

# Family-Supportive Workplace Environments: The Employer's Role

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In a 1951 Fortune magazine, an IBM executive described his company's pro-family policy: Wives and children of company men should be included in the life of the corporation by the provision of country club facilities, picnics and parties, and special children's clubs. The responsibility of the corporation was to provide entertainment for the family. A work/family problem was viewed as a conflict between excessive work hours of corporate men and the emotional needs of their wives and children.

Since 1951, family life and the business environment have both changed dramatically. The influx of women into the work force, the economic necessity of two-income families, the increase in single-parent families, child care and elder care availability and affordability, and increased time pressure have all contributed to the work and family concerns of the '90s. Yet many families and businesses have neglected to adapt to these changes.

No longer are family concerns strictly individual or female issues. Balancing work and family is an issue for both females and males. Women have rapidly increased their labor participation in North Dakota as well as in the U.S. Men are expected to be more actively involved at home with household duties and the care of children and/or aging parents.

Often we assume that rural states have remained very traditional with the majority of women primarily at work only in the home. Statistics do not support this line of thinking. Businesses in our state are beginning to develop partnerships to address the inevitable work/family conflicts. The corporate bottom line is a must to consider, but in the end, it is the next generation of children who stand to benefit or lose the most.

Ever since the Workforce 2000 report was issued, progressive companies have recognized that if they want to recruit and retain a skilled, loyal work force, they need to become partners at work and in the community to create a family-friendly environment. Offering options such as flexibility to enable workers to manage their work and personal lives is important as is providing training to assure supervisor sensitivity within the company.

## Benefits Offered and Expected to be Offered

Non-traditional benefits for the work force of 2000	Companies surveyed currently offering	Companies surveyed that will offer by year 2000
Offering child care and referral service	29%	75%
Subsidization of child-care expenses	12%	52%
On- or near-site child-care facilities	7%	35%
Sick child-care facility/home-based care	3%	28%
School/camp advising service	3%	14%
Off-hour babysitting	1%	9%
Elder-care resource and referral service	11%	64%
Subsidization of elder-care expenses	3%	23%
Elder respite care	1%	19%
Part-time employment	80%	94%
Flexible hours	52%	86%
Family leave	49%	84%
Job sharing	24%	67%
Telecommuting (home-based work)	15%	52%

Source: The Work and Family Revolution: How Companies Can

## Supervisor Sensitivity

A headline in the Wall Street Journal read:

**Managers Navigate Uncharted Waters Trying to Resolve Work/Family Conflicts.**

All over the country middle managers and supervisors are on the front lines of handling a variety of issues. How far should an employer go in helping to resolve employee conflicts? How much flexibility and understanding are too much?

Carol Sladek, a work/family consultant for Hewitt Associates in Lincolnshire, Ill., refers to middle managers as "foot soldiers in the work/family revolutions." Their responses range from a fear of getting into trouble to rigid rules to just "winging it."

## Flexibility

The national news recently carried this story about flexibility:

**Mom Late 54 Times; Judge Proposes Flex-time, Not Penalty.**

When Lesbia Morones, a California mother of five, was late for work 54 times in five months, her employer, the Department of Motor Vehicles, decided to cut her pay by 10 percent. Morones took them to court. Because she couldn't drop her youngest children off at child care until 8 a.m. and had only half an hour to get from one end of San Francisco to the other, chances were she would continue being late. Administrative Law Judge Ruth Friedman proposed revoking all penalties and allowing Morones to start her workday 15 minutes later.

The problem,

she said, was not personal but social. The state personnel board appealed the decision, and the matter will go before a state hearing.

Clearly, flexibility is a major concern to employees and supervisors. Employers are looking for creative ways to use flexibility with their work force.

## The Business Response

The workplace of the 1990s is a place of increasing pressure -- pressure to perform, to improve. Employers have increased pressure on employees to meet the needs of their customers and run a profitable business. As a result, employers find their employees are in need of support.

Supervisor and management training in handling work and family concerns is surfacing as an important issue for the workplace in the '90s.

## The Bottom Line

How can you justify work/family programs without giving away the store? What's in it for the business?

A report from The Conference Board called Linking Work/Family Issues to the Bottom Line offers evidence that such programs pay. The report analyzed 80 research studies and concluded that reduced turnover, lower absenteeism and increased productivity are a few of the benefits to companies that help employees balance work and family.

But these conclusions are not unequivocal. "Research can make the case to those who want to see the connection between the bottom line and family concerns," the report notes, "But it will be unconvincing to those who do not believe in this new role for business." Most companies have examined how unmet needs negatively affect productivity, but to date few have tracked how the company's efforts to help meet those needs have positively affected productivity.

Companies with work and family programs in place put a high value on them. They are at least as recession-proof as other human resource programs. According to a survey conducted by The Conference Board in 1992, more than 60 percent of the 131 companies responding indicated their dependent care, alternative work schedules and family leave programs expanded during the past year. While 32 percent of the companies surveyed experienced declining profits, only 2 percent cut family programs more than other human resource programs.

"To some degree, work/family programs are a means of dealing with recessionary problems," says Arlene Johnson, program director of work force research at The Conference Board. "Employers know that their reputation for how they treat people is made during bad times. It's important to give people the feeling that they aren't disposable, and these programs are less expensive to maintain than many others. Often there are no costs involved other than administration."

## Can Small Companies Compete?

Fel-Pro, Inc., a maker of gaskets for internal combustion engines, is a small company that has found family-friendly policies to yield productive workers. The investment in their benefits (child care, summer camp, scholarships, summer jobs, elder care, family leave, emergency care) is rather small. They spend about \$700 per employee per year or 35 cents per hour. Employees know the company cares, and Fel-Pro believes that caring about people is good business. The company continues to grow and has few recruitment and retention problems.

## Constructing A Successful Work/Family Strategy

As companies recognize and respond to employees' family concerns, their attitudes and strategies evolve in predictable ways. Research indicates there are three discernible stages in the evolution of a corporate work/family agenda.

**Stage I:** The first stage involves a focus on child care and the implementation of one or two programs as well as a lot of resistance throughout the organization.

**Stage II:** There is a more supportive culture, a broadened view of work and family, and a coordinated set of responses.

**Stage III:** Companies begin to challenge the status quo and work toward creating a truly family-friendly culture and surrounding community.

While the vast majority of companies follow the three-stage pattern, some do not. The overlapping of the three stages will become even more commonplace as companies continue to learn from each other's experiences.

Once a company implements one policy or program and initial apprehensions prove unwarranted, the firm is likely to expand its programming and continue to do so over time. Generally, the stages represent a snapshot in a dynamic and quickly changing field. Is your company at stage I, II or III?

The following chart describes the evolution of employer work/family programs according to research by the Families and Work Institute.

How will society, in particular your business, reconcile the dual roles and inherent conflicts of work and family while reaffirming basic values of strong families and a productive work force? The answer rests with everyone. The future of business and economic development in North Dakota and the quality of life for North Dakota families may depend heavily on how work and family conflict are addressed. Attention to these issues will be critical for enhancing growth of the state. With changing structures and composition in the work force, separating the myths from the facts when confronting work/family issues is difficult.

### Evolution of Employer Work/Family Programs

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Stage I: Developing a Programmatic Response	Stage II: Developing an Integrated Approach	Stage III: Changing the Culture
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### COMMITMENT

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Emerging but	Work/Family as a	Work/Life as a

Tentative	Human Resource Issue	Competitive Issue
Overcoming assumptions: Work/family is not a business issue Equity means the same policy for all employees Work/family is a woman's issue Child care assistance means creating on- or near-site facilities	Focus on child care is expanded to include other work/family issues (elder care, relocation, etc.) Programs and policies broaden	Work/family issues throughout the company are integrated with such issues as gender equity and diversity There is a movement toward a life-cycle approach, thus broadening the concept of work/family to "work/life" Company involvement extends to global issues and concerns Developing work/family policies is seen as a continuous, dynamic, problem-solving process

#### PROCESS

Identifying the Problem	Centralizing Responsibilities for Work/Family Programs	Mainstreaming the Issues
Committed individual(s)/ champion(s) takes on the job of making a business case for a company response to work/family issues Champion(s) convinces others that there is a cost to not responding, e.g.: employees may miss time or be less productive because of unmet child care needs Champion(s) demonstrates many possible solutions If a task force is created to assess employees' needs (usually through surveys or focus groups), its focus is on child care	Part- or full-time responsibility is assigned to an individual or group, often at the level of director, manager or vice president Position of work/family coordinator may be instituted Top-level commitment begins to emerge Work/family initiatives are seen as a key to recruiting and retaining skilled employees Training to help supervisors manage work/life issues may be initiated If a task force is created, its focus is on work/family issues	Implementing flexible time and leave policies becomes central Changing the workplace to be more flexible calls traditional work assumptions into question Work/family management training is undertaken, or such training is integrated into core management education programs If a task force is created, its focus is on work/family issues

#### SOLUTIONS

One at a Time	Integrated	Holistic and Strategic
Programs generally focus on child care for employees with young children Separate solutions are found in the following areas: child care assistance, flexible time policies and flexible benefits The one or two solutions developed are seen as an add-on to other human resource programs	The extent to which personnel policies, time and leave policies, benefits affect family life is considered A package of several policies and programs is developed in response to a wide variety of work/family problems Policies are periodically reviewed and revised Work/family and other issues are seen as ongoing and dynamic	Full consideration is given to company culture and its effect on family/personal life Consideration is given to the effects of using family-responsive policies on career development Work/family issues become linked to strategic business planning

#### COMMUNITY FOCUS

Information Sharing	Collaborative	Influential
Companies begin to share information with each other, but generally	Companies and individuals come together to share information, solve	Companies advocate or designate funds for improving the quality and

act alone to solve  
problems and develop  
programs

problems and develop  
joint solutions  
Companies and individuals  
reach out to their  
communities to share  
resources  
Some advocacy for local,  
state and federal programs  
such as Head Start

supply of community-based  
dependent care services  
Company programs reach out  
to the underserved in  
their communities as well  
as their own employees

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## Myths and Realities of Work/Family Policies

### **One size fits all.**

No one program will fit all companies nor will it fit all employees within one company. Organizations need different approaches, depending on timing and circumstances, just as individuals need different kinds of support at different times in their lives.

### **Presence equals productivity.**

According to Ellen Galinsky, co-president of the Families and Work Institute, "We are moving the definition of productivity from 'How many hours do you put in?' to 'What do you actually accomplish on your job?' Quality of work and performance is seen as more important than quantity of time put into the job."

### **Give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile.**

"Research shows that if you give 'em an inch, they'll give back a mile," according to Galinsky, who notes that studies show when supervisors are accommodating, workers are more likely to give more effort to the job, even if it means taking work home.

### **Work/family issues are women's issues.**

Michael Macoby in his book "Why Work?" described how women's and men's values are converging into "new generation values" that include independence, self-development and the creation of a balanced life that sacrifices neither work nor family. A Bank Street College study of one high-tech company showed that "42 percent of the male employees and 43 percent of the females felt that their work and family responsibilities interfered with each other a great deal."

### **Child care is the family's problem.**

When family problems interfere with work responsibilities, it's obviously the company's problem, too. Moreover, Galinsky says, "What we're seeing now is the growing assumption that children are our future workers and we'd better consider them a resource just like we consider our current workers a resource."

### **Many companies are downsizing and don't need family-supportive programs.**

An upheaval, such as reorganization, may be the right time to introduce family-supportive initiatives to reduce stress and increase employee loyalty.

### **Family-supportive initiatives are costly.**

Granted, some programs offered by large corporations, such as on-site child care, can be expensive. But many work/family initiatives cost little or no money, such as flexible work hours, flexible spending accounts, on-site seminars and a supportive environment.

### **The timing is not right.**

There is no best time to start implementing family-friendly work policies except now. Taking the first step, however small, is critical to addressing these issues.

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