

Striking the work-life balance

By Jennifer Swanberg

Work/Life Lines Columnist

Nearly five years ago, my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. She learned about her condition just three months after I had relocated from New York to Kentucky. In addition to grappling with the meaning of parental loss, days and nights were filled with worry about how I would help my siblings care for my mother. As well as living 1,000 miles away from family, I had just started a new job as an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky. It was too soon to request leave under the parameters of the Family Medical Leave Act. Yet she needed me. I was fortunate to have a dean who authorized flexibility in my work schedule, allowing me to spend long weekends caring for my mother. Without her support, I might have needed to resign from my new position.

Most of us can recall a time when juggling the demands of work and family created some form of angst. Maybe your physician's available office hours did not coincide with your work schedule or your child's delayed school starting time due to winter weather caused you to be late for an important work meeting. For some workers, poor bus service or a sick child is reason enough to be late or miss work. School vacation breaks most always become a stressor for working parents with young children. Finding affordable, reliable and safe school vacation programs takes significant time and consideration. I know of a local businessman who closed his successful small business, in part because managing a restaurant operation, caring for a young daughter and transporting his father to and from kidney dialysis appointments three times weekly was becoming an impossible feat. He found another job that was less demanding of his time, allowing him to more easily attend to his family caregiving needs.

The majority of working people in Kentucky and the United States have personal and family responsibilities. According to the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, a national representative study that examines the quality of workers' lives on and off the job, 85 percent of U.S. wage and salaried workers live with family members and have immediate, daily family responsibilities off the job. More than three out of four partnered employees have spouses or partners who are also employed. Nearly 20 percent of workers currently care for an elder family member or friend, and 48 percent expect to care for an aging loved one in the next five years. One in five working parents are part of the "sandwich generation," raising children and caring for elderly relatives.

Over the past three decades, the United States has witnessed major shifts in labor force demographics. For example, the workforce is comprised of more women, single fathers and mothers, employees with working partners and employees with elder care responsibilities. Furthermore, most employees are working longer hours and many work evenings, nights or weekends.

While the social demographics of the U.S. workforce have dramatically changed, the fundamental assumptions on which U.S. workplace policies were developed have essentially remained unchanged. The mainstream view of waged work in the 20th century was built on the view that men were the paid workers and women, unpaid, met the needs of the family. In this view, women's paid employment was considered a strain on the family, and men's paid employment was considered the general custom, presuming the male employee has little or no family responsibilities. Some argue this perspective of women's and men's employment and its relationship to family created the backdrop by which contemporary organizational

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blueprints were constructed. It appears that job schedules, performance expectations and management operations were shaped based on the assumption of male as “provider” and female as “nurturer.”

Sociologist Myra Marx Ferree, from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, argues that the “provider” myth has misrepresented history because it fails to recognize that women have always contributed significantly to the household economy through paid and unpaid work. Nonetheless, the provider myth underlies operational and structural frameworks of organizations. Taking this argument further, a legal scholar from Georgetown University, Joan Williams, posits that the marketplace is organized around the “ideal worker.” This ideal employee works full time and overtime, taking minimal time off for caregiving responsibilities. For instance, at some workplaces, there is an implicit assumption that employees working part time are less committed to the company than full-time employees. As well, working long work hours is inherent to the organizational culture. Such a culture implies that working the standard 35- or 40-hour workweek is substandard performance.

This social issue, the institutional mismatch between workplace practices and the personal and family responsibilities of employees, has been labeled work-family or work-life. In the last 10 to 15 years, workplaces have begun implementing policies and practices responsive to contemporary employees’ work, family, and personal needs, while researchers have been studying consequences associated with this mismatch. In the coming months, this column will focus on various work-life issues. It will cover national work-life trends as well as how local organizations and working people have adapted to contemporary work life.

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