

The Leaves Aren't the Only Things Changing

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Work/Life Columnist

November 3, 2007

Along with leaf peeping, pumpkin carving and watching horse races at Keeneland, Kentucky workers had another reason to celebrate in October: the commemoration of National Work and Family Month. Surprised? Who knew? October has become a time when large corporations and the U.S. Congress recognize work-life effectiveness as one of the most critical issues facing U.S. businesses, nonprofit organizations and working families.

In 2003, Fortune magazine approached the Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP), the national organization committed to the development and advancement of the field of work-life effectiveness, expressing its conviction that work-life effectiveness was going to be one of the most important business growth trends of the decade. Fortune's leadership wanted to develop an action initiative to educate public and private leaders about this critical social issue, and to encourage change within organizations. The collaboration between Fortune and the AWLP resulted in what became known as the National Work-Life Initiative.

The National Work-Life Initiative developed a three pronged approach to social action. They proposed: 1) the publication of an annual work-life special section in one of the September issues of Fortune; 2) a congressional resolution declaring an official work-life month; and 3) the designation of a corporate chair to bring attention to the associated business impact of work-life initiatives on a national level. Among the national business and public policy community, the creation of the National Work-Life Initiative marked the emergence of work-life effectiveness as a cornerstone of the 21st century American workplace.

Within a very short time, the National Work-Life Initiative achieved its initial objectives. Fortune published the annual special section on Sept. 29, 2003, addressing critical business imperatives related to work-life initiatives. The special section featured the latest bottom-line research and best practices and included interviews with leaders of the best practice companies, along with labor, government and educational organizations. Over the past three years, the special September sections have reached well over four million business professionals.

The National Work-Life Initiative's second objective was achieved on September 5, 2003, when a 12-member bi-partisan committee led by Senator Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah, unanimously passed U.S. Senate Resolution 210 designating October as "National Work and Family Month." As noted in the resolution, this federal initiative "expressed the sense of the Senate that supporting a balance between work and personal life is in the best interest of national worker productivity" and that "the quality of workers' jobs and the supportiveness of their workplaces are key predictors of job productivity, job satisfaction, commitment to employers, and retention."

The third objective was accomplished when the American Business Collaboration for Dependent Care was selected as the first corporate sponsor to bring attention to the associated business consequences of work-life effectiveness. The American Business Collaboration for

Dependent Care is an eight-member corporate alliance of Fortune 500 companies partnering to ensure that their employees have access to quality dependent care initiatives. In subsequent years, companies such as Morgan Stanley and Xerox have served as corporate chairs.

In Lexington and surrounding areas, internationally recognized corporations such as Toyota, Lexmark and Marriott are leaders in creating work environments and work cultures that support workers in their lives on and off the job. Other large workplaces such as the Lexington Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) and the University of Kentucky have integrated work-life effectiveness into daily operations. For instance, under the leadership of Mayor Pam Miller, LFUCG created a Work-Life Office, appointed a Work-Life Committee, established flex-time and flex-place policies, developed a dependent care resource and referral program, and required supervisors and managers to attend work-life effectiveness training.

The University of Kentucky, under the leadership of President Lee Todd, established a comprehensive work-life initiative, hired a director of work-life to lead the initiative, and launched a university-wide work-life survey. Dr. Todd purports that "the work-life survey results will assist the university in evolving as a competitive work environment attractive to a diverse, dynamic workforce focused on advancing the greater good of our commonwealth."

Work-life effectiveness is not only for large organizations. As illustrated in a report to be released in January 2007 by the UK Institute for Workplace Innovation, throughout Kentucky many small and medium businesses have implemented innovative workplace practices that motivate employees to be productive at work and at home. For instance, Meridian Communications, a Lexington-based full-service advertising agency and event planning company, works collaboratively with employees to provide the flexible work options that meet their needs while ensuring superior service to its clients. For instance, Chief Executive Officer Mary Ellen Slone recently rehired on a part-time basis a former employee who resigned from her full-time job several years ago to raise her children. "When you have good employees, you want to be flexible. It's good for the clients, employees and the business," she said.

W. Rogers Company, a Lexington-based and family-owned municipal water and wastewater treatment contractor, is another great company that has developed innovative workplace practices to meet business demands and employees needs. For over 20 years, W. Rogers has used a "Key Employee Program" to attract and retain quality trade workers. To retain workers rather than relying upon job-by-job hiring, W. Rogers has created incentives for full-time employment with the company. Key employees receive annual paid vacation time, something of a rarity among hourly workers within the construction industry. They also receive a competitive benefits package, opportunities for an annual review and advancement within the company, and the opportunity to attend an annual Key Employee Breakfast that boasts drawings for prizes such as NASCAR tickets and a Bass Pro Shop gift card, among others. Warren Rogers, CEO and son of the company's founder, has worked to cultivate a workplace culture that values employees and provides them with opportunities to succeed both professionally and personally. "We want people to want to work here," said Rogers.

While you are enjoying the fall season's activities, remember that while the U.S. Congress declared October the month to make change within workplaces, the intent was to spur companies to rethink standard workplace practices. If you are a supervisor or manager, consider ways that your management style may facilitate or inhibit employees' ability to work effectively and manage work-life. Likewise, if you own your company or are part of a management team, consider how your organization is assisting employees in achieving optimal business and personal outcomes.

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