

## Workplace innovation: An imperative for economic and workforce development

By Jennifer Swanberg  
Work/Life Columnist

A few weeks ago on a frosty Wednesday morning, Lexington experienced its first significant snowfall of the season. Due to icy conditions, Fayette County and other area schools closed. As I heard the announcement on the radio, before I imagined the jubilant sounds of joy among school-age children, I envisioned panicked parents scrambling to patch together care-giving arrangements. At the Institute for Workplace Innovation, we have three employees who are parents of pre-school and elementary school-age children. Two of them were left stranded without childcare that day. One employee worked from home until the roads were safe for commuting, and then she brought her fifth grader to work. The other employee had to choose between missing work (and a day's pay because she is paid hourly) or bringing her three-year-old daughter to the office. Missing a day's pay was just not an option. Fortunately, we are a very small office, and the nature of our work allows us to accommodate when parents are in a childcare pinch. However, most employers cannot make such accommodations.

This example exemplifies the contemporary conundrum of many working families in Central Kentucky and throughout the state. We can all conjure up a story of when our life off the job called for creative maneuvering to ensure that we would not skip a beat at work. Ensuring the plumber enters the house to fix a leak, taking time off for a medical appointment, or caring for an infirmed friend are all issues many of us have encountered. For others, there is the weekly worry about whether an assigned schedule will "fit" with personal and family responsibilities. Over the past two decades, thoughtful business leaders have recognized that high-performing work environments that attract and retain key talent are workplaces that adapt to the changing needs of the workforce.

The Institute for Workplace Innovation (iWin) at the University of Kentucky has been established to assist Kentucky-based organizations in developing effective workplaces by aligning organizational policies, practices and cultures with the responsibilities and aspirations of employees. In doing so, iWin's objective is to help workplaces become employers of choice in the community, where employee recruitment, retention and productivity are maximized and the costs associated with these and other issues, such as health care, are significantly reduced.

While the example I have used in today's column demonstrates the issues salient to working parents, adapting workplace practices to consider the needs of employees' care-giving responsibilities is just one aspect of workplace innovation. Workplace innovation is about creating quality work environments that leads to positive outcomes for employers and employees. Quality work environments are workplaces where executive and senior leaders value the importance of training supervisors and managers to learn how to provide the tools and resources necessary to get the job done, to motivate employees to excel at work and to be creative problem solvers. Supervisor effectiveness is one of the key critical success factors of employee engagement and work-life effectiveness. Quality work environments also incorporate on going opportunities for learning, advancement, flexible work options and employee input into key organizational decisions.

The Institute for Workplace Innovation's vision is to be a catalyst for organizational change and economic development. The mission is to enhance performance in the changing economy by providing employers with knowledge and opportunities related to innovative practices that enable the creation of quality work environments while ensuring work-life effectiveness. iWin is committed to:

- Engaging employers in the adoption, implementation, and utilization of innovative workplace solutions that benefit employers and employees;
- Developing a regionally based research agenda focused on the workforce and economy in the 21st century; and
- Affecting public discussion about the employer, employee and economic benefits associated with innovative workplace options.

The Institute engages employers in workplace solutions through the establishment of its Innovative Employer Roundtable, workplace development services and workplace research. The Innovative Employer Roundtable is a membership-based organization that will bring together Kentucky's leaders interested in the promotion of quality work environments as a deliberate business strategy and committed to work-life effectiveness. The Roundtable will provide the venue for peer-to-peer learning, the opportunity to hear from national business leaders on workplace innovation, and information for the adoption of salient workplace practices. Workplace development services include executive and management coaching, organizational consulting and information services. Finally, the Institute's research will be nationally recognized, locally based, interdisciplinary theory-generated research that informs workplace practices and state policy.

To adequately contribute to Kentucky's workforce and economic development, the Institute strives to learn about current business practices, workforce concerns, and the issues keeping business leaders up at night. We are currently trying to raise funds for the Kentucky Changing Workforce Study, a statewide representative study of workers 18 years and older who are employed 20 hours or more. This study will mirror the National Study of the Changing Workforce, conducted by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) in New York every five years. Findings from the national study have been key to effecting change at Fortune 100 companies and informing federal policy. We expect the statewide study to have a similar impact. It will provide rich information about the relationships between the quality of employees' lives on and off the job, from which the Institute can design the necessary tools and strategies to promote economic and workforce development in the state. Assuming we can secure funding, Kentucky will be the first state in the country to conduct such a study. In addition to the statewide study, we are considering other ways to systematically learn about the issues facing Kentucky's businesses.

One of the exciting aspects of my job as executive director of the institute is that I have the opportunity to learn firsthand about the successes associated with the effective workplace practices. In late February, iWin will release the report Making Workplaces Work: Employer Best Practices in Kentucky. This report provides an in-depth look at the strategies used by 24 small, medium and large companies to recruit top talent, enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover, and maintain their competitive edge in the local and national marketplace. Also, starting in February, iWin is accepting applications from companies that want to become part of the Employer Roundtable and will be posting issue briefs and facts sheets. Please see the Institute's Web site (<http://iwin.uky.edu>) for additional information, or feel free to send me an e-mail at: [jswanberg@iwin.uky.edu](mailto:jswanberg@iwin.uky.edu).

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