Family Ties and Bottom Lines

IT MAKES BUSINESS SENSE TO HELP EMPLOYEES RESOLVE WORK-VERSUS-FAMILY CONFLICTS. BUT IT TAKES SOME TRAINING TO MAKE THIS NEW ROLE A SUCCESS.

BY BONNIE MICHAELS AND ELIZABETH MCCARTY

Fred and Catherine both have full-time jobs. They also have a little girl. Juggling work and home life can create a lot of stress for this young family. After spending the day meeting the demands of their hectic work schedules, they must don the hats of parenthood and meet the demands of a daughter entering the "terrible twos."

Sometimes those demands clash. Their daughter gets sick and Fred or Catherine must stay home. The one at work feels guilty for not staying home, and the one at home worries about work obligations. They've discovered what many parents of the 1990s have learned: It's not easy to be a working parent.

Employees have found too little corporate support for their child- and elder-care responsibilities and too little employer assistance in balancing their work lives and their home lives. They are facing increased workloads, frequent overtime, travel away from home, and other workplace demands.

U.S. demographics indicate that the conflict between family and work is not going to go away by itself.

Sixty percent of the U.S. workforce consists of dual-career couples. Most children have working parents. Sixty percent of all mothers are employed, a figure that is expected to increase to 80 percent by the year 2000.

Though the number of working women has increased dramatically, family responsibilities for the most part remain on women's shoulders. Fifty-seven percent of married women who are parents report 100 percent of the responsibility for home chores. Sick children are still cared for primarily by their mothers. When children are sick, their mothers typically are the ones who miss work.

Lifestyle changes also affect the family responsibilities of today's employees. Men and women are marrying later and having children in their 30s and 40s. Fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce and 80 percent of all divorced people remarry. More than half of them divorce again. These statistics have resulted in many more single parents and combined families.

In fact, 26 percent of U.S. children now live in single-parent homes.

These new families tend to be chronically fatigued, simply from trying to cope with everyday issues. Families in general are struggling to find new ways to live in light of the increased participation of family members in the workforce.

The aging population will also have a dramatic effect on the workplace. By 2000, 15 percent of people in the United States will be over the age of 65. There will be one retiree for every two workers, compared to a present ratio of one to three. One study by the U.S. House Select Committee on Aging found that the average senior citizen needs 18 years of some form of special care. In most cases, family members—predominantly women—provide 80 percent of that care.

More than half of the baby boomers will care for elders and children at the same time. Clearly, the combination of employees' child- and elder-care responsibilities will continue to affect employers for years.

What can companies do? They can offer programs, benefits, and services that support workers and their families. But one of the most cost-effective ways of dealing with family-and-work conflicts is educating upper managers and training employees and managers in how to deal with work and family conflicts.

Executive awareness and support

An excellent way to begin or expand a family-and-work initiative is to hold a forum or retreat for senior decision makers that addresses the changing workforce and its bottom-

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line effect on an organization.

One objective of such a forum could be to educate executives on the effect family-and-work issues have on such corporate goals as productivity, quality, recruitment, and retention. Another objective is to get formal and informal support for family-and-work programs that address those issues.

Upper-management commitment to a company philosophy regarding family is a key element of such a session. To articulate the corporation's position, executives must identify their own values regarding family and work and then determine how and to what extent those values will be incorporated into a philosophy applicable to all employees. Upper management must then decide how the new philosophy will be translated into action over time, and must communicate both the philosophy and the action plan to employees.

Points to discuss during the forum should include the following:
▶ the degree of executives' willingness to be role models of flexible management strategies and the degree to which they are responsible for being role models
▶ support for flexible work alternatives
▶ family-and-work task forces
▶ a commitment to train managers and supervisors to implement work-and-family philosophies and directions
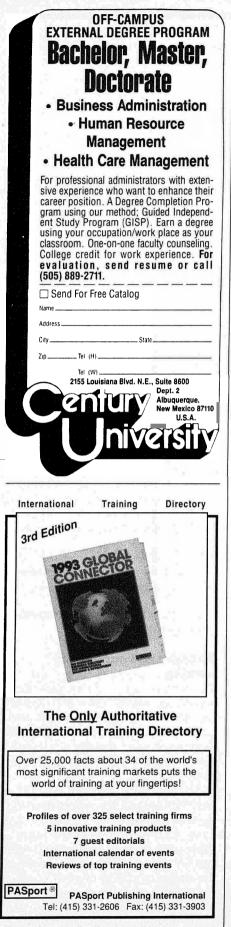▶ a commitment to employee education
▶ the need for an organizational assessment to identify employees' actual family-and-work issues and employer-assistance options
▶ budgets to support the family-and-work initiatives.

Manager and supervisor training

We conducted a family-and-work survey and found that a win/win situation between managers and their employees is extremely important. Employees need managers to understand their family concerns and responsibilities.

Managers can be more effective if they understand the effect that conflicts between work and home can have on employee performance. They also need to understand what can be done to eliminate or alleviate the negative effects of such conflicts on productivity and the bottom line. A hands-on training program that gives managers skills and strategies to handle family-and-work conflicts can reduce absenteeism, tardiness,

and distractions. And it can enhance productivity, recruitment, retention, and morale.

A training program for managers should include the following topics:

- ▸ flexible work alternatives
- ▸ game plans for implementing leave policies
- ▸ proactive strategies for achieving win/win resolutions of family-and-work conflicts
- ▸ reactive strategies for dealing with poor performance and unmet expectations
- ▸ effective communication skills
- ▸ time-management and organizational skills.

Employee education and training

Even nonmanagerial employees need new skills to manage their multiple roles. A core training program for nonmanagers could include the following tools and skills:

- ▸ organization and time-management skills
- ▸ communication skills to enhance cooperation and understanding between employees and their supervisors, their dependent-care providers, and their family members
- ▸ techniques for dealing with guilt
- ▸ ways to take care of oneself
- ▸ support groups and resources.

Helping employees get the information they need to handle family issues throughout their families' life cycles will reduce the work time lost when employees must search for answers. Employees need information on a wide range of issues, including the following:

- ▸ choosing high-quality child care
- ▸ identifying services to support the elderly
- ▸ talking with elders about aging and related issues
- ▸ planning parental leaves
- ▸ fathering and partnering in the 1990s
- ▸ raising adolescents
- ▸ traveling and parenting
- ▸ planning career and life goals
- ▸ discussing family-and-work conflicts with supervisors
- ▸ learning how to be good stepparents
- ▸ learning how to be effective single parents.

Manager training and employee education can have an effect as stand-alone efforts. But there is real

THERE IS REAL VALUE IN CONDUCTING EMPLOYEE AND MANAGER TRAINING PROGRAMS BACK-TO-BACK

value in conducting employee and manager training programs back-to-back. Once managers and employees are trained to recognize the conflicts, given the skills to identify options for handling the conflicts, and encouraged to find creative solutions, they can work together to develop successful long-term strategies.

To ensure the ongoing success of family-and-work training programs, training directors and human resource professionals need to track the results of the programs on such bottom-line issues as productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and tardiness. Tracking results and collecting testimonials and case studies will help organizations modify or supplement their training and education programs. At some point, mini-surveys or focus groups can help organizations understand what has changed, what has improved, and what needs further work.

Staying competitive in the market for skilled workers is important for any company. Becoming more flexible and family-friendly can give organizations the visibility and credibility needed to recruit and retain loyal, productive employees. ∎

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