

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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