Investing in the Future: Addressing Work/Life Issues of Employees

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract
The Extension organization has a long tradition of professional service to clientele, often at a cost of sacrifice to family and self. The results of a national study indicated that work/life issues are of great concern. Employees identified the most critical work/life challenges as: 1) a heavy work load, 2) evening and weekend time commitments, and 3) lack of control or job autonomy. The recommendations, based on this study, urged Extension administrators throughout the organization to reduce the workload and time requirements of county-based professionals and contended that policies needed to be consistent within the national Extension system.

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Work/Life Challenges of Today's Employees

For both the private and public sectors to stay competitive in today's global market, an effort must be made to address work/life issues. Challenges such as work schedules, child and adult care, time concerns, gaining administrative support, meeting family needs, and work expectations are becoming increasingly more complex for employees in the public sector throughout the world.

A different kind of employee is emerging in the workplace. Increasingly, workers' commitments may be more to themselves than to their employer. Younger workers, particularly those with children, are more willing to make sacrifices in their education, career, and/or job in exchange for increased time for family or personal life. This reorientation of values is contributing to changing patterns of thinking and decision making for employees (Galinsky & Friedman, 1993).

Due to demographic shifts within the American workforce, changing values have influenced company organization and business policies and practices. Work is a way to sustain a living and lifestyle, as well as an opportunity to productively contribute to the function of the economy and society as a whole. The workplace has become a setting for human development and employee self-fulfillment. A major challenge for managers in today's workplace is to be able to compete effectively in the marketplace and provide growth opportunities for employees at the same time.

The combination of a fluctuating work environment with competing job and family commitments can negatively affect employees. This negative effect can occur in the form of lowered morale, diminished motivation, reduced productivity, and increased burnout and turnover (Benedict & Taylor, 1995). Each of these is costly to an organization from both an economic and time efficiency standpoint.

What Research Says About Work/Life issues: A Case Example

The Cooperative Extension System, as a national organization funded by federal, state, and local governments and administered through land grant universities, has more than 16,000 personnel located in over 3,100 county offices nationally, in addition to district and regional offices in every state and in the territories of Puerto Rico and Guam. Like most of corporate America, Extension organizations throughout the country are experiencing profound changes. Financial problems, issues of accountability, restructuring, staff reductions, and redirection are faced daily. While significant attention has been committed to research of work/life issues in the private sector, little emphasis has been given to the study of public workers' concerns, specifically those employed by the Cooperative Extension System.

The Extension organization has a long tradition of professional service to clientele, often at a cost of sacrifice to family and self. Prior studies have identified that Extension employees are satisfied with their work and are committed to Extension. However, additional research has suggested that Extension employees experienced stress-related health concerns, had difficulty setting aside time for family and/or partner, felt less control over their lives, felt pressure from family to spend more time at home, were frustrated with their lack of accomplishments, and felt unsuccessful in balancing work/family roles (Lingren, 1995).

A 1995 study of turnover was conducted to identify the reasons why 67 of Extension's county-based professional staff voluntarily left Ohio State University Extension between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994 (Rousan, 1995)**.** The research found that the majority of program staff left the organization for the following reasons.

- *Organizational factors*, including low pay, too many work responsibilities, too many requirements for advancement, and a lack of recognition for a job well done.

- *Non-work-related factors*, including family obligations, more money elsewhere, conflict with personal responsibilities, and no time for personal relationships.

- *Individual work-related factors*, including other priorities in life, too many late night meetings, and conflict with values.

In 1997, The Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP) funded a national research study to identify issues concerning Extension personnel and their families in the area of balancing work, family, and personal time. A team from The Ohio State University received the grant to complete the national study. The study involved a national forum via electronic technology to identify key issues of personnel and family members, and a mail survey to a stratified random sample of Extension employees and family members drawn from the four national regions.

Reports of findings were sent to JCEP and to all Extension organizations, as well as several presentations of findings to national meetings of Extension employees. In addition, a national satellite broadcast was conducted to share the findings and implications. A complete summary of the study is available on the Web at: <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~worklife/>.

The Extension employee sample included administrators, program professionals, and support staff. A profile of the "typical" employee included these characteristics:

- Caucasian,
- Married,
- Somewhere between 39 and 52 years old,
- Had worked with Extension for 15 years,
- Had obtained a Master's degree, and
- Was the parent of two children who no longer lived at home.

This composite employee:

- Worked full time (40-50 hours/week),
- Spent 20-40 hours a week with family and friends, and
- Spent 10 hours or less a week in personal/self development activities.

Extension administrators in the study allocated a greater number of hours per week (56 hours/week) in work-related activities than other personnel. Administrators also spent 5-9 hours less than other personnel with family and friends, and 1.15-2 hours less in personal/professional development activities.

What Did Employees Say About Work/Life Issues?

Extension employees perceived supervisors to be supportive concerning their needs to balance work/life. To a moderate extent, co-workers shared in the concern for work/life balance, wanting to discuss these issues and support one another. Identified work/life challenges were workload, time, control/balance, and personal attitude/expectations. When asked to indicate who has the greatest influence on the number of hours the employee works for Extension, the top three items were self, clientele, and immediate supervisor.

Organizational support for assisting employees in balancing work/life was perceived as slight to moderate. When asked what actions Extension could take to better support employees and their families, employees indicated flexible working arrangements, reduction of workload, and administrative support.

Though 40% of employees were greatly aware of benefits and programs offered by Extension concerning work/life balance, 32% had little awareness. The top six benefits provided by Extension organizations nationally included:

- Seminars,
- Counseling/employee assistance programs,
- Paid childbirth/adoption leave for women,
- Pre-tax spending accounts,
- Sabbaticals, and
- Unpaid family leave.

The benefits most often used by Extension employees were:

- Flextime,
- Pre-tax spending accounts, and
- Seminars on work/family.

Support staff and program assistants more frequently indicated a need for better communication concerning their job responsibilities. Concerns of too much work and unclear priorities left many individuals feeling a lack of satisfaction with their work and a feeling of being unappreciated. These concerns were not unlike those expressed by administrators and professional staff, who also indicated they had difficulty with personal expectations, unclear priorities, and too much work. In the national study, program respondents who indicated that organizational culture was unsupportive were less able to balance their work and personal life.

Administrators and employees may view the level of administrative support for work/life issues differently. In the national Extension study, administrators appeared to be less concerned about organizational issues related to balancing work and personal life compared to program professionals. Ironically, the administrators perceived that organizational support for work/life issues was greater than was perceived by other personnel.

Family Perspective on Work/Life

The family members/friends provided a second perspective on the issues of work/life balance for Extension employees. They reported concerns related to:

- Time,
- Work spillover to home life,
- Family needs,
- Physical needs, and
- Financial needs.

They provided emotional support for the employee, leadership for family and home responsibilities, and also assisted with the employee's work responsibilities. They worked with the employee in scheduling and planning personal/family activities, sharing responsibilities, and doing things together. Few difficulties with child care or elder care arrangements were reported due to the travel or overnight requirements of the employee's job. They perceived that Extension work affected family/friend relationships to a great extent and that job stress factors were somewhat evident in the employee.

Family members/friends perceived that the organization, including the employee's supervisor, supported and helped employees achieve balance to a moderate extent. Factors they identified as inhibiting work/life balance were:

- Conflicts with others,
- Inadequate training, and
- Poor supervision.

Consequences of Ignoring Work/Life Issues

If work/life issues are ignored, the end result may have a negative impact on both the employee and the organization. Due to a shrinking workforce in the United States, employers must be more concerned about why people leave. Clearly, many of these reasons for professional staff turnover are related to issues of trying to balance work, family, and personal life.

When work/life issues are ignored, organizations run the risk of not being an "employer of choice," losing talented and trained people as well as potential employees to more work/life "friendly" organizations. Implementing work/life policies does not have to be costly. A 1996-97 study conducted by Baxter Health Care showed that the most basic work/life need of employees was respect (Campbell, 1997). Regardless of the number of benefits/services offered by the organization, if employees do not feel respected they are more likely to leave.

Economically, it may cost the organization up to 150% of the departing employee's salary to replace him or her (Friedman, Galinsky, & Plowden, 1992). But there are additional consequences of not addressing work/life issues. When costs of recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and training each new staff member are considered, any loss of personnel to the workforce due to work/life issues can be a substantial cost. There is an additional cost of time and energy to the remaining staff as well, when positions are left open to be managed until a replacement is hired. Employees may be adversely affected both physically and emotionally, resulting in increased health care costs, higher divorce rates, and employee burnout.

It is important for an organization to have insight into who is leaving the system and why. Managers and leaders need to address issues of work/life and their effect upon the workforce. By maximizing effective strategies, leaders and managers enhance their global competitiveness while creating positive work environments for their employees.

Adopting Work/Life Strategies

Profit and nonprofit organizations have experimented with formal and informal policies and guidelines, in their quest to help employees manage work/life effectively. The more formal "new" work policies include:

- Flexible work schedules,
- Job sharing,
- Telecommuting,
- Virtual offices,
- Formal employee leave polices for sick dependents, and
- Employee leave policies for community volunteer projects.

Many existing policies/programs are also benefits that help employees cope with work/life issues, such as:

- Vacation,
- Sick leave,
- Flexible spending accounts,
- Resource and referral services,
- Employee assistance programs,
- Part-time employment, and
- Sabbaticals.

It is a continual challenge for managers to keep their employees aware of existing benefits/services as well as new ones that are added. Making a one-time per year distributions of the benefits/services brochure to employees may not be sufficient. The distribution needs to be a continuous process because benefits/services are tied to events in the lifecycle (e.g., childbirth leave and elder care assistance).

In the national study, both employee respondents and family/friend respondents suggested actions Extension could take to help employees better achieve work/life balance. The number one suggested action by both groups was providing flexible working arrangements. Both groups also mentioned the need to reduce employee's workload and the need for Extension administrators to provide more support (e.g., serve as work/life role models, create & implement new work/life policies, etc.). A suggestion made only by the employees was developing mutual expectations (i.e., employee/supervisor).

"Organizations that support balance need to do more than develop family-friendly policies. They will redefine the notion of effective performance to incorporate a wide range of individual talents, contributions and styles. They will redefine the notion of career to respect a range of individual aspirations and definitions of success" (Kofodimos, 1993). Leaders and managers should be aware of the cultural norms and implied messages within their workplace regarding commitment to work. An organization's system of values and rewards within which people must work is often based on the overarching commitment to work. The emphasis is often on time worked ("face time"), communicating that the more hours an individual works means a stronger commitment to the job and the organization.

Managers/administrators often struggle with their own imbalance between work and personal time. When they focus the majority of their time, energy, and commitment on work, behaviors such as staying at the office into the evening or returning on weekends, traveling frequently, and taking full briefcases home are manifested. Even when they're not working, work often occupies their minds. And with the technological options such as cellular phones, beepers, fax machines, it makes it easier to be connected to the workplace. The struggle varies from individual to individual. Some see their life structure as controlled by these external pressures. The result is a discrepancy between what managers say they value and the values they demonstrate by their behaviors.

Summary

The results of the study indicated that work/life issues are of great concern to many Extension employees. Sixty-five percent of the responding Extension personnel expressed the concern. They further identified the most critical work/life challenges as:

1. A heavy work load,

2. Evening and weekend time commitments, and

3. Lack of control or job autonomy.

In reporting the number of hours worked per week:

- 49% indicated 40 to 50 hours,
- 27% 50 to 60 hours and
- 10%more than 61 hours.

Effective strategies embraced by employees in order to better balance their personal and professional lives include:

- Using a common calendar for work and life events,
- Combining family activities with work travel,
- Using flexible hours informally among a work-team,
- Setting work boundaries,
- Establishing priorities, and
- Using personal development activities.

The recommendations, based on this study, urged Extension administrators throughout the organization to reduce the workload and time requirements of county-based professionals and contended that policies needed to be consistent within the national Extension system.

Points to Ponder

Research findings show a strong interest in opportunities for flexible work arrangements and the development of clear work/life policies.

- How does your organizational culture need to change to create a more work/life friendly environment?

- Is your organization inclusive in its balancing work and family strategies/policies?

Employees express uncertainty about available benefits, and access to benefits that support work/life issues.

- How does your organization communicate, on an on-going basis, information about available benefits?

- How are employees encouraged and supported to make use of the existing benefits?

- Do the actions of administrators discourage employees from using available benefits?

The study notes participants' concern for a lack of respect and sensitivity toward employees' personal situations on the part of administration.

- How does your organization gain understanding and support from clientele/funders in balancing work and family for its employees?

- What are your organization's administrators doing to "walk the talk" in balancing work and family?

Acknowledgments

The authors extend special acknowledgments to these additional members of the Work/Life Issues of Extension Employees Research Team, The Ohio State University:

- Ann Clutter, District Specialist, Family and Consumer Sciences;
- Jo Jones, Learning and Leadership Officer;
- Jim Lemon, Communication and Technology;
- Steve Lichtensteiger, District Extension Associate, Computer Education;
- Ruben Nieto, Analyst;
- Marilyn Spiegel, Assistant Director, Family and Consumer Sciences; and
- Jan Thompson, Leader, Work/Life/Health

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