance programs; job stress; wellness; information and referral networks; education and training workshops; leave

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policies (family, health, emergency, parental, sabbaticals, etc.); telecommuting, benefit packages, and the cultivation of trust, communication, and respect among colleagues.

This paper examines work/ family issues in several contexts. First, a historical context is presented thereby setting the stage for an overview of the current trends affecting organizations. (*** Due to space limitation, the Historical Context was deleted for these proceedings. For a copy of the full paper, contact the author.**) Next, the need for work/life changes is identified followed by the barriers to change frequently confronted. The necessity for champions in higher education and industry to embrace progressive policies is advanced and the strengths that engineering educators and employers can exert are emphasized. A process for implementing change is then proposed.

CURRENT TRENDS AFFECTING ORGANIZATIONS

***Increasing Diversity of the Workforce:** Demographic changes in the U.S. over the last twenty years have been dramatic. Higher rates of women and minorities entering the workforce has created greater diversity, and this trend continues. The American Psychological Society, along with numerous other groups, has estimated that by the year 2000 women will make up two-thirds of all entering workers and 29 percent will be ethnic minorities. While still the majority in the U.S. workforce, white males will comprise less than 40% of the workforce by 2010. And diversity is increasing due to expanding international business.

*** Globalization of the Marketplace:** No longer are companies facing only local or national competitors but are now focusing on international markets prompting a need to be cognizant and respectful of other cultures and open to innovative ways of working. As organizations strive to remain competitive in an increasingly technological society, they also need to consider their human capital in times of downsizing, mergers, takeovers, and organizational structure changes. By assisting employees with the increased stress, additional responsibility, and often low morale evident during these transitional times, organizations can retain commitment from their employees.

*** Increasing Concern with Human Resources:** In the 1970's and 1980's when an abundant labor force existed, employees had little opportunity to make requests or demands on their employers. As we encounter an increasing shortage of available workers, many of whom are not adequately prepared to handle the increasing technological base needed, organizations are realizing the associated costs of recruitment, training, information, productivity level, etc. when they lose their highly trained employees to their competitors. By reinvesting in their employees and becoming responsive to their needs, organizations can retain and attract the best and the brightest of those entering the workforce. Higher education faces similar shortages as the baby boomers become the retiring professoriate. There is increased difficulty in recruiting faculty in some disciplines (engineering, science, and mathematics possibly leading the list), and further competition

in retaining women, minorities, and all top ranking faculty members who can be enticed to campuses providing the most advantages to them.

* **Increased Professionalism in Management**: Managers are receiving advanced professional education and ongoing training in management strategies and the proliferation of management books, articles, and journals has mushroomed as leaders attempt to learn the "best" strategies for remaining competitive.

* **Cognitive Psychology Movement**: Cognitive psychology, the study of how people think and process information, has given us research on the brain, decision-making processes, and motivation can assist us in addressing concerns individually and collectively.

* **Empirical Approach to Work Behavior**: Computer technology provides new ways to analyze and interpret data as well as an enhanced ability to collect, assess, and evaluate the need for and effectiveness of new programs and policies.

* **Greater Focus on Quality**: Without quality products and services, organizations can't compete well in today's marketplace. While quality needs to be emphasized, organizational cultures must also encourage their employees motivation to produce that quality.

* **Changing Definitions of Families**: Families are now defined variously: "single parents, unwed mothers (many by choice), multiple stepfamilies, same-sex couples, unmarried parents with children unrelated to one another, and single adults who choose to live alone [or together]." ⁵ Many employees are part of the "sandwich generation" providing care for their children, as well as a parent, and elder care is frequently seen as a broader issue than childcare. Additionally, the number of American children living in poverty remains staggeringly high. While this is certainly morally wrong, it also creates a future cost our society will face.

* **Changing Gender Roles**: While women's roles have changed significantly, attitudes about men's roles have changed, albeit gradually, as well. Many studies indicate that baby-boom men did not spend as much time with their fathers as they would like and the young men in our classrooms frequently agree. Given their expressed desire for more parenting involvement, greater numbers of men would likely vocalize their interest and utilize work-family policies if they felt there was a more supportive workplace climate.

* **Changing Definitions of Work**: A profound structural shift has also redefined the definition of what "work" is. The boundaries between work and family are becoming more diffuse since entering the Information Age where faxes, computers, car phones, etc. offer greater flexibility for *when* work can be done and *where* it can be done. The emphasis has moved from counting the number of "face hours" an employee puts in to evaluating the effectiveness and timeliness of a task's completion. These trends are

affecting every aspect of our lives. Just as earlier generations were affected when the United States moved from an agricultural to an industrial base, the changes are no less significant now as we adapt to the Information Age.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED

The work-family issue should not be a battle between employers and employees because in reality they are on the same team. If an organization does not support the need for policy changes, they will find themselves losing employees to those that do. Ms. Susan Seitel with the Work-Family Connection, Inc. at the University of Minnesota highlights seven primary motivators for implementing work/family changes. Inherently linked to the current trends facing organizations are the needs to 1) recruit talented individuals. Industry and education alike need to be concerned about our aging workforce, the need for highly skilled individuals, diversity, and increasing competition for employees, 2) to retain the employees they have already invested in, 3) increase productivity and decrease loss. Current research indicates that those organizations implementing work/family policies have shown declines in absenteeism, turnover, and illness, and productivity has increased when individuals are given the opportunity to more flexibly manage their time, 4) Increase morale thereby increasing productivity, 5) Decrease workplace stress and depression which create physical illness. By providing a supportive work environment significant savings can be earned through reduced health care costs, 6) Gain commitment from employees. As Ms. Seitel explains, "this is not just productivity we're talking about - it's a little different than just churning out the work. This is commitment - it means catching mistakes, noticing when things could be done more efficiently, spending some time thinking about how to do a better job, using time more wisely, not gossiping or putting down management or co-workers." ⁷ 7) do the right thing. Families and organizations are composed of people who are our current and future workers and consumers.

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Dana Friedman, founder and president of the Work and Family Institute in New York along with Ellen Galinsky and Peter Stein, have identified five obstacles to the development of work-family programs in their research with Fortune 500 companies: 1) during a time when many organizations are downsizing, cost-cutting, and restructuring, employers often believe that work-family issues can be postponed until more profitable times. Interestingly, the research has shown that this is often the *best* time to consider new policies. 2) organizations want to see bottom-line proof that work-life policies will be beneficial. A growing body of research is now available which supports these findings, however, more awareness and education of employees and employers is imperative. 3) Many workplace climates are not conducive to speaking up about work-life issues because employees fear reprisal or dismissal. Many top policy makers grew up in "traditional families" and without having experienced the issues themselves, they may remain unaware of their impact on employees and performance. They may never have

experienced the challenges of balancing work and family life due to having more definitive and divided roles in their own families. Again, increasing education on the issues is needed.^{9,10} 4) Organizations need solid data from their own employees in order to tailor their programs and policies thereby increasing the success of work/family changes. 5) How does an organization treat employees equitably when individuals have differing needs? One response is to realize that treating employees equitably is not necessarily treating them the *same*. Another is seeing a life-cycle approach to one's career where at various career junctures employees have differing needs.

Unique circumstances at colleges and universities, according to the Families and Work Institute and CUPA study, can be further barriers. Academic calendars, diverse and autonomous departments or colleges, tenure issues, research, and various organizational structures prompt creative alternatives.

EFFECTING CHANGE

What comes first; individual change or organizational change? I suggest that one cannot work independently of the other. Focusing our energies on individual change may only increase the frustrations of individuals if the institutions remain rigid. We also cannot implement sweeping organizational change (at least not effectively) if the individuals resist, sabotage, or ignore the change without an understanding of the need and desire for it. A two-pronged focus seems most productive, and while change can be initiated from either prong, organizational change has the potential for the broadest and most timely impact. The following is a four step process for implementing change.

Whether we consider the corporation or, certainly having the commitment of organizational leaders can expedite changes. This, however, is frequently not the case. Essential to any organization though is a "champion", a change agent who understands the value of work-family policies to both sides of the equation. The Leadership Campuses highlighted in the Work-Family Institute/CUPA report indicated that the president, provost, or faculty-senate demonstrated a commitment to work-family issues. Additionally, the Human Resources director and department chairs are important players in supporting initiatives. This must be the first step.

In the corporate sector historically, two factors have influenced proactive work-life policies: 1) the size of the organization, with larger firms in high growth industries and service sectors being at the forefront, and 2) organizations with a high percentage of female employees. Other organizations who want to recruit and retain skilled workers - those with higher education, high productivity, strong technical skills, and the ability to create profits for the organization - also implement work-life policies in the hope of increasing worker satisfaction. In either environment, once a champion or "team of champions" (i.e. task force, faculty-senate committee, council) is established the next steps can be initiated.

Second, a Needs Assessment is vital to determine the prevalence of needs and also to prompt an awareness of the issues. It also can reflect the costs of inaction in a work/family direction. The Needs Assessment is not costly and can be done in several formats: 1) Needs Assessment Survey, 2) Management Interviews, 3) Focus Groups, 4) Internal Research (to learn why people left an organization and to evaluate existing policies, etc.), and 5) External Research (to identify available community resources and "best practices" nationally and internationally.) The Needs Assessment can be done by members of the organization or consultants. While college and university data is still in short supply, considerable research is now available from corporate studies which is easily transferable when we view the university as an "employer". Linking policy changes to the organization's vision and concerns strengthens the likelihood of the policy's implementation. The policies must be in line with the needs of the organization as well as the needs of the people within that organization.

After determining needs, a third step can be utilized, that of generating options. Options can be divided into several types of efforts. Work by Ms. Susan Seitel suggests four distinct efforts: 1) Programs, 2) Policy implementation, 3) Flexibility, and 4) Culture/climate change.

Programs can be educational seminars; information and referral for childcare, elder care, adoption assistance; employee assistance programs; wellness programs, etc. Policy implementation includes written policies for family leave, funeral leave, sabbaticals, emergency leave, and benefits packages. It is critical for the success of work-family policies that they not only be formalized into employee handbooks and policy manuals but be endorsed on a day-to-day informal basis as well. Flexibility takes many forms including flextime, job shares, part-time work, telecommuting, and other flexible schedule arrangements. Promoting an organizational climate/culture conducive for employees to speak freely, express needs, and not fear repercussions from utilizing policies is necessary and coincides with trust, communication, and respect among co-workers.

The fourth step is developing, at the onset, assessment and evaluation methods to be reviewed regularly. Evaluation can demonstrate the effectiveness of policies and the still unmet needs which may be ongoing in the lifecycle of an organization. The organization's "champion(s)" or consultant needs to direct these efforts and update them to insure successful implementation. Organizations need and deserve proof that work/family efforts are credible, valuable, and cost-saving to the institution. Employees need to see the endorsement of these efforts from their organizational leaders, understand the life-cycle equity ideology, and believe that they are free to utilize the efforts created without negative outcomes. Creating work-family policies can thus be a win-win situation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3 Lord, 80.

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