

MIT Workplace Center Explores Win-Win Solutions to Work/Life Conflicts

Can companies help their employees balance the demands of work and home life without taking a dent out of their productivity? At first glance it may seem counterintuitive, but researcher-educators at the MIT Workplace Center maintain that a systemic, collaborative redesign of the work process to reflect employees' personal needs can actually boost their job performance.

Launched in July 2001 as the latest in a growing number of Sloan Foundation Centers on Work-Family, the MIT Workplace Center is the first such institution to focus on workplace practices. Guided by its Co-Directors, Sloan School Professor of Management Lotte Bailyn and Sloan School Professor of Work and Employment Relations Thomas Kochan, MIT Workplace Center staff collect and analyze data at the regional and firm level on work processes, technological and work performance innovations, and work-family policies; document the gap between the realities of family life and work structures and policies; and conduct and evaluate workplace-based experiments aimed at developing new approaches to structuring work that benefit both company performance and quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. Current projects focus on the healthcare, legal services, and high tech industries.

"We've done very little in this country to adjust workplace practice and public policy to the new reality of dual-income families," says Eileen Appelbaum, Director of the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers

University. "What the Workplace Center can do is help business and policy-makers understand what changes are needed and why they're beneficial." Towards that end, adds Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, a co-principal investigator for the Sloan Work and Family Research Network, "Lotte and Tom have gathered a unique team of people who possess extraordinary research expertise, a deep understanding of workplace issues, and a strong commitment to the lives of working people." The team includes Executive Director Ann Bookman, Program Director Mona Harrington, Program Manager Susan Cass, five faculty, three PhD students, and two job-sharing secretaries.

Questioning Assumptions

To identify better ways to integrate companies' productivity goals with employees' personal needs, Center researchers start by challenging the assumptions underlying current work practices. One of those premises is that you can judge an employee's performance and commitment by how much time he or she logs at work. "That's clearly an assumption that works poorly for employees' personal lives, but it turns out it's also not very good for business," says Bailyn, who recently coauthored the book *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*. She suggests that by carefully streamlining work practices, businesses can achieve performance goals while allowing employees greater control over their personal time.

Bailyn and her colleagues also question the notion that a company's

top executives know best when it comes to optimizing work practices. "The real knowledge of how work is being done and how it could be done better is at the worker level, not at the supervisor or manager level," she argues. "We found that if you ask people how their own lives could be better, they have much more motivation to be inventive about how to improve their work and make changes that they suggest really work."

For example, Bailyn and former student Leslie Perlow (now at Harvard Business School) worked with a group of product development engineers on a high-priority product under a tight deadline. To meet that deadline, workers found themselves working nights and weekends. "They could never do their independent work on any given day because they were always interrupted," Bailyn recalls. After she and Perlow presented data on this phenomenon to the group, the engineers devised an experiment: certain periods of the day were designated as quiet time, when no one was to be interrupted; other periods were designated as interactive. In short order, the engineers accomplished more during quiet hours, and communicated more efficiently during interactive hours. Ultimately, the engineers not only met their schedule and won a quality award, but also gained more time for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Citing examples from Southwest Airlines, Toyota, Ford, Saturn, and several other companies, Kochan stresses that bringing employees into the decision-making process and

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combining that with flexible work design yields improvements in both employee satisfaction and productivity. “The key is to sustain that level of participation over time by making sure that employees feel free to offer their ideas, and get rewarded in terms of career opportunities,” he says.

Stakeholder Dialogues

In a recent report called *Integrating Work and Family Life: A Holistic Approach*, coauthors Bailyn and Kochan tout the benefits of “stakeholder dialogues” that help employees, employers, family and community groups, unions, trade and professional associations, and government agencies to arrive at mutually beneficial solutions to work/life conflicts. “We see a need to bring the different groups together so that you have a more complementary approach rather than piecemeal efforts,” says Kochan. “The preferred approach is to engage these public and private groups to explore how they could think about the work process itself, and redesign the work process in ways that increase flexibility and make the work environment more satisfying and productive.”

Many work/life problems lend themselves to this kind of system-wide solution. Consider the plight of lawyers who operate under the assumption that they should work 70 or 80 hours per week. Studies conducted in Boston and nationwide show that in the legal profession, 90 percent of U.S. firms offer a part-time career option. But only about 4 percent of

employees take advantage of this option, and about a third of employees considering it fear it would hurt their career. “The law firms need to engage the bar association and the lawyers themselves to solve this problem of overcoming the reluctance of people to use it,” says Kochan. “No individual lawyer can do it, because if I choose to work less and my colleagues

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continue to work more, then my career will be at a disadvantage.”

To initiate a series of stakeholder dialogues that address such problems holistically, says Program Director Mona Harrington, “The key is to identify all the relevant stakeholders—people or groups with a significant interest in the issues in question, and those in a position to affect the outcome of the discussions—not just employers and employees.” Once a facilitator is hired, the next step is to

build trust among stakeholders. “A serious challenge from the outset,” Harrington observes, “is the need for stakeholders to recognize that many parties may be involved who may seem irrelevant or even threatening to the positions of those usually engaged in negotiation. Another challenge is to organize dialogues so that all voices, including the less powerful, are heard.” Then the parties can work together to question underlying assumptions about work practices and devise more effective solutions.

The Bottom Line

According to Kochan, who recently coauthored the book *Working in America: A Blueprint for the New Labor Market*, labor market demographics for the next 10-15 years indicate that to recruit and retain a skilled, knowledgeable workforce, companies will need to do a much better job of addressing work/life issues. “The real insight,” he says, “is that if you take into account when you organize your work the fact that people have personal obligations and responsibilities, and build that into the way you think about your work in terms of flexibility, time allocation, work location, and employee interactions—if you build all that in upfront, you’ll get better work, and people’s lives will be better.”

by Mark Dwortzan

More information about the MIT Workplace Center is available at <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/index.html>