

Research-in-Progress***Integrating Work and Family Life:
Research at the MIT Workplace Center***

Ann Bookman

[Ann Bookman, executive director of the MIT Workplace Center, discusses research pertinent to current needs of the faculty.]

The MIT Workplace Center, based at the Sloan School of Management, was founded in July 2001 with a three-year grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. It is the seventh university-based center established by the Sloan Foundation to study the lives of dual-career, middle class families. It is the first such center to focus on the workplace, and the first to combine research with experimental interventions for change in selected companies. The Center is co-directed by Professors Lotte Bailyn and Thomas Kochan. Dr. Ann Bookman, a social anthropologist, is executive director, and Dr. Mona Harrington, a political scientist, is program director.

The approach taken by the MIT Workplace Center is based on two distinctive strands of scholarship and policy analysis. First, we hope to contribute to a growing literature on work redesign. For over 10 years, Professor Bailyn and colleagues have pioneered innovative approaches to work organization, advancing the possibilities for work-family integration and gender equity. She says, "After collaborating with employees and managers in many companies, I believe it is possible to design new work systems that promote the effective performance of firms and the well-being of employees, their families and communities. We are taught that we

have to choose between the two—my research suggests that 'win-win' solutions are within our grasp." The MIT Workplace Center will address the problem of the "one size fits all" workplace. By engaging interested parties in the redesign of work systems and employment practices, we hope to offer new approaches to meeting the diverse needs of diverse families.

Second, our work is informed by the framework set out in a recent report, "Integrating Work and Family Life: A Holistic Approach," co-authored by Lotte Bailyn, Thomas

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Kochan, and Robert Drago. Written with the participation of a small, national group of academics and practitioners called the Work-Family Policy Network, the report reviews the social science literature on work and family life, and assesses both private sector policy and public policy. Professor Kochan explains the report's conclusions. He says, "There is a serious institutional lag at present between private sector policies and labor laws developed in the 1930s and the problems facing working families today. If we want to integrate work and family life in the twenty-first century, it will require a well-informed collaborative effort on the part of all the key actors that share interests and responsibilities in these issues." The MIT Workplace Center

is applying this stakeholder approach to its research and its public education efforts in an attempt to move away from single-party, piecemeal solutions and towards multi-sector involvement in systemic change.

Our research agenda is based on the study of work-family issues in the greater Boston metropolitan region. This area includes a multi-state labor market that crosses the state lines of Massachusetts into New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Using a regional approach is one way of concretizing our view that work-family problems do not fall neatly into preconceived

categories with clear boundaries. Rather, we study how problems at work spill over into home, and even into the community, and how family and community issues may affect the operation of the workplace.

We have chosen three industries that are critical to the functioning of this regional economy: health care, high tech, and legal services. In each industry, we begin by collecting baseline data on the scope of products and/or services, the size and demographic composition of the workforce, recent trends affecting the structure, organization, and vitality of companies in the industry, and information on work-family policies and practices.

In the Center's first year, we have developed a number of projects in the health care industry. Health care is the leading employer in Massachusetts, with over 450,000 workers in a wide variety of professional, para-professional, and low-wage service occupations. In the summer and fall of 2001, we interviewed over 40 leaders in the industry to learn about pressing workforce issues. Interviewees reflected on their experiences with the current health care system as employers, union leaders, public officials, leaders of community organizations, professional associations, and others. We convened this group in a stakeholder dialogue soliciting their views and concerns to help shape our key research questions. We found that although many participants described problems with long/inflexible work hours, staffing shortages, high levels of stress, and degraded working conditions, they did not identify these issues as connected to work-family dilemmas. Mona Harrington explains the relevance of this disconnect to our research/action agenda, "The American idea that work-family is a problem for individuals to solve as best they can remains so strong that it prevails even in an industry like health care, operating 24/7 with a predominantly female workforce—nurses, technicians, and increasingly physicians—many of whom have family responsibilities. Challenging that idea is the starting point of our projects."

The exchange and multiplicity of perspectives in this stakeholder meeting laid the foundation for our current research. For example, one participant highlighted severe problems produced by long hours among medical residents. Sloan doctoral candidate Kate Kellogg and her advisor, Lotte Bailyn, have begun a study in two acute care hospitals to

look at the impact of new policies to reduce residents' work hours on both the quality of patient care and the family lives of health care workers. Kellogg has begun interviews and work observations among surgical residents, and Bailyn is exploring work organization and family life among nurses and certified nursing assistants who also care for surgical patients.

Another project is focused on innovative approaches to providing health care in long-term care facilities. Ann Bookman and Mona Harrington are collaborating on a study of professional health care employees who are organized in teams to provide extended and palliative care to elderly and/or terminally ill patients. They are examining the way the team model of work organization affects the quality of patient care, relations with other nursing home workers, and opportunities for work-family integration. They are also interviewing the family members of patients, a group who face their own set of work-family issues. These family members are caught in a bind—more and more health care is being pushed down into the home to save costs at the same time that most adults are working, unable to be home to care for their families. The aim is to develop a cross-occupational picture of the extended care workforce, and to document the workings of a care system that links paid caregivers with unpaid caregivers, blurring the work-family "boundary."

Sloan doctoral candidate, Forrest Briscoe, guided by his advisor Thomas Kochan, is studying physicians in a health maintenance organization (HMO). Briscoe is interested in how the dramatic restructuring of the health care industry and the increasing number of dual-career families are affecting the pattern of physicians' careers.

Combining survey data and qualitative interviews, Briscoe has hypothesized that while large medical organizations may have diminished some aspects of physician autonomy and control, they also are providing new career paths in health care management, as well as more flexibility in work hours and accommodation of family needs.

Several Sloan School faculty members are conducting research in conjunction with the MIT Workplace Center. Professor Diane Burton is studying the performance of high tech start-up firms, focusing on the relationships between a company's employment practices—such as hiring, training, promotion, and work-life policies—and their business strategy. Professor Roberto Fernandez is surveying new nurses to better understand the place of non-pecuniary rewards, such as flexible hours, in their job choices and career paths. Professor John Carroll is convening a stakeholder dialogue on preventing medical error and (increasing accountability in health care. He is also beginning a project with operating room anesthesiologists to explore strategies for improving team communication in this high stress occupation, strategies that could enhance life on the job and at home.

Although the MIT Workplace Center is still developing its agenda, we have learned much in our first year. We hope that others on the MIT faculty who are working in related areas will share their findings with us, and expand the list of questions we can take into the field. We believe that researchers laboring inside the academy are important stakeholders in the evolving effort to create a society that values paid work, family care, and community involvement. Please join us in any way you can. ❁

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