

Managers Letter

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Family-Friendly Workplaces Generate Productivity

by *Liza N. Burby*

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Just when working parents think they have their childcare plans arranged to perfection, a sick child or an unexpected school meeting can throw them off balance. For the working parent, it's a virtual nightmare to juggle backup childcare and still maintain productivity at work. Gone are the days when an employee's attendance and timeliness were a manager's main concern. Today, most managers have come to recognize that offering parents a way to jointly handle their work and family life is good business. Many managers are parents themselves, struggling with the same issues. Therefore, programs like flextime and employer-assisted emergency childcare are frequently becoming as much a part of the workplace dialogue as are profit margins.

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*Bob Nelson, President and Founder
Nelson Motivation, San Diego, CA*

“Work is increasingly becoming a state of mind rather than a place to be. If you say your employees have to be in at 8:00 AM because that's the way it's always been done, you're working in the past,” says Bob Nelson, president and founder of Nelson Motivation in San Diego, CA.

“The big picture is to get the work done. Some parents work better at home or late at night. It's important to accommodate people to get the best from them. It used to be, ‘I pay you, I want your body here.’ Today, when you align your organization's goals with your employees' needs, allowing for flexibility, autonomy and independence, you have the competitive advantage.”

According to the Families and Work Institute, work/family issues have moved to the forefront primarily because of changing demographics. Today, 85 percent of the U.S. workforce lives with family members and has daily responsibilities for both children and aging parents. Given such extensive obligations, there is bound to be conflict between work and family and the potential for productivity loss in a significant portion of the workforce. The bottom line: child and elder care are business issues today.

According to the Institute's 1998 study, “Ahead of the Curve: Why America's Leading Employers Are Addressing the Needs of New and Expectant Parents,” an employee's performance suffers from absenteeism and distractions when they're having childcare problems. On the other hand, research shows that when employers offer help with child and elder care, and establish policies that give workers more flexibility, they generate positive effects on retention, absenteeism and employee performance.

“If I have a working mom whose child is sick, I want her to be home, regardless of her official sick time, because if you do that, people know you're making a concession,” says Nelson. “One out of a thousand will take advantage of that, but don't set your policies based on that one person. The others will remember and will be there when you need a concession.”

Families and Work Institute research indicates that when parents have access to needed resources, they pull their weight and reward their employer with loyalty, and they tend to go the extra mile to get the job done. According to the report, as workplace demands become more rigorous as the result of advances in technology, the ability to hire and retain qualified workers becomes a pressing necessity.

“The tide has changed, especially for companies competing for the best and the brightest; it's that kind of labor market,” says Ann Vincola, a senior partner with Corporate Work/Life Consulting, a subsidiary of Knowledge Beginnings in Boston, MA. “You're fighting to get the best, so you need to offer as much as you can to attract people who are more concerned with the quality of their lives and the ability to spend time with their families.”

Nelson agrees. “There are smaller generations coming up within the next ten years, so it will be harder to get the people we need, let alone the skilled workers. It’s a long-term buyer’s market for employees,” he explains. “In trying to strike their own balance, employees have named personal and family balance as their second most important job criteria — ahead of money. Most people feel they can’t count on job security today, and they don’t want to be successful in business and divorced at home.”

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*Jan Lorimer, HR Director
Scholastic Books, Inc., New York, NY*

Scholastic Books, in New York, NY, which was ranked number six by *Working Woman* magazine in 1998 as one of the leading companies for women, currently employs 70 percent female workers, the majority of whom are parents. Family issues matter here. “Most of our managers make real concessions to parents for things like plays, games, etc. We pay the first five days of unpaid leave so people can use it if their child is ill. We care, and employees appreciate that,” says Jan Lorimer, human resource director for the company’s New York operations. “They can go to their child’s game guilt-free, as long as they put in the time to get the job done. As a result, we see committed and more productive employees.”

The 1993 Family Medical Leave Act is partly responsible for the overall change in values. “This is not to say that every company understands,” says Vincola, “but most companies are striving to be leaders in this area.”

For instance, Nelson reports that many companies are now combining days off instead of breaking them down into vacation days, sick days, etc. For example, employees get 20 days a year for whatever purpose they want. “They don’t have to justify their time,” he explains. “This gets them out of the game of sorting excusable and inexcusable absences. The focus is on getting the job done and taking whatever time they need.”

The best way to make your employee’s family — and your own — fit into the workplace, says Vincola, is to examine different options. Start by organizing a work and family committee or task force, and designate a program manager. Include all definitions of family and spouse in company policies. Assess the needs of your employees via a survey or a focus group. Vincola also recommends checking with local childcare groups to locate available services. Other ideas include group care, resource and referral services, lunch-hour parenting seminars, lactation rooms,

parenting resource rooms and assistance with toll-free numbers for day care, college placement assistance and elder care concerns, among other issues.

Once policies are in place, communicate them to all employees. Train managers and supervisors to be sensitive to work/family issues. Evaluate managers’ and supervisors’ ability to work with employees in these areas.

Vincola says the main objectives are to be flexible and to communicate. The employer has to be flexible in offering alternative work configurations such as telecommuting, and the employee has to be flexible in making sure the company’s needs are met.

“Both sides need to communicate with each other. It’s not going to work if you don’t understand and trust each other,” she asserts. “You have to empathize with each others’ needs, and the employee needs to understand that the company is there to make money. It’s best if there’s a mutual comprehension of goals and a working arrangement that has advantages for each side. This means teamwork and covering for each other, without feeling one is over-compensating for the other.”

And while you’re accommodating families with children and elderly parents, recognize that work/family issues include all employees, regardless of demographics. The Institute’s “Ahead of the Curve” study shows that when efforts to address the needs of employed parents also address the needs of other employees, there can be a dual payoff. When provided with flexibility, all employees — not just parents — tend to miss less work.

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