

Real-World Reactions to Work-Life Balance Programs: Lessons for Effective Implementation

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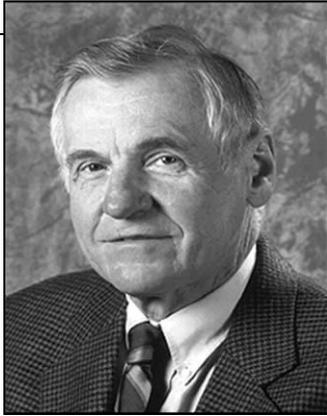
Recently, many organizations have ventured into a new area in human resource management—helping employees to balance the demands of work with those of their lives beyond the workplace. Work-Life Balance (WLB) programs are being heralded as an enlightened yet strategic weapon in the competition for the best employees. Many firms are implementing WLB programs expecting to help their employees cope with their time-pressured lives and enhance the organization's efforts to recruit, retain, and motivate their most valued employees. Organizations further hope to reap the public relations benefits of being viewed as “family-friendly”. Although in the abstract these efforts appear to be well advised, existing research suggests that, at the practical level, they have been less successful than expected.

The purpose of this paper is to help organizations improve their WLB initiatives by reporting on a study of the efforts of two organizations to implement such programs. Our research showed that while the programs were generally successful, their success was limited by a number of rather mundane factors relating to their design and relationship to other aspects of human resources administration. After document-

ing the sources of these limitations, we suggest steps that organizations might take to increase the value of work-life programs both to the firms and to their employees.

What's holding up WLB? It is now widely assumed that in our society many people do not balance work and other life demands optimally. The stress induced by this inability to manage competing demands has been addressed in recently popular books such as Juliet Schor's *The Overworked American* and Arlie Hochschild's *The Time Bind*. However, these books have pointed to a problem, but have not provided detailed guidance that would help well-intentioned managers to address it.

Moreover, even the best research we know on the subject—a number of empirical studies by industrial/organizational psychologist Tammy Allen and colleagues at the University of South Florida—has provided only limited guidance to managers who want to lead family-friendly organizations. Their recommendations were limited to such highly general directions as (1) developing procedures and communication to minimize negative consequences to coworkers; (2) achieving perceptions of fairness concerning family-friendly policies; and (3) establishing productivity-maintenance



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procedures to facilitate a fair division or assignment of work and communication between program users and nonusers. The researchers’ conclusions are consistent with Hochschild’s suspicions that, even when both family-friendly programs and supportive supervisors are present, employees often may perceive that the basic values and norms of the organization do not favor usage of such programs. Therefore, they are unlikely to use them. For example, many employees may fear that if they use the programs, they might be perceived as not being committed to the organization, and thus jeopardize their careers.

These matters raise important concerns for organizations that offer WLB programs. If employees often fail to utilize the available programs, their organizations will miss out on the very advantages that research has suggested companies obtain from such programs.

Many of these advantages center on employing women most effectively. Specifically, workforce demographics often dictate that “hiring the best” more and more frequently may mean “hiring a woman”; work-life programs are especially helpful in recruiting and retaining women. In fact, a study at Du Pont Co. found that women engineers who left the company in search of companies offering better work-family balance were likely to be the best performers. Further advantages ascribed to “family-friendly” programs include reduced insurance rates (due to reduced stress levels), lowered absenteeism and tardiness, reduced disciplinary problems, and heightened performance.

In sum, recent developments in human resource management have featured attempts to help employees balance the demands of work with other demands upon their time by creating “family-friendly” organizations. When these efforts are implemented effectively, employers and employees can benefit substantially, but a number of barriers typically limit effective implementation. Primary limitations result from the fact that even though employees can benefit

substantially, they do not always take advantage of these programs.

Thus, several important questions about work-life programs need to be addressed. First, what can managers do to increase the effectiveness of these programs? Second, what benefits do employees get out of them when they are offered? Third, why might employees not use these programs when they are offered? Fourth, how can managers prevent “family-friendly backlash” due to perceptions of unfairness held by single or childless employees? The research reported here provides some answers to these questions.

Data collection for this study. We collected data through the Tampa, Florida offices of two major international consulting firms. Both organizations had pioneered in developing WLB programs. Through a combination of questionnaires, interviews and participant observation by two authors of this paper, who were employed by the firms studied, we looked to both program users and nonusers to help us understand the underlying factors in the success or failure of these efforts.

Since the two organizations had a number of related but not identical programs designed to promote WLB, program-by-program comparison was not feasible. Therefore, we analyzed only the three programs most frequently mentioned in the interviews in each organization. In Firm I, these were flextime, reduced hours, and telecommuting. Firm II offered flextime, reduced work schedules, and internal job rotation.

Several features of the study must be kept in mind in using the results. First, the convenience sampling limits generalization of any findings. Generalization is also limited by the particular nature of the organizations—both firms were major consulting organizations, and special circumstances in their industry appeared to have induced member firms to become leaders in developing “family-friendly” practices. Most notably, such firms employ large numbers of professionals, many of whom are female. Their work entails heavy demands to travel;



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typically, many of the most valued employees spend the majority of their work time outside the city of the employing organization. Turnover, difficulty recruiting these professionals, and burnout have posed significant problems. Obviously, work and staffing in these firms is far from typical. Therefore, care must be taken in attempting to generalize the results reported here.

On the other hand, it appears that precisely these types of demographic and job characteristics may increasingly typify the workplace of the 21st century. Therefore, although these two firms may be somewhat atypical today, their experiences could very likely suggest important patterns from which other organizations can learn.

FIRM I

To become more flexible, Firm I had instituted a wide variety of nontraditional work schedules. These arrangements, including reduced hours and flexible scheduling, were intended to accommodate diverse personal situations such as: (a) returning to school for an advanced degree; (b) transitioning back to work following the birth or adoption of a child; and (c) juggling the responsibilities of parenting or caring for elderly or ill parents. Schedules could accommodate almost any number of hours, either on a regular basis, or on a concentrated basis, so as to accommodate the seasonal or project-intensive nature of certain aspects of the firm's practice. In addition, telecommuting was offered to help employees achieve greater balance in the work/home equation by reducing commuting hours. In conjunction with telecommuting, schedules could be individually tailored, as long as they didn't impede the firm's service responsibilities to clients.

Reports from WLB Program Users

Most of the employees who had used flextime or telecommuting reported benefits in managing their personal lives. The major

benefit they reported was reduced commuting time. As one employee put it, "Now that I don't have to do that [commuting], it has allowed me to get a lot more done ... also enables me to juggle family life issues better"

Other users highlighted how the program enhanced their ability to carry out personal responsibilities as needs arose. These benefits were especially important to employees whose jobs entailed significant travel. As one person put it: "I have been around and available more for the usual family crisis—car died, sick kid at school, etc., since I have the ability to shift the work into nontraditional time slots." Another noted, "I have been traveling a lot during the week, and it's great to have one day at home working. It's nice to be here to answer the phone, get deliveries ... Helps to balance the burden that my spouse has to take on because I have been traveling so much."

Other reported benefits included greater opportunities to enjoy personal activities and the flexibility to shift work to nontraditional hours. In addition to such personal benefits, many employees emphasized that the programs increased their work productivity. As one respondent observed: "Telecommuting has improved my response time. When someone calls with questions, I have all the information, and everything I need is right at hand, no matter what time of day ... If I did have an office, I would probably answer fewer after-hours calls."

All in all, employees generally felt that Firm I benefited from these programs. In addition to the above advantages, they felt the firm benefited in recruiting. Several consultants said that availability of the telework option was important in their decision to join the firm, reporting that they would not have even considered joining the company if the telework option had not existed. To illustrate, one employee lived in a city where there was no other office staff and another lived in Michigan and worked with a unit based in Minnesota. Telework enabled these employees to contribute to the organization from home. Telecommuting was thus a factor in



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recruitment of new employees and most likely in retention of current ones. However, the experiences of users were not universally positive.

Some Negative Reactions of the Program Users

Several employees reported negative aspects of the programs, which they attributed primarily to one or more of the following: inadequate technical support, policies and procedures, human resource systems, supervisory support, and communications.

Far and away the most frequent complaints about telecommuting stemmed from perceived inadequacies of the technological infrastructure (including dial-up capabilities, modem speed, hardware/software support, and teleconferencing facilities) for attaining desired levels of productivity. Respondents were frustrated by inadequate technical support that spawned a great deal of wasted time in the initial setup and subsequent use of the remote computer facilities. In their words: "I was disappointed because [Firm I] is a firm with a reputation in technology. I expected state-of-the-art technology as well as a defined process for telecommuting For the first six months, I was on the phone with our help desk, working to get access at least once per week—usually on the weekends, and the phone calls lasted sometimes four hours It has been frustrating."

Another complained: "Bad [experiences] include slow dial-in time. I've had to ask coworkers to post big files into our database, because if I tried to do it from home it would take 45 min. If I did it from the office it would only take about two Technically, really can't do all the things I need to from home."

Sometimes a lack of defined procedures for telecommuting exacerbated the technical problems. Complaints included lack of processes for remote staff utilization, inadequate teleconferencing support for remote collaboration, and deficient reimbursement policies for telework-related expenses. As one employee observed: "The more organized

and disciplined the work group is, the easier it is . . . and since the group I joined was in a start-up phase, division of work presented some challenges. Communicating to everyone that I was available, encouraging them to call on me when they had work, and not just grab the first person they saw in the office. Telecommuting requires more discipline in the use of staff, and we are not quite there yet."

Several respondents were concerned about a poor fit of the programs with basic features of the firm's human resource practices, including selection, appraisal, project assignment and motivation systems. Specifically, they noted that the new systems required managers to change the way they allocated tasks, but often they had not done so. One employee commented that managers needed to focus more on outcomes rather than task activities.

Importantly, new hires felt particularly disadvantaged by their managers' informal task allocation styles. "Telecommuting works great when you have a bunch of seniority, but as a new hire it does not work well at all. I felt that people didn't know me, didn't know my work ethic or skill set, and only pulled people to work on projects whom they knew."

Another noted individual differences in ability to work productively as telecommuters: "This program works best if one has the discipline Some individuals who have worked from home don't have the ability to stay in their office, and are easily distracted at home I haven't seen a trait tool to measure who would be the most likely candidates for working at home—seems a series of questions to help determine if employees can handle it would be helpful."

Telecommuters also experienced isolation, reduced social interaction, and difficulty in achieving team synergy due to their reliance on remote modes of communication. One respondent said: "Another disadvantage is there is no synergy with the group. Sometimes face-to-face informal contact helps keep communication flowing."

Taken together, these concerns suggest human resources managers may be well advised to:

- provide supervisors with special training in managing under the new work arrangements, especially assigning work,
- offer training or other support for people who plan to work at home, and
- work to gain commitment of immediate supervisors.

Support for Participation by Managers

Much has been written on the importance of top-management support in addressing diversity and work-family issues. In contrast, many of the employees in our study viewed the support of lower level managers as being even more critical. This makes sense because it is the first-line supervisors of program participants whose day-to-day work is most impacted by work-life programs. Several respondents observed that verbal or public relations endorsements by partners (i.e., top management) were far less important than the active involvement of their immediate supervisors in implementing telecommuting, flextime, and part-time options. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, immediate supervisors often communicated the "real" outcomes of taking part in WLB programs, particularly when participation was inconsistent with deeply held cultural beliefs of the organization.

As one employee observed, "It seems that the general perception is that working exorbitant hours is a good thing. Our director makes comments about working 20-h days, and it gives the impression that if you are not working that many hours, there is something wrong with you. Lack of efficiency is rewarded more often than efficiency in working."

Shortcomings in Communication

In addition to these concerns, plain old communication was seen to be very important.

Some respondents perceived that poor communication had resulted in peers stigmatizing flextime and telecommuting peers in ways that spawned cynical attitudes about coworkers, as reflected in peer to peer comments such as "Nice of you to show up today", and "What is he doing all day?" To a degree, employees attributed the stigma to inadequate communication, several respondents noting that communicating the advantages and effectiveness of these programs might help.

Inadequate communication also seemed responsible for a perception of the organization's failure to adequately publicize availability of the programs and partner/manager support for them. One respondent reported not knowing that a particular program even existed "until a coworker mentioned it to me in casual conversation". Others felt that abstract pronouncements of support from distant partners were no substitute for the active support of one's immediate supervisor. As one employee put it, "I think the best way to communicate these programs is that whoever you are working for on a day-to-day basis should talk to you about them. We get lots of e-mails about these programs, but if I didn't hear it from my supervisor, I wouldn't be sure it would apply to me We end up hearing all the terms and quality of life words, but don't really see it in practice It's one thing to have the partners say that they support it, but you really need the supervisor of the department to implement it." So, again the immediate supervisor plays a critical role in administering the programs.

So far, we have reported reactions of employees who used the programs. However, employees who did not use the programs were also affected by them.

Reports from Nonusers

Inadequate communication and related administrative issues contributed to a perception of unfairness. Several employees, for example, pointed out that inadequate written policies concerning task allocation led to an overburdening of childless employees.

Further, some felt that HR systems (e.g., performance appraisals, goal-setting and rewards) were not geared toward part-time, flextime, or telecommuting modes of work.

Nonusers frequently expressed concerns about fairness, particularly when programs were geared toward helping families. "Family-friendly backlash" was apparent in several comments made by coworkers who were not eligible for the programs or who did not use them for other reasons. Many nonusers felt their own work-non-work conflicts and needs were neglected. Non-parents observed that family-friendly programs spawned unfair burdens on those coworkers who had fewer family obligations. As one single, childless woman lamented: "... what's difficult right now is that I don't have a life and am not being allowed to create one." Another employee elaborated, "Because I am one of the only single people on my work team, I feel that I get slammed because I am single. One time we were late with a proposal, and didn't make the Fed-Ex. Guess who was on a plane to Chicago, hand delivering it to the client? I felt that I got pulled to be the messenger out of everyone on the project because I didn't have ... kids at home."

Employees' Suggestions for Improvements

The suggestions employees offered for improving the WLB programs provided more information about their concerns. In addition to calling for better technical support and communication to increase awareness of the programs, employees suggested additional avenues of flexibility, noting that sometimes, even when a deadline is pressing, people may need to leave work. Also, they suggested new programs, including: on-site gym/fitness facilities, a subsidized on-site cafeteria, personal valet service and paid sabbatical leave.

So far, we have reported data that came directly from the interviews and questionnaires.

Participant Observation

Many of the observer's reports provided additional support for the information from the interviews. First, the task allocation problem reappeared; telecommuters frequently remarked to coworkers that they were not given enough work to do—sometimes even when their peers were working 60–70 h per week. When they attended a meeting and heard about how busy everyone else was, they began to wonder if there was a reason why they were not being given more work. Often they concluded that it probably resulted from an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality, but still reported that if one is the least bit insecure about one's job performance, all kinds of thoughts run through one's mind.

Participant observation also detailed a perceived contrast between the "user-friendly" policy statements and the actual experiences of employees who were on a flexible work schedule. One incident is illustrative. Conference calls were a common way to conduct business. Once the observer was on a conference call with several "flexible" participants, two of whom were high level managers and two lower level managers. One of the lower level managers had made it clear that a personal commitment required him to leave the office at 5 p.m. It was stated several times on the call by one of the high level managers that "we have to wrap up, John [fictitious name] has to leave at 5." Still the employee's needs were ignored, the call finally ended at 5:15 p.m., and then only because the manager who initiated the call accidentally disconnected everyone by hitting the wrong button.

Informal actions surrounding work assignments further supported the view expressed in the interviews that employees with children received special treatment. For example, large departments had some flexibility in scheduling work hours when these opportunities for flexibility existed outside the formal program. Invariably, employees with children were able to choose their schedules first, forcing single/non-parent

employees to work around those schedules. For example, if an employee with kids needed an 8-to-5 work schedule in order to pick up the kids by a certain time, when the department needed coverage until 7 p.m., other employees—regardless of their own obligations outside of work—almost automatically got the later shift.

Participant observation also reinforced the need for greater involvement and support by managers. Such increased involvement is especially important for helping to manage the workload of employees on reduced hours, to ensure a more equitable distribution of the workload.

Further additional human resources infrastructure appeared necessary to support these programs. This need might be idiosyncratic to Firm I in this setting, because of its start-up status that has necessitated an emphasis on selling the business, obtaining new clients and getting the staff to them. In this context, simply finding someone with the right skills to meet client needs was an enormous challenge. This start-up mode likely contributed to the concerns about infrastructure shortcomings and limits the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusions from Firm I

Both interview and participant observation data offered some guidance for managing these types of WLB programs.

1. Supervisors should be cautioned that some of their traditional practices may not be optimal for the new situation. More systematic procedures for assigning work may be needed to avoid simultaneously overburdening employees on traditional arrangements and underutilizing those on nontraditional tracks (e.g., telecommuting).

2. Special attention to technological and organizational infrastructures may be critical for supporting telecommuting.

3. New procedures to provide for equitable treatment in personnel evaluations may be needed.

4. Fairness in administration of these new benefits is a major issue. The criteria

used to determine who is eligible to utilize these new benefits are apt to privilege the personal interests of some people over those of others. In short, the new arrangements introduce new dimensions on which inequity can be experienced.

Although the intensity of these issues and exactly how they are best addressed is apt to vary among organizations, the current findings should serve to heighten awareness of the potential of these programs to disturb employees. Anticipation of such problems and management of the details are the keys to successful implementation.

While the data revealed some ways to improve the programs, they also indicated the value of them. Most employees who used the programs perceived that they benefited from them and the firm did as well (e.g., in employee recruiting and loyalty). Perhaps our findings understate the potential net value of these efforts due to the fact that this part of Firm I was a new unit, which may have accentuated the occurrence of and sensitivity to the problems introduced by lack of infrastructure. Nevertheless, it seems likely that similar concerns would be salient in other settings as well. With this in mind, we turn to the next case, study of Firm II.

FIRM II

The three programs considered at Firm II were flexible hours, reduced schedules and internal rotation.

1. *Flexible hours*: This option permitted employees to work normal or standard numbers of hours, but on a specially arranged schedules such as a compressed work week (either irregular hours or reduced daily time during a less busy season to balance increased hours at other times of the year). Regardless of the particular arrangement, the total period worked on an annual basis and the workload assigned was the same as the normal for similar positions.

2. *Reduced schedules*: Under this policy, the individual worked a reduced number of

days or hours and/or had reduced responsibilities. In making these arrangements, the firm's and the employee's needs, job priorities, and the seasonal impact of the employee's work were considered.

3. *Internal rotation*: This option permitted an employee to remain for 6 to 12 months in a non-client-serving [internal] position, such as an education coordinator or member of an internal methodology development team. This arrangement afforded the employee reduced travel and a more predictable work schedule.

Reports from Users

Questionnaires and interview data revealed that participants rated the programs as generally successful. When asked to evaluate success of the programs on a 7-point scale, respondents were generally positive, rating them five or six. One respondent said: "Oh, I would give it a ten . . . I got everything I wanted." Another employee described it as a total "win-win."

Despite this general enthusiasm, some problems were reported. The most serious ones stemmed from the fact the program did not mesh well with the firm's external environment—with client expectations in particular. Respondents noted that the client-driven nature of the firm's business often hindered their achieving WLB.

Client expectations often hindered employees' efforts to arrange their schedules, because clients were not always informed up-front of the firm's attitudes concerning life balance issues. One person commented: "... I think that the partners can be more honest with our clients . . . tell them that life balance is an important issue." Specifically, he advised following the lead of one partner who had put in the Letter of Understanding [LOU] that they would be there (at the client's location) Monday to Thursday. "It was in the LOU, so there was no question what our schedule was going to be, and I thought that was a great way to set client expectations . . . The clients are fine with things if you tell them it is our policy, e.g., we travel out on

Monday, so we will be there by noon. They are fine if you just tell them."

Besides fit with the external environment, fit with internal management practices was important. In general, respondents felt that components of human-resource policies needed to be tailored to the actual nature of the work one did on a flexible work schedule. Program users were concerned that goals needed to be better proportioned to the percent of full-time for which a person is compensated. "My biggest comment would be to get your arms around how to evaluate the performance of someone on an FWA [Flexible Work Arrangement], and how do you bring them back into the fold in terms of compensation once they make that full-time commitment again." Another respondent noted, "One of the biggest challenges is, it's a little tough to meet sales goals . . . if they aren't proportionate to the amount of time one is compensated for by the firm's standards. [However,] the firm in most respects has done a good job in recognizing the components of the flexible work week arrangement schedule, but that wasn't taken into consideration."

A need to adjust human resource policies was stressed by many. Several respondents were concerned about the possible effects of participation in these programs on promotability and career paths. One noted, "The trade-off is a delay in your ability to get promoted. It absolutely adversely affects that. But I think it also adversely affects your compensation. In the sense that you are not able to compete with those senior managers who are out there leaving Monday morning and coming home on Friday night." This respondent added that her lower output was not due to lower productivity; observing that her sales numbers while working 2 days a week far exceeded those of others who were working 5 days a week. "I don't know what the raises were, but I can tell you that there was an implied idea of trade-off in terms of promotion . . . I believe . . . when they have a pot of money, and they have to decide who to give it to, I mean who are you going to give it to? The person who is

committing two days or the person out there five days a week busting their butt?"

Other comments also reflected concern that the existing human resource systems (e.g., evaluation, promotion) were based on traditional work arrangements and were unfair to participants in the nontraditional WLB programs. One person noted: "When you're really performing, you should be paid commensurate with what your performance is But it's a hard thing. How do you evaluate someone who is not full-time? It's the difference between saying I am competing against a peer who is competing five days a week ... versus I am competing against my personal reduced goals. But I can never compete with a full-time person."

Not surprisingly, top management support for the programs was seen as very important. However, there was a distinction between general support and operational support. Respondents felt that the partners supported the program, but that they needed to do more, especially, as noted above, in setting client expectations. One respondent commented, "I think they walk the walk, but there is still a lot more progress that needs to be made." The nature of this progress seemed to overlap with some of the concerns mentioned above. As one respondent put it, "I think they [the partners] believe in it; I think they believe in it in concept until it affects their individual jobs, until it becomes personal People I have known who have had a reduced work week and stayed in client service haven't found this to be successful for them ... the partners and the practice doesn't [sic.] support your being on a reduced work week. They still expect you to do the full amount of the job. So, I think they support it if it means moving you out of client service."

As at Firm I, employees perceived that the level of support from lower level managers varied widely and was sometimes problematic. "As far as the whole flexible work arrangement, it's kind of give and take, depending on who your sponsor is and who you are working for."

Respondents also commented about how the programs affected productivity. Most perceived that productivity remained high. Employees on FWA often reported working even harder than before. "The expectation is that when you shut off your computer or leave for the weekend, that still does not mean that you are not responsible for 24-h coverage." Another stated, "I have never not done something that was due, even if it was my day off. I have never said I can't do that. I'm an FWA. The joke among the FWA's is that you can work four days a week, but you are really working five, and getting paid for four. But it's psychological, in that you don't have to work that fifth day if you don't want to. If the work has to get done, you get it done ... the work gets done because of employee commitment. But the employee benefits too. Another trade-off is that you do it, but when you need the time off, you have it."

"Win-Win" Outcomes—Benefits to Employees and Company

In general, employees believed that the company did not suffer, because their productivity remained high under these programs, and that they (the employees) were better off because they had greater flexibility to shift things around so that they could meet other life demands. In addition to the benefits noted so far, employees felt that the firm benefited in other ways, such as through increased loyalty and retention. As one person put it, "I would not have my job today and be able to provide for my family the way I can do, if the firm would have not been willing to be so tolerant in accepting my limitations on what I was able to provide. I mean it's made the whole difference in our family. I mean they [Firm II] have me until I die. It's kind of like, I would do anything for this place because of what they have done for me."

Also with respect to retention, a senior female manager commented, "I am an example that if you hang in there with us, women have got another 25 years to work. If you can just hang with us during this gap of time,

until your kids get to where they're not babies anymore, then it's well worth it, and it's worth the hassles associated with it. I mean I know it's a pain in the neck to have an FWA person working for you, [but] the benefits to the firm are clear Obviously the more we spend on retaining our people, the less we have to spend on hiring and recruiting, so there is a motive on management's part to retain individuals."

Employees reported additional benefits to themselves, especially with respect to travel, which was such a key component of jobs in this firm. One person commented, "When I started with [Firm II] you were out five days a week, no holds barred, and you were asked to go out on Sunday nights, and you had to fight not to do that. Go out on Sunday nights and come back on Friday nights, but be at the client until five on Friday and then fly home. I think we are a kinder, gentler firm now. I think we have made a lot of progress but there is still a ways to go."

As at Firm I, employees were very positive about the programs, but there were concerns as well. The parallels with the concerns at Firm I are noteworthy.

Users' Concerns and Recommendations about Program Use

Some respondents feared that utilizing these programs might stigmatize them. One commented, "If someone (male) has a kid and decides to take six months off, and it's not what is the norm, most of the partners who have worked their way up the firm would look at it and think negatively, that it shows that maybe the firm isn't your first priority. I think a lot of them think the firm needs to be a priority if you are to succeed here, at least at the partner level."

As at Firm I, the most important suggestions proposed for the future centered on communication, but there were differences. In Firm II, most concerns were about external communication, particularly lack of communication to clients about the firm's family-friendly commitment. Regarding internal

communication, respondents complained that communications concerning the programs had been nonsystematic; some respondents reported first hearing about the programs by word of mouth, others at quarterly meetings and some from the WLB database. One respondent who had not taken advantage of the program reported first learning of it in our survey.

As at Firm I, employees who had not used any of the programs were affected by them, and the major issue was fairness.

Reports from Nonusers

Several employees who were not eligible for or did not use any programs expressed concerns about fairness. For example, "I want to emphasize ... that it's not just when you have kids. This type of life is taxing, even for a single person I think that people are oversensitive ... to people who have kids; but we all have obligations outside of work, and it's not fair to assume that just because you have kids you do not have to work late, or you should get special treatment, or conversely assume of people who don't have kids that their time is your time. I think that's the negative side of life balance, whether you have kids or spouses or not." Again, at Firm I, the interview findings were corroborated by the participant observer.

Participant Observation

Observations by the author employed at Firm II generally reinforced the findings from the interviews, that Firm II was committed to the balance effort and was implementing it reasonably effectively.

Ongoing commitment was demonstrated by the firm's continuing efforts to communicate the new options to all levels of staff. These efforts included devoting considerable time to discussion at monthly meetings of life-balance issues and programs. In addition, staff advisory committees composed of staff consultants were formed, and reported to the partners on how well life-balance demands were being met. The

partners appeared to be trying to enhance the operation of the programs at local levels, by incorporating the life-balance arrangements into some client agreements.

Despite these efforts, concerns similar to those expressed in the interviews were present. Some people feared that if they participated in the programs they might be perceived by their peers as slackers, or not dedicated team players. Others (males more than females) feared that taking advantage of the options might negatively affect the progression of their careers. Several men said that they felt that a woman could take advantage of the programs without experiencing a negative effect, but a man could not. Interestingly, fear that participation would have a negative effect on a career path seemed to be more prevalent among those who had not participated in the programs than those who had.

In short, while top management was acting in ways that indicated continuing commitment to the WLB effort, some employees voiced concerns that this commitment would not translate into specific actions that would protect their individual careers if they used the programs.

Conclusions from Firm II

Overall, the WLB program at Firm II appeared to be serving the needs of the firm and its employees. Top management continued to invest in it, and most respondents reported personal benefits and felt Firm II was highly committed to WLB.

In assessing these results, we must keep in mind that the need for extensive travel was a special feature of work in this particular firm, making it a major barrier that people perceived in achieving WLB that might not be as salient elsewhere. In this context, although the flexible work arrangement option was not a panacea, it did provide employees with more control over their time. Paralleling Firm I, employees of Firm II expressed two major sets of concerns.

- Inequities were perceived when the programs appeared to favor people with

children and ignore the needs of those without them.

- The firm's traditional human resources policies failed to respond adequately to the particularities of evaluation and compensation under the altered work arrangements.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of these two firms' experiences with family-friendly programs offers a number of insights for other organizations considering these types of arrangements. While these two firms are atypical in important ways, we suggest that many organizations are and/or are likely to experience similar special needs: recruiting, retaining, and motivating professional staff, and helping employees cope with the stresses inherent in high travel requirements and intense client service demands. It must be cautioned, however, that one size will not fit all. Despite the similarity of these two firms and the programs they sought to implement, there were differences in the problems they experienced. At Firm I, perhaps because it was a new site, the absence of infrastructure seemed to be a major impediment. At Firm II, the communication with clients was more central. Thus, although improved communication was needed in both settings, the substance was organizationally specific.

Managers of such organizations need to anticipate the need to reconcile the firm's work-life commitment with the needs of the clients. While this is a tall order, it might be possible if more flexible arrangements or definitions of what constitutes an employee's job were communicated fully and frequently to clients. Firm II's experience offers one possible approach. Because each consultant was scheduled to work a 4-day work week, meeting client needs while simultaneously maintaining the WLB effort might be accomplished best by using teams whose composition would change in order to provide full service coverage to the client. The details of such arrangements have major implications

in the rethinking of traditional approaches to customer service staffing.

Similarly, institutionalizing the ideas about rotation poses major challenges for the human resources function, entailing career planning systems in which employees might routinely devote certain periods in their careers to assignments that require less travel and/or less direct client contact. For example, assignments for education and development might be planned for in conjunction with other aspects of one's life. As the nature of meeting work and non-work demands changes, a fundamental revision of the concept of career development may be needed. The revised concept will need to focus just as legitimately on anticipated life demands as on specific job requirements.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly as organizations become more active on the WLB front, the total human resource system might need to be adjusted to help participants in these programs align their job requirements, evaluations and rewards with their WLB objectives. Given the potential for "backlash", however, care is needed in designing and implementing such an approach, to avoid coworker resentment on the one hand, and career derailments of the "mommy-track" sort on the other hand.

If a firm wants to make WLB part of its strategy for attracting and retaining the best employees, this commitment must be reflected in the engagement of top-level managers and human resource practitioners in the transformation of staffing, performance management and job design. To achieve the dual objectives of serving clients while giving high priority to employees' life-balance goals, a major part of the burden would appear to fall to high-level executives (e.g., the partners in these settings) in negotiating client expectations. Human resource practitioners would also have much to do in revising current systems to support the effort. Care must be taken to anticipate, recognize and manage problems these changes may introduce that affect both users and nonusers.

Clearly, human resource practitioners have only begun their work in addressing WLB when they gain upper management's recognition and support. Actualizing that commitment demands operational changes throughout the organization's human resource practices. Although the specific problems will vary from firm to firm, a number of general implications may be drawn from the experiences of these two firms. We suggest that the value of these insights lies in attending to a host of rather mundane details.

- Human resource managers may need to serve as liaisons between users of the programs and top management. In doing so, they must communicate with high-level managers about how the new programs are affecting life in the trenches, and encourage them to manage relationships with external clients in ways that are consistent with running the programs.

- Line managers may need assistance in adapting their managerial approaches to the new work arrangements. Revised performance management systems and training may help them overcome tendencies to underutilize telecommuters or devalue the contributions or commitment of flextime employees.

- In order for these programs to be perceived as fair by users and non-users alike, care must be taken to avoid subtle penalties with respect to task assignments, compensation and promotion. Many of these subtle penalties may come from peers or inadvertently from supervisors.

- Particularly for new employees, special arrangements might be necessary to enhance their internal networking opportunities so they will become part of the fabric of the organization.

- Revised evaluation procedures may be needed to reflect alterations in the de facto contract with employees, concerning not only the short-term evaluations of employees, but overall career paths as well.

- For effective management of telecommuting programs, it cannot be assumed that employees will automatically work well at home. Special attention needs to be paid to

selecting, counseling, training, motivating and evaluating telecommuters.

- Finally, special resources may be needed to enable employees to maintain excellent levels of performance while taking advantage of these programs. In today's world, telecommuters cannot contribute fully without adequate technical assistance and equipment, including up-to-date levels of hardware, software, and communications support. Telecommuters must be assured adequate budgeting and clear procedures for allocation and reimbursement of supplies, equipment, and utilities needed to work from home. Human resource departments can support these efforts by providing training in the use of telework systems and procedures, assistance in anticipating these problems and in setting up home offices, guidance through the reimbursement procedures, and advice on dealing with associated taxation and insurance issues. Further, special efforts may be needed to obtain the support of coworkers, managers, and clients and to fully integrate teleworkers and

flextime workers into the social and decision-making fabric of the organization, and in turn enhance their contributions substantially.

In conclusion, like major human resource developments in the past, WLB programs may stimulate most attention at an ideological level during the early stages. But when it gets right down to it, their success will depend heavily on human resource management processes and technical infrastructures at very concrete levels. Like other frame-breaking changes in human resource management during the last century, meeting these challenges successfully seems likely to require some professional training and new procedures for those who currently run organizations. Human resource managers have an important role to play in this process, and the findings reported here offer some guidelines for the nature of these developments.



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The paradox of leading-edge firms going to great lengths to develop, implement, and publicize family-friendly human resource programs, only to find minimal acceptance and usage among employees, was first brought to our attention in Arlie Russell Hochschild's ground-breaking book, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 1997). Hochschild studied a Fortune 500 company in depth for a period of 3 years. She sought to understand why so few working parents, particularly among professionals and managers, took advantage of "family-friendly" policies such as flextime, a company-sponsored childcare center, part-time work, and job-sharing. She uncovered strong undercurrents in both the organization's culture and the outside community, as well as broader transformations in societal norms and values regarding parent/professional roles, the value of time, and lifestyle management. These cultural norms served to inhibit ambitious, aspiring managers from making use of these policies, or, at an even deeper level, from desiring to change the balance of their time allocation from the workplace to their homes.

This theme has been taken up by a number of organizational researchers, who have pondered the two sides of the issue of work-family programs. First, there is overwhelming evidence of the need for organizations to accommodate people's efforts to balance work and life demands, as well as workforce demographic changes creating a critical talent shortage. See, for example, Susan J. Lambert's article, "Added Benefits: The Link Between Work-Life Benefits and Organiza-

tional Citizenship Behavior," *Academy of Management Journal*, 2000,43(5), 801–815. See also Steven L. Grover and Karen J. Crooker's paper, "Who Appreciates Family-Responsive Human Resource Policies: The Impact of Family-Friendly Policies on the Organizational Attachment of Parents and Non-Parents," *Personnel Psychology*, 1995, 48, 271–288. In light of the demonstrated advantages, why do relatively few organizations offer usable WLB programs and policies? What barriers seem to be preventing employees from taking advantage of such programs once they are offered?

Some of the best empirical research addressing these issues has been done by industrial-organizational psychologist Tammy Allen and colleagues at the University of South Florida (Tammy D. Allen, "Family-Supportive Work Environments: The Role of Organizational Perceptions," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, in press). A closer look at organizational culture and its role in supporting or killing work-family balance efforts is offered by Cynthia A. Thompson, Laura L. Beauvais, and Karen S. Lyness in their article, "When Work-Family Benefits are Not Enough: the Influence of Work-Family Culture on Benefit Utilization, Organizational Attachment, and Work-Family Conflict," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 1999, 54, 392–415. Mark Frankel offers some sound advice on overcoming many of these cultural barriers in his chapter "Creating the Family Friendly Workplace: Barriers and Solutions," *Handbook of Organizational Health Psychology: Programs to make the Workplace Healthier* (Madison: Psychosocial Press, 1998) edited by Sam Klarreich.

This paper argues that supportive organizational work-life culture, which includes managerial support, career consequences, organizational time demand, gender related perception and co-workers' support, is important for the successful implementation of WLB programs. Only if HRM department get the support from top management and the assistance from supervisors and managers, begin to enhance women's positions, establish new performance evaluation methods, and consider the fairness between co-workers, can the supportive organizational work-life/family culture be formed and implemented.