

Job justice: A key to retaining talent

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

If your director of human resources informed you, the CEO of a company, that implementing certain workplace policies at your business is highly associated with employee productivity and retention, what action might you take? What action might you take if you also learned that the costs of implementing these policies would have limited or no impact on the budget? What if you learned that the fiscal costs of these policies were minimal compared to the benefits for the company? Have you made a decision? A rational decision making approach might guide you to approve the implementation of these policies, especially if recruiting and retaining top talent is a priority for your firm. What type of policy might have such an impact on your company, you might be thinking. The answer is domestic partner benefits.

The term “domestic partner” is often defined as one of two individuals who are in a committed intimate relationship, live together, and are not married. The obvious difference between domestic partners and married partners is that the latter is afforded a range of economic and social protections sanctioned by federal, state and workplace policy. In 2004, the U.S. General Accounting Office estimated that federal law provides 1,138 ways in which married couples are given special treatment and from which domestic partners are excluded. The term “domestic partner benefits” often refers to employee benefits or social policies that provide the same benefits or protections to domestic partners as they do to married couples. While some companies extend domestic partner benefits to same-sex and opposite couples, in this article I use the term to connote same-sex partnerships. Examples of employer-sponsored domestic partner benefits include: access to spousal medical benefits, inclusion of a partner’s health costs as a legitimate expense covered by pre-tax spending accounts, and allowing same-sex partners to use employee resources such as child care assistance, elder care resource and referral or the office gym that is generally accessible to family members.

The costs of extending to domestic partners the same employee benefits offered to legally married employees are generally related to: 1) the implementation of a particular benefit, and 2) the employee perceptions of organizational justice. The most common domestic partner benefit that employers generally offer is health benefits to an employee’s same-sex partner. The costs of establishing this policy in workplaces have been shown to be minimal. The National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association purports that large employers have between less than .5 and 1 percent of employees enroll their same-sex partners. Another study conducted by KPMG Peat Marwick suggests that insurance premium costs for same-sex partners are the same as or less than costs for spouses. So it seems costs are not a barrier to implementing domestic partner health benefits.

The second set of consequences associated with providing domestic partner health benefits results from employees’ and future employees’ perceptions of justice within their organization. Although the trend is towards adoption of domestic partner health insurance in companies of all sizes, a recent Society for Human Resources survey reveals that only about 32 percent of employers of all sizes and 44 percent of large firms offer domestic partner health insurance. Locally, very few companies offer this category of employee benefit to domestic partners. The consequences of not offering domestic benefits to employees in same-sex relationships could be eroding workplace culture. Organizational justice research shows that a climate of injustice in the workplace leads to higher employee turnover, low morale, employee stress, and increase in incidents of workplace violence. Put another way, the adverse consequences to employers of

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discriminating against employees with same-sex partners by not extending comparable health benefits as those received by married employees are substantial. A formula developed by Louise Young, co-chair of the Human Rights Campaign's Business Council, measures the dollar amount of increased productivity created by a fair and inclusive work environment for lesbian and gay workers. The formula assumes conservatively that the number of gay and lesbian employees in any workplace would be five percent and the amount of productivity associated with a safe and equitable workplace would be ten percent. These numbers allow an organization to estimate how much money a firm might lose by not providing a safe and equitable workplace. For instance, an organization that employs 500 employees would have approximately 25 gay or lesbian employees. If the average salary is \$40,000, the average loss in productivity per gay worker per year is \$4,000, resulting in a total annual loss of productivity to the organization of \$100,000. This estimated loss of \$100,000 excludes the costs of gay discriminatory policies to "straight" (heterosexual) employees. For instance, human resources professionals report that they sometimes lose potential job applicants because a growing number of highly educated professionals refuse to work in an organization that deliberately discriminates against a class of employees. Additionally, the figure noted above does not consider costs of lost company business due to gay and gay-friendly people refusing to use a company's services because of their exclusionary policies. As Business Lexington's editor Tom Martin suggested in his April 21st editorial, discriminating against gay people has radiating, long-lasting and very costly effects for businesses and for communities. His reported example of Cincinnati is a powerful one, one worth repeating. According to a spokeswoman for the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau, Cincinnati has lost at least \$46 million in potential convention business since the 1994 anti-gay amendment. It is clear that successful organizations such as many of those listed on Fortune Magazine's top 500 companies are leading the way by abolishing discrimination in the workplace. It is time for more Kentucky-based and Kentucky-owned employers to end discrimination in their workplaces by adopting domestic partner benefits. I commend local leaders such as Centre College, The Lexington Herald-Leader, Lexmark, and Toyota for setting the pace in Kentucky's Bluegrass region.

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Original publication: May 19, 2006

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Office spouses: A boon for productivity or a mess for home-life?

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

If you have a working partner or spouse, have you ever considered where he or she is most workdays? Actually the question should be, have you ever considered with whom your partner or spouse spends most of his or her time at work? In a survey conducted last January by Vault Inc., a New York-based career research firm, 32 percent of employees acknowledged having an “office spouse.” An office spouse appears to be a person with whom an employee of the opposite sex spends limitless amounts of time collaborating, sharing ideas and doing whatever it takes to get the job done. For some, it may be spending the most waking work-week hours together, traveling long hours to and from business appointments, or engaging in occasional conversations during non-work hours. For others, it might be collaborating on various types of job-related projects. Ah, you might be thinking an “office spouse” is code language for an office love affair. Not at all, say experts.

Men and women have always enjoyed friendships at work. However, it seems that as men and women are becoming more equally distributed within the ranks of organizations, male and female employees are increasingly working as peers. In a recent article on “office spouse” social phenomena in *Globe and Mail*, a Canadian newspaper, Julian Barling, associate dean and professor of organizational behaviour and psychology at the Queens School of Business in Kingston, Ontario, is noted as saying that “it is not surprising that men and women develop strong personal bonds when they are forced to spend long hours together and to work as a tightly knit team.”

Research suggests that having a good friend at work is highly associated with job satisfaction, productivity and employee loyalty. Findings from a Gallup Organization’s study of 4.5 million U.S. workers between 2002 and 2004 suggest that 30 percent of respondents have a good friend at work. Among this subset of employees, 60 percent reported they were satisfied in their jobs. So it seems having a good friend is good for employees and good for workplaces.

But what happens when employees’ romantic spouses or partners become suspicious of the “office spouse?” Or what happens when office rumors start circulating about a close male-female office relationship? Experts on work behaviors and relationships suggest several strategies for dispelling negative rumors at home or at work. For instance,

Clear the air. At home, discuss the work relationship with your spouse or partner as soon as possible. Be clear that the relationship is a platonic working relationship. Do the same with the office manager. Tell the manager there is nothing inappropriate about the relationship. Be sure to secure the manager’s and organization’s support for the work friendship.

Invite others in. Plan a dinner party so your romantic partner/spouse can get to know your close on-the-job associate. Dispelling any myths about the office spouse may help to circumvent any possible suspicion from your loved one. At work, exclusive relationships should be avoided. Invite co-workers to join you and your office spouse for lunch or for an after-work social hour.

Common sense rules. When the office spouse pair gets together with their “real” partners/spouses, inside jokes or discussions about work should be avoided. The goal is to make your “real” partner/spouse feel

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included, not excluded, from your relationship with your work spouse. On the job, when collaborating with a large team, avoid always sitting next to your office spouse, and avoid too much physical contact or intimate chat.

Other strategies that organizations can employ to minimize negative consequences associated with close office male-female contact include: set clear office policy about employee conduct; have a strategy in place if other employees express discomfort about the behaviors of a close male-female working team; and resist the temptation to discourage a close male-female working relationship as it first develops. Talking with the pair in question is a great approach to better understanding the relationship.

Platonic working relationships between men and women in the workplace have always existed. However, as greater numbers of women fill positions throughout all levels of organizations and as companies demand more from their employees, workers may find themselves heavily dependant on an opposite sex co-worker to achieve work related objectives. Cultivating these healthy working relationships among co-workers may reap many benefits for the company, especially if romantic partners and spouses understand the meaning of these complex couplings.

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Original publication: April 21, 2006
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Beyond living wages

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

Last month this column focused on a contemporary conundrum facing policy makers: what defines a minimum standard of living necessary for the general well-being of working families? And should local, state or federal policies play a role in helping families achieve this standard? Soon after the column was published, a friend (I'll call her Denise) asked me if I knew where in town someone could receive medical care at little or no cost. Denise, a finance professional by training, is a social worker in her heart. She is forever trying to assist friends and family in need. This time Denise needed guidance for one of her colleagues. The dilemma encountered by Denise's co-worker, Liza, demonstrates that full-time employment is not always associated with a minimum standard of living.

Liza, a thirty-something, loving mother of two school-age children, works full-time as an administrative assistant for a Lexington-based employer. According to Denise, Liza earns an hourly wage between \$9 and \$10 and has worked for her current employer for over one year. Although Liza has a four-year college education, in the past she has had difficulty finding full-time employment that also pays a "decent" wage. It took her nearly six months to secure her current job, which she considered a boon because of the good hourly wage. Provided Liza or her children do not experience any unforeseen, negative life events requiring unplanned expenses, Liza saves a few dollars each month.

Generally speaking, Denise reports that life has been good for Liza. Her daughters thrive at school, she enjoys her job, and she looks forward to spending evenings and weekends with her children. One day, as Liza was preparing to take her children to school, she noticed her car had a flat tire. She tried to change the tire, but the deflated spare in the car's trunk was useless. A neighbor generously offered to drive Liza's girls to school and her to work. During her lunch break, Liza made arrangements to have her tire repaired at the end of the week when she received her weekly paycheck. During the four-day interim period without transportation, Liza relied on friends to take her children to school and to give her rides to and from work. Although the flat tire created a cascade of inconveniences, she never missed work.

A few weeks later, Liza's children played tag team with a mean case of influenza. Her oldest daughter was home from school for three days, while her other daughter missed two additional school days. Like any attentive mother, Liza stayed home to care for her ailing children. In total, Liza missed five days of work. Now, this may seem like a minor hassle for those of us with access to paid sick or vacation leave. For us, missing five consecutive days may create a few frenzied days upon our return to work, but our home and safety is rarely threatened by such events. However, for someone like Liza missing five days of work means a 25 percent reduction in monthly income. Yes, that's right. Liza's job is classified as "temporary," and sick or vacation time is not an employee benefit associated with the position. A 25 percent decrease in monthly wages for any working family may create a financial strain. However, for a single mother earning minimal wages, such an extreme drop in pay could prevent timely payments for rent, mortgage or utilities. According to Denise, Liza stretched her income that month by paying her rent in two small rent payments rather than one single large payment.

Almost as soon as Liza's children recovered, she developed a cold, which eventually turned into bronchitis with a high fever. Despite a high temperature, cough and raspy voice, Liza faithfully went to work. Her work

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ethic in combination with her tight fiscal circumstances associated with missing a week of work during the previous month ensured that Liza had perfect on-the-job attendance. Though her attitude and stamina prevented Liza from missing work, it failed to heal her illness.

Enter my friend. Denise naively asked Liza, "Did you see your doctor?" "No," she replied. "I do not have health insurance." Apparently, temporary employees at Liza's workplace are ineligible for health benefits. Denise, frustrated by the situation, proceeded to ask about local health care clinics that offer free or low-cost services. Liza knew them all well. Yet she had been unable to seek medical attention for her recent illness because the clinic's hours of operation were incompatible with Liza's work hours. According to Liza, people seeking health care at the local health clinic must arrive by 8:00 a.m., sign up for a time to see a medical professional and then wait for that appointment - even it means waiting a few hours. Liza had been reluctant to go see a medical professional, because she had not wanted to miss work.

Liza's circumstances illuminate the vulnerabilities encountered by working parents employed full-time, but without private social benefits, such as sick time or employer-sponsored health insurance. Kentucky, like most states, provides a host of private and public social benefits aimed to assist the "deserving" poor. Yet somehow these systems fail some of the most vulnerable working families. Health clinics may be available to people without health insurance, yet from the perspective of a working person, the hours may be incompatible with their jobs. And for employees without sick or vacation leave, visiting the doctor means losing wages - a situation few working families can afford.

Liza did eventually see a doctor; she prescribed rest and an antibiotic. Despite the fiscal hardship associated with missing work, Liza followed the advice of her physician.

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Original publication: March 10, 2006
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Living wages for working families: A policy paradox

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

One of the most illuminating classroom exercises that I facilitate in my undergraduate and graduate social policy classes is one where I assign students hypothetical working family situations. Students are given scenarios where the primary wage earner in their family works full time (40 hours a week) and earns the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. After assigning students various jobs, wages, and informing them of their families' various circumstances, I ask them to create a monthly budget for their families. Throughout this classroom exercise, students discover the shortfalls associated with the current federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. One of the first lessons learned is that despite working full-time, a single head of household earning minimum wage has difficulty affording adequate housing for a family of three or four. Before taxes, a full-time worker earning minimum wage earns a monthly income of \$824. Assuming the average two-bedroom apartment in Lexington costs \$500 a month, there is very little income remaining for other expenses such as food, utilities and transportation. Students also learn that even if the primary wage earner in their family earns an hourly wage of \$6.00, or if there is another family member earning an hourly wage between \$5.50 and \$6.50 the family unit will still encounter financial hardship trying to meet basic living expenses.

This teaching exercise is designed to illuminate the paradox of public policy, in particular the paradoxes of social policy. Often students believe that social policies are designed to promote or protect the well-being of actors in the polis. However, this hypothetical working family exercise demonstrates otherwise. Though well intended, sometimes policies fall short of their initial intention.

The federal minimum wage was established as part of the 1938 Fair Labor Standard Act. At the time of its creation, the U.S. Congress deemed it necessary to create labor standards because "industries engaged in commerce or in the production of goods for commerce, had labor conditions detrimental to the maintenance of the minimum standard of living necessary for health, efficiency, and general well-being of workers." The 1938 Fair Standards Labor Act established a federal minimum wage, child labor protections, and maximum work hour stipulations, among other policies.

How do policy makers, at either the federal, state or local level, determine the meaning of a minimum standard of living? Lately, some of the Commonwealth's policy makers are advocating for an increase in the state minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.00 in 2006, and to \$6.50 in 2007. By passing such legislation, Kentucky would join 17 other states and the District of Columbia in increasing the state minimum wage above the federal standard. One of the most common arguments against raising the federal minimum wage is that it would increase costs for businesses and would thereby reduce the number of available jobs. However, research by two economists, Alan B. Krueger of University of California, Berkeley and David Card of Princeton University, found otherwise. In 1992, New Jersey increased the state minimum wage to \$5.05 from \$4.25, while Pennsylvania maintained the federal minimum wage. Their analysis of the effects of the minimum wage on the fast-food restaurants and low-wage jobs in the two states found that a modest increase in wages did not harm the labor market. In fact, they found that an increase in minimum wage increased employment.

At a national level, large corporations have entered the discussion about the minimum wage. In a recent New

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York Times Magazine article, it was reported that Wal-Mart's president and C.E.O supports an increase in the minimum wage. From his perspective, an increase in the minimum wage would have little effect on his company's operations, as Wal-Mart's current average hourly wage is \$9.68. Increasing the minimum wage would be more likely to benefit Wal-Mart's customers than its employees, which of course is good for Wal-Mart. Similarly, 2004 Bureau of Labor Statistics data suggest that among the 704 occupational categories listed for Kentucky, only four occupational categories reported an average wage of less than \$7.00 per hour-waiters & waitresses, food preparers, fast food cooks, and dining and cafeteria attendants.

The poverty rates in Kentucky are increasing among working families with children. In nearly two-thirds of these families, research suggests that it is likely that both parents are employed full-time. The United States Social Welfare State is rooted in the English Poor Laws, first established in England during the early 1600s. One of the legacies of the English Poor Laws is the idea of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. That is, individuals who are poor through no fault of their own should receive some form of public assistance. In contrast, individuals who are poor because they choose not to work or they choose to engage in activities that prohibit them from working do not deserve public assistance. Conservatives and liberals have long debated this matter. However, what is indisputable is that in Kentucky (as in other states) a contemporary policy paradox plagues policy makers and the business community. Many employed people are poor through no fault of their own. Until federal or state governments choose to intervene and change the system, current policy interventions will continue to fall short of promoting a minimum standard of living necessary for the general well being of working families.

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Original publication: February 10, 2006

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Baby boomers changing trends ... again

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

2006 marks the first year that “baby boomers,” people born between 1946 and 1964, turn 60. Happy birthday to all born in 1946! I wish you a year and many more of good health, prosperity, and fulfillment.

In the past, as workers approached the seventh decade of their lives, many contemplated retirement, thinking about endless days of golf, building the perfect dream house or caring for grandchildren. For over the last fifty years, older Americans exited the labor force in their early to mid sixties. Most were able to support themselves on Social Security, plus additional income from pensions, savings, investments and earnings from part-time employment. However, economic and demographic trends suggest that turning 60 or 65 may no longer be synonymous with retirement. In fact, research suggests that workers 45 and older are likely to postpone retirement.

Why will older workers work past the “traditional” retirement age? A number of factors influence the reasons older workers stay in the labor force or return to the labor force. According to Boston College’s Center on Aging & Work, financial stability, physical and mental well being, job satisfaction and the work environment are primary factors that inform older workers’ decisions to remain in the labor force. Older workers’ assessment of their own financial resources dramatically affects their decision about how long they will continue working. As an example, in a recent Conference Board Survey, among the older workers indicating they will retire in the next five years, 70 percent stated their financial needs directly affected their decisions about continuing to work.

Working to stay healthy and active is another reason older workers stay employed. In the past, when jobs were physically demanding, older workers left the labor force because of injuries, or they lacked the physical stamina to do the job. However, in general, older workers are healthier than in years past. As a result, older workers are interested in staying employed longer. According to research conducted by Phyllis Moen, a sociologist from the University of Minnesota, the desire to stay physically active was the second primary factor influencing older workers’ decisions to continue working; second only to financial security. Additionally, research studies have consistently found a direct relationship between employment and life satisfaction of individuals 65 years and older.

You might be wondering, what does this mean for U.S. businesses and other employers? Many of us have walked into Wal-Mart, Target, or a local drug store chain to be greeted by someone who looks like they might be older than 65. From your experience, was there any difference in their work performance than other workers? If your experience is anything like mine, you will agree that generally there is very little difference between older and other workers. In fact, sometimes I have found older workers to be more pleasant and more willing to please the customer.

Businesses and other organizations are recognizing the importance of leveraging the skills and competencies of older workers. As a way to address current and future human resource challenges, some employers have implemented strategies to retain, rehire and recruit older workers. These employers have targeted recruitment and retention strategies to assist their organizations with talent shortages, staffing

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challenges and unwanted turnover. As an example, hospitals with nursing shortages are recruiting retired nurses to fill shifts or to at least be available on an “on call” basis. Similarly, manufacturing plants are using retired workers to fill in when employees are sick or go on vacation.

Another way businesses are leveraging older worker talent is by aligning older workers’ competencies with specific business objectives. Older workers can add a particular value to relationships when experience matters. Likewise, businesses providing services to older workers may find it advantageous to have a workforce that mirrors the demographics of their customers.

Retaining and recruiting older workers can be a boon for employers and workers, especially if organizations create environments or policies conducive to older workers’ needs. Certain organizational environment factors influence older workers’ decisions to either keep working or to leave the labor force. For instance, having some say in the hours scheduled to work or having some choice over the number of hours worked are factors that influence older workers’ job satisfaction or intention to leave the company. Similarly, having the chance to work on a project basis on an as-needed basis, or having the option to change jobs within the same company but with less responsibility are examples of creative workplace solutions being used to retain and recruit older workers. Locally, an employee at a drug store chain was planning to retire from his company because he needed to move to a warmer climate for health reasons. However, when the employee’s supervisor learned why he was retiring, the supervisor suggested transferring to a store in the community where he was moving. The supervisor was intent on keeping the valuable employee working for his company.

Employed men and women in the baby boomer cohort are projected to live longer and healthier lives than their parents’ generation. Once again, baby boomers are forcing us to reconsider previous norms, attitudes and practices. This time, they are challenging the U.S economic and social systems to reconsider old mind-sets about retirement, the meaning of work, and turning 60. Perhaps rather than retire, many will refocus their work, family and personal lives.

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Original publication: January 13, 2006

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Men want work-life balance too!

By Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D.

Columnist: Work/life issues

The 24/7 work week may be on the way out. Well, maybe. Fortune magazine's lead article "Get a Life!" in the November 28 edition suggests that 'round-the-clock operations may be good for companies, but top male executives are realizing it is bad for senior management.

The surprise - men finally agree! The gist of the article? Long working hours are out and alternative workplace practices are in. In an attempt to have a life outside of work, high-level male executives and corporate superstars at Fortune 500 companies seek achievement in their professional goals without jeopardizing their lives outside of work. A poll of 100 Fortune 500 male executives reveals that 84 percent agree with the statement, "I would like job options that let me realize my professional aspirations while having more time for family, community, religious activities, friends and hobbies." Sixty-four percent would choose time over money at the current stage in their career, and 71 percent would prefer more free time over career advancement.

Waves of shock and glee reverberated within the work-life professional community over the past few weeks. E-mails have been flying back and forth between work-life professionals who have been advocating for workplace changes for years, providing senior executives with scientific and anecdotal evidence demonstrating organizational practices that support employees in their work and family roles is not just a women's issue. It is a business issue! Though some enlightened companies have embraced change, other firms have stuck to the ole' "no pain, no gain" philosophy and still consider work-life integration a women's issue.

Impressive examples of retooled job expectations, remodeled organizational practices and revised attitudes fill this Fortune article. Evidence abounds; men in key senior positions in leading U.S. companies get it - having a life outside of work actually improves employee productivity. Participating in family events and family rituals is not just for women. This is great news for workers. Change starts at the top. Senior executives in our country's most prestigious corporations set trends. If male executives "get it" then they are likely to require modification of work environments throughout the organization, including for workers in entry-level positions. Fortune 500 companies set the tone for other businesses. The logic being, "Well, if they've done it successfully, it must be okay for us to try." Men (and women) may now "come out" in their organizations. They can start talking about their families or hobbies. They can leave work at a reasonable hour without fear of being perceived as less committed to the company's success.

I once conducted a study in a top pharmaceutical company where a senior scientist, a new father of twin boys, said he never discusses his children at work, nor puts up photographs of his children. According to his boss, he was not putting in the "face-time" required of employees, and as a result, he worried he would not earn his next promotion. Although he left work at 5 p.m., 5 hours before most of his colleagues, he would arrive to the office by 6 a.m., and many nights would spend at least 4 hours working at home. This did not matter to his superiors; in their minds, he had chosen family over a career as a scientist. This could not have been farther from the truth. In that same company, a mother of three sons started a new trend - leaving work at 5 p.m. within a culture of 12-18 hour days. She and her husband coached baseball for their sons' teams. Initially, senior management questioned this woman's motives, as evidenced by being overlooked twice for a

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promotion. However, once management recognized that her work team produced almost twice as much as other teams, they became believers.

While change at the top is good, what are the general perceptions of U.S. workers? After all, work-life professionals have been pushing for change for nearly 20 years. Statistics of the U.S. labor force suggest that many men are not comfortable bringing up family or personal issues with their supervisors. Almost 40 percent of male employees compared to almost 50 percent of women are at ease about discussing family/personal issues with their supervisors. Likewise, men are less likely than women to perceive their supervisors as understanding when discussing personal or family issues. About 50 percent of men report feeling comfortable discussing personal issues with their supervisors, compared to 60 percent of women. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to report that they experience a lot of interference between their job and non-work life compared to women. Surprisingly, there are no differences between men and women with respect to putting their job before family or family before job in the past year. Seven percent of men and women say they put their job before family very often, while about 20 percent of men and women report they have put family before their job very often in the past year.

The news is out. Male senior corporate executives want a life too. If men start demanding family-friendly workplaces, then maybe this will become the norm rather than the anomaly.

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Original publication: December 16, 2005
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WorkLife: The win-win of workplace flexibility

By Jennifer Swanberg

Columnist: Work/Life Issues

A few weeks ago during a productive workday, parents Robert F. and Alexa Y. received notice from school that their respective daughters were feeling ill. Robert, a senior vice president at a bank and single father, heard the news from the school nurse while sitting in his office preparing for his next meeting. Alexa, a line worker at a manufacturing firm and single mother, found out about her daughter's ill health two hours after the nurse attempted to reach her on her cell phone. Alexa's only opportunity to receive personal voice mail messages is during her mid-day break.

Upon learning about his daughter's fever, Robert asked a colleague to cover the next meeting and then left for the day. Alexa, however, had to get approval from her shift supervisor to leave work early. Alexa knew this request might cause a problem; over the past month, she has missed three days of work and has twice arrived to work late due to her daughter's asthma-related sickness. Alexa's supervisor granted her request.

In the scenario above, Robert and Alexa appear to be in very similar situations. Each has been employed by their respective companies for over five years, is a single parent, and is a valued employee. However, Robert is in a salaried position, while Alexa is an hourly employee. Although leaving early from work to pick up his daughter inconvenienced Robert, he handled the situation with few work-related consequences. For Alexa, the incident resulted in lost pay and reconsideration of a promotion to shift supervisor.

The other difference between Robert and Alexa's situations is that Robert's employer has flexible work policies and Alexa's employer does not have such practices. In Robert's firm, salaried employees are able to use "flex-time" to handle unexpected situations like an ill child. Although he left work early, his company expects that he will complete his work and make up his hours later in the week. In Alexa's firm, employees earn a certain number of sick and vacation days per year. Once the sick days are exhausted, employees taking time off for illness do so without pay. Employees are not allowed to use vacation days for personal or family illness.

Workplace flexibility, broadly defined by New York-based research and policy think tank the Families and Work Institute, is a way to characterize how and when work gets done. While workplace flexibility has been recognized as a strategy to assist employees in meeting their work, family and personal responsibilities, it is increasingly becoming used as a tool to recruit and retain employees, manage workload and respond to employee diversity. Some in the business community recognize that recruiting and retaining talented employees, all of whom have a range of personal and family needs, means making workplace flexibility paramount.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. workforce is growing less than 1 percent annually, and the number of available workers between 25 and 44 will shrink within the next five years. Furthermore, The Saratoga Institute found that it costs 150 to 200 percent of an exempt employee's yearly salary to replace him or her. As a result, the need for and the recruitment of qualified people are forcing companies to rethink recruitment efforts, workplace policies, work schedules and work processes.

Workplace flexibility includes policies such as flex-time, schedule-swap, and flex-career. It can also include such policies as extending the parameters of traditional sick time to include paid time for personal or family

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illness. In the scenarios presented, Robert had the “flexibility” to finish his workday at home by accessing his e-mail and participating in meetings via conference call. Though the nature of Alexa’s work does not allow for comparable practices, if her company had a flexibility policy that allowed employees to use vacation time to cover personal or family illness, she would not have lost pay.

Locally, Lexington Division of Parks and Recreation Director Chuck Ellis has implemented a variety of flexible work arrangements as a strategy to meet the division’s work load, to retain and recruit valuable employees, and to assist employees with work-family situations. For instance, the parks department implemented four 10-hour workdays for people mowing the parks’ fields and lawns. “It made good business sense. Not only does it take time to load the machinery and drive to one of the several city parks, but also sometimes it takes more than six hours to mow a field. Four 10-hour days gives workers more time to complete tasks. It saves time, money and most employees like the schedule.”

Ellis has also approved another situation for a female employee expecting twins and experiencing a high-risk pregnancy. After careful consideration, Ellis and his administrative staff realized that much of her work is computer-related. Providing her with a laptop allowed her to continue working, but under modified work conditions. “I have retained a valuable employee who might have otherwise taken a leave or reduced her hours; we could not afford to lose her,” reported Ellis. Modifying traditional work hours is a practice that should be taken seriously,” says Ellis. “Not every job can be flexible, and each employee situation is unique and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, when flexibility works, employees are more productive, loyal and happier.” National research supports Ellis’ experience. Research suggests employees with access to flexible work arrangements report higher levels of commitment to their employers and report working harder than required to help their companies succeed.

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Original publication: November 18, 2005
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Striking the work-life balance

By Jennifer Swanberg

Work/Life Lines Columnist

Nearly five years ago, my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. She learned about her condition just three months after I had relocated from New York to Kentucky. In addition to grappling with the meaning of parental loss, days and nights were filled with worry about how I would help my siblings care for my mother. As well as living 1,000 miles away from family, I had just started a new job as an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky. It was too soon to request leave under the parameters of the Family Medical Leave Act. Yet she needed me. I was fortunate to have a dean who authorized flexibility in my work schedule, allowing me to spend long weekends caring for my mother. Without her support, I might have needed to resign from my new position.

Most of us can recall a time when juggling the demands of work and family created some form of angst. Maybe your physician's available office hours did not coincide with your work schedule or your child's delayed school starting time due to winter weather caused you to be late for an important work meeting. For some workers, poor bus service or a sick child is reason enough to be late or miss work. School vacation breaks most always become a stressor for working parents with young children. Finding affordable, reliable and safe school vacation programs takes significant time and consideration. I know of a local businessman who closed his successful small business, in part because managing a restaurant operation, caring for a young daughter and transporting his father to and from kidney dialysis appointments three times weekly was becoming an impossible feat. He found another job that was less demanding of his time, allowing him to more easily attend to his family caregiving needs.

The majority of working people in Kentucky and the United States have personal and family responsibilities. According to the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, a national representative study that examines the quality of workers' lives on and off the job, 85 percent of U.S. wage and salaried workers live with family members and have immediate, daily family responsibilities off the job. More than three out of four partnered employees have spouses or partners who are also employed. Nearly 20 percent of workers currently care for an elder family member or friend, and 48 percent expect to care for an aging loved one in the next five years. One in five working parents are part of the "sandwich generation," raising children and caring for elderly relatives.

Over the past three decades, the United States has witnessed major shifts in labor force demographics. For example, the workforce is comprised of more women, single fathers and mothers, employees with working partners and employees with elder care responsibilities. Furthermore, most employees are working longer hours and many work evenings, nights or weekends.

While the social demographics of the U.S. workforce have dramatically changed, the fundamental assumptions on which U.S. workplace policies were developed have essentially remained unchanged. The mainstream view of waged work in the 20th century was built on the view that men were the paid workers and women, unpaid, met the needs of the family. In this view, women's paid employment was considered a strain on the family, and men's paid employment was considered the general custom, presuming the male employee has little or no family responsibilities. Some argue this perspective of women's and men's employment and its relationship to family created the backdrop by which contemporary organizational

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blueprints were constructed. It appears that job schedules, performance expectations and management operations were shaped based on the assumption of male as “provider” and female as “nurturer.”

Sociologist Myra Marx Ferree, from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, argues that the “provider” myth has misrepresented history because it fails to recognize that women have always contributed significantly to the household economy through paid and unpaid work. Nonetheless, the provider myth underlies operational and structural frameworks of organizations. Taking this argument further, a legal scholar from Georgetown University, Joan Williams, posits that the marketplace is organized around the “ideal worker.” This ideal employee works full time and overtime, taking minimal time off for caregiving responsibilities. For instance, at some workplaces, there is an implicit assumption that employees working part time are less committed to the company than full-time employees. As well, working long work hours is inherent to the organizational culture. Such a culture implies that working the standard 35- or 40-hour workweek is substandard performance.

This social issue, the institutional mismatch between workplace practices and the personal and family responsibilities of employees, has been labeled work-family or work-life. In the last 10 to 15 years, workplaces have begun implementing policies and practices responsive to contemporary employees’ work, family, and personal needs, while researchers have been studying consequences associated with this mismatch. In the coming months, this column will focus on various work-life issues. It will cover national work-life trends as well as how local organizations and working people have adapted to contemporary work life.

Original publication: October 21, 2005

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