

The Best Solution to the Work/Family Divide: Put the Personal into Personnel

The New Hampshire Legislative Task Force on Work and Family has been taking testimony from successful managers who believe their company's bottom line is directly proportional to their ability to create and maintain family-friendly work environments.



Over the past couple of months, the Task Force, chaired by Rep. Mary Stuart Gile of Concord, has heard from executives of New Hampshire companies large and small, local and international, for-profit and not-for-profit.

Although many of us on the Task Force expected these companies would have complicated formulas or costly smorgasbord menus for dealing with family issues, managers told the Task Force that the best practices for work/family balance don't have to be complicated or expensive, but they do need to be caring and creative.

What business owners and managers are telling us is something that research bears out: investing company resources in healthy families pays big dividends in the form of productivity and worker retention.

Tom Raffio, president and CEO for Northeast Delta Dental of Concord and Connie Roy-Cryzowski, Delta's vice-president of human resources, testified that family issues can really influence an employee's productivity. Some of the family-related challenges they identified include meeting the needs of young children in day care or the care needs of elderly parents, making accommodation for children's doctor and dental visits, illnesses, or school cancellations, sick children, and meeting the special needs of families struggling to negotiate the mental health systems.

In the past, many managers have chosen to ignore the needs of workers' families. They've tried to compartmentalize their workers' lives by telling them that work time is not family time and that they should deal with the types of challenges listed by Raffio on their own time. All of us in working families know how those policies have failed us and our families.

Other family-conscious managers who testified before the Task Force included Kathleen Neils and Jackie Mitchell from The Timberland Company in Stratham; George Downing, president of Electrisola in Boscowen; Juliana Eades, president of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund based in Concord; Mark Coen, president of Page Belting Company in Boscowen; and Robert Chambers, president of Bonnie CLAC in Lebanon.

From their testimony, three themes emerged that seem to form the basis for family-friendly New Hampshire companies:

- **Managers listen to their employees.** These managers and HR reps spend time on the assembly line, in the offices, and out in the field with their employees. They commit to a simple principle: "If I really listen to the people I work with, they'll tell me what they need

to maintain a healthy work-family balance.” This may seem fundamental, but many employers seem to think they know best what their employees need, even though there’s a huge and growing gap between the incomes, ages, and family size of managers and those of line workers in New Hampshire companies. Don’t assume you know what your employees’ family pressures are. Ask them what they need to balance their responsibilities. Then take the time to listen.

- **They’re flexible and creative when it comes to work/family issues.** Just as no two employees are exactly alike, neither are their family responsibilities. Some strategies managers identified that can help employees create a better balance between work and family:
 - Offering flex-time that allows employees to trade shifts, make up lost time after hours, cyber-commute on family-need days, or work flexible or reduced shifts or compressed workweeks.
 - Offering prorated benefits for productive part-time employees.
 - Letting employees manage their own leave time.
 - Building snow days into the schedule based on the formulas school districts use.
 - Contracting with child-care providers for company rates.
 - Getting creative with benefit planning, allowing employees to design the plans that best meet their families’ needs.
 - Offering incentives to purchase fuel-saving vehicles, giving gas cards as bonuses/incentives, or creating and managing a carpool for employees.
- **They commit to caring.** The industrial age is over. The key to our service economy is attracting and investing in well-trained, skilled employees who will remain loyal. Ask yourself this question: “Do we treat our employees as well as our clients and customers?”

To fully realize the New “Hampshire advantage,” we need to invest in New Hampshire’s families. A stressed employee struggling to find a way to balance the responsibilities of a demanding work environment and a challenging family situation is a shaky investment. Healthy, stable families produce productive workers. The goal is clear: we’ve got to put the “personal” into our personnel policies.

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