

Zicklin Conference

Children: The Unseen Stakeholders at Work

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There are a number of ways in which a parent's work affects his or her children. This ought to be a more important point of focus for the efforts by firms to create both economic and social value in society. As employees, corporations, and the government all grapple with balancing work and family, how children are affected by the quality of their parents' work lives remains largely unexplored. In a research study about the work and family lives of alumni from both The Wharton School and Drexel University, Jeff Greenhaus and I observed that the design of work and the management of careers influence how the next generation fares.

For example, children had better health if their parents had authority and control over their work. Having responsibility for determining how, when, and where work is done may be the right medicine for today's working parents, giving them opportunities they need to pick up a sick child at school, take the child to the doctor's, or to stay at home when the child is sick.

Also, we found that working mothers who are involved in network-building activities at work—conferences, lunches, career development and so on—tend to have children with fewer health problems. And fathers who can structure their work lives on a day-to-day basis to accommodate family needs also had children with fewer health problems.

A child's psychological health is also affected. Children had fewer behavior problems if their mothers had control over their work and

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were involved psychologically in their careers. On the other hand, children had fewer behavior problems if their fathers were *not* so involved in their careers, but were highly satisfied with their jobs and felt they performed them well.

Surprisingly, parents' time spent on work and on childcare had virtually no impact on child outcomes. We did find, however, that the more time working mothers took for their own relaxation, the fewer their children's behavior problems and the better they felt about themselves as parents.

While work time was not an important factor affecting children, psychological conflicts between parents' work and personal lives *did* affect them. Children had more behavior problems if their parents' work interfered psychologically with family or with relaxation, for example.

Finally, we also explored the effects of parents' values about career and family. Children of parents who valued career more than family had more behavior problems and performed less well in school.

For the benefit of children, then, both mothers *and* fathers need discretion and flexibility at work. Children are the unseen stakeholders in the American workplace. Their health and welfare ought to be accounted for as legitimate when decisions are made about the design of work and the structure of careers. Failure to do so puts children—the future workforce—at risk.

Yet most firms are indeed failing in their responsibilities to support the healthy development of the next generation. Why? One reason is the lingering dominance of an industrial era model of the employment relationship in a post-industrial era. In our knowledge-based economy, the need for "face time," for example, is not the same as it had been in the past and so it should be re-evaluated. Another reason is that most firms don't see the impact flexibility and discretion have on employee commitment and productivity. What's the business case?

The basic premise here is that work and personal life must be understood not as competitive but as collaborative forces; the tensions between them should be viewed as opportunities for crafting new solutions to the challenges faced both at work and in life beyond work. Organizations are changing: Slow-moving, steep hierarchies are giving way to lean, team-based structures that require speed and flexibility. And employees are changing: For many, commitment to a

business derives more from opportunities for freedom and flexibility than from a chance to climb the corporate ladder. Updated employee benefits policies alone are not sufficient to ensure success in this brave new world. Needed are new skills, new attitudes, and a new psychological contract at work.

Based on field research of managers in a number of different industries, I have found (in research done with Perry Christensen and Jessica DeGroot), that there are three key principles managers need to know to create work environments that result in both high commitment and high life quality.¹ Both employees and managers have to know how to clarify what's important, recognize and support the whole person, and continually experiment with how goals are achieved.

For employees this means:

- Being clear about one's life priorities.
- Assertively expressing one's needs.
- Finding support for aligning actions with values.
- Clarifying boundaries among different roles.
- Being flexible, at work and at home.
- Reexamining expectations.
- Seeking new ways to meet competing demands, by, for example, accepting less than perfection.

For managers this means:

- Communicating clear performance goals.
- Rewarding people for results, not time at work.
- Role modeling, by living in accordance with one's own values and encouraging others to live by theirs.
- Valuing what employees bring to work from other roles.
- Questioning assumptions.
- Encouraging innovation and flexibility in how work is done.

We've found that these competencies can be learned, and, in practice, can serve to overcome such barriers to needed cultural change as outmoded assumptions about "face time," fears of creating new employee "entitlements," and ignorance of the business value inherent in employees' family and community experiences.

We've assembled materials from 35 experts in a resource guide² intended to help people learn these competencies—to cross the divides that cause needless inefficiencies for business and

problems for families—and so to enrich both. Companies as diverse as Merck, Starbucks, Fel-Pro, and Patagonia have shown that employers that value the whole life of their employees engender greater commitment and productivity, and they help the next generation of employees, the unseen stakeholders, too.

NOTES

1. Stewart D. Friedman, Perry Christensen, and Jessica DeGroot, “Work and Life: The End of the Zero-Sum Game.” *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1998, 119–128.

2. Stewart D. Friedman, Perry Christensen, and Jessica DeGroot, Eds., *Integrating Work and Life: The Wharton Resource Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 1998).