



# Balancing Work and Family:

## Working with Your Employer

*What does it mean to be family friendly?*

*A company realizes that the employee is not two separate people. Companies acknowledge the importance of their employee's home life and help them respond as best they can.*

*Susan Seitel, President  
Work & Family Connection  
Minneapolis*

*A survey of work/family professionals regarding flexibility found:*

- 1. Employee requests are driving the increase in a variety of flexible working arrangements.*
- 2. Attitudes, not procedures, are the most formidable barriers to flexibility.*
- 3. A cluster of strategies has proven effective for implementing flexible schedules.*
- 4. Companies must empower front-line survivors to be flexible.*

*The Conference Board  
December 1991*

### **H**ow Do I Approach My Employer?

You are the best judge of who in your workplace is responsive to work and family needs. Look for a supervisor who is also balancing work and family. Get ideas from co-workers who have had experience with juggling the many roles and responsibilities that you are feeling pressured about and need to address. Each person will have specific situations to work through; however, there are several common needs that most every worker will have to address at some time.

### **T**ime Off for Children's Events at School/Child-Care Site

Visiting your child's school or child-care site is an important task for parents. However, your work demands/schedule may often stand in the way. Sick leave and vacation time are reserved for illnesses and checkups or trips.

Children need parents to help bridge the worlds of home and school. Parents need release time from work, usually in small increments, to attend to their children's needs.

More and more employers are recognizing the importance of parent involvement. They know it's critical to get children off to a good start and to support them along the way. They recognize that parents need flexibility.

Some employers are generating release time to allow parents to be more involved in their children's programs, parent-teacher conferences, special educational concern meetings, volunteering to assist in the classroom and chaperoning field trips. Others work out comp time so parents can be involved. As an individual employee or as a group, consider the following four steps when you approach employers.



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*We need to contest the rules of the workplace if we are to modernize. This redesign would be nothing short of a revolution, first in the home and then at places of work—universities, corporations, banks and factories.*

*Arlie Hochschild  
The Second Shift*

#### **Work/Family as a Business Issue**

*When managers look at changing demographics, they see that responding to the family needs of their employees directly affects the bottom line through:*

- *Reduced stress levels of employees*
- *Increased loyalty and morale*
- *Increased commitment to the job and the company*
- *Better recruiting and retention of skilled workers*
- *Enhanced image in the community as a caring organization*
- *Tax breaks for employers and employees.*

#### **Step One: Explain Why Release Time is Important.**

Help employers understand that parent involvement sends an important message to children. It says adults care about what they do each day and are interested in their friends and in their lives as individuals.

Parents need to visit classrooms to:

- help children make the transition from home to school
- better understand the types of activities children are doing so they can be reinforced at home
- build partnerships with and provide support, input and assistance to the children's teachers and care providers.

#### **Step Two: Explain How You Will Use This Release Time.**

For employers to support these activities, help them understand what you will be doing in the schools. Explain that you want release time to:

- spend a few extra hours at the school during the first few weeks
- attend a parent-teacher conference
- attend a special school function such as a play or school trip
- volunteer in the classroom.

#### **Step Three: Be Specific in Your Request.**

It may be helpful to have a specific understanding with your employer at the beginning of the year regarding policies for parent participation. For example, you may ask for:

- two "school readiness" days a year that could be used to participate in your child's education or child-care program
- a certain number of hours a year to increase your involvement in the schools
- more flexibility in your schedule to visit the school/child-care site in the early morning hours or during lunch.

#### **Step Four: Once You Secure Release Time, Keep Your Employer and Others Informed About the Importance of Such a Benefit.**

- If your employer agrees to release time, express your appreciation at an employee function or in the local media.
- After a visit to the school, send a short note to your employer about how much it means to you, your children and the school.
- Share the idea of such a benefit with neighbors and friends who work with other companies.

*What is needed is a thorough reform of the institutions and policies that govern the workplace to ensure that men and women have the time and resources needed to invest in their children.*

*William B. Johnston  
Executive Summary Workforce 2000*

*Don't be discouraged if your workplace isn't yet state-of-the-art. Be creative.*

Support for children and families is a sound investment in the future since caring for children is everybody's business. Release time to encourage parent participation creates an important partnership among parents, employers, schools and child-care providers that can make a difference in the lives of children and in our country.

Remember to go to your employer with solutions, not just a list of your problems.

To resolve work/family conflicts, develop a plan that both employee and employer can live with.

### **Yes, but...**

What if your employer isn't committed to addressing work/family issues? Talk about your concerns and keep letting management know about successful ideas from other workplaces.

One Small Step, California's Bay Area employer work/family coalition, published a list of low price tag initiatives that could help employees handle home life issues but don't demand a major commitment from management. Here are some of their suggestions:

- Contact community resources for free materials, referral numbers and educational programs
- Develop parent and caregiver fairs with provider information and free presenters
- Compile a library of free materials for employees to use
- Use company resources (newsletters, bulletin boards, E-mail) to publicize information
- Set up dependent care spending accounts; use unspent amounts to fund work/family programs
- Review company policies; recommend new policies that promote flexible scheduling
- Host a meeting with local child-care providers to discuss child-care issues and share information.

### **Do these programs benefit employers as much as employees?**

Many businesses are looking at what they can do to support work/family needs in their work force. How can family-friendly programs be justified when a company needs to be leaner?

- The **Ford Foundation** report from Boston University's Center on Work and Family summarized 10 years of research. The report said that family-friendly policies and programs reduced absenteeism and stress and improved morale.
- **Aetna** found its family programs increased retention of its highest performers from 77 percent to 91 percent.

## Time Saving Ideas

- Take time to plan and organize your day.
- Incorporate tasks like planning the day while commuting, cooking while talking on the phone, exercising while watching TV, etc.
- Make a "to do" list.
- Encourage the help of other family members.
- Solve problems one at a time.
- Assign age-appropriate tasks to others.
- Vary your routine.
- Involve all family members with household tasks.
- Notice when you are at your peak and use this time wisely.
- Give plenty of positive attention to your family.
- Create a family calendar to help plan time efficiently.
- Do not expect perfection. It may be necessary to adjust standards to have time to spend elsewhere.
- Enlist outside supports such as family, friends and modern conveniences.
- Accomplish parts of a large task rather than trying to finish it all at once.
- Start now to manage your time effectively.

## Deb Gebeke

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- A survey by the **Commerce Clearing House** listed the hidden costs of unscheduled absences, saying the costs of those absences ranged from an average \$45,000 for small firms to more than \$1.5 million for companies with up to 5,000 employees.
- **Waste Management** reported its Family Life Education program reduced some unscheduled absences as well as decreased benefit claims and improved productivity. The company documented a savings of \$1,600 per participant to offset the \$200 per person cost.
- A **GMAC Mortgage** evaluation showed work and family programs had improved profitability by decreasing turnover, lateness and unplanned absenteeism and enhancing the company's image.
- The **Putnam Companies**, Boston, and several other firms reported providing emergency or back-up care cut absences and increased productivity.
- A Chicago University study for **Fel-Pro, Inc.**, Skokie, Ill., found family-friendly benefits were instrumental in reducing turnover.

## A Final Note

Work and family issues are really everybody's business. Society is just beginning to recognize how everyone — from businesses to agencies to individual families — can work together to strengthen both the workplace and the family. In the end, everyone stands to benefit. But remember that changes occur one step at a time. The most progressive companies were once unaware of the links between family and the business place. Be patient and avoid making demands. Approach your supervisor with ideas that are reasonable, and watch the partnership grow.

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