

Finding the Best Work Environment for Your Family's Sake

The Families and Work Institute, a New York-based national think tank focused on issues concerning work and family life, has just released an important piece of research for anyone striving to balance work and family life.

When Work Works: The 2008 National Study of Employers is a comprehensive sample of 1100 employers with 50 or more employees. Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, it's the brain child of Ellen Galinsky, a founding member of the work-family balance movement in the U.S. and a noted researcher in the topic area.



This recent study is based on earlier research by the Institute which indicated that employees who work in family-friendly and flexible workplaces tend to have greater engagement in and satisfaction from their jobs, intend to remain with their employers over the long haul, have better mental health, and experience less negative spillover from job to home and home to job than other employees.

The new study assesses the extent to which employers around the nation have heard learned that maintaining healthy work/family balance is good business. It compares changes in employer practices by examining trends over the past 10 years.

There is good news and bad news in the report. It won't surprise anyone that the bad news involves health care. This research confirms the reality that employers continue to pay an increasingly smaller share of health care costs, leaving employees with more out-of-pocket costs and creating an enormous financial burden on families.

The good news is that time flexibility, a hallmark of family-friendly business practices, is on the increase. According to Galinsky's findings, 79 percent of employers now allow at least some employees to modify their work schedules to accommodate the needs of their families. This figure represents a 10 percent increase in businesses that allow flex-time, an encouraging trend for those of us who understand the difficulty of predicting and scheduling family needs.

For the most part, however, businesses in this study have made few changes in their practices relative to family well being over the past 10 years. For example, there were no changes in the way they provided support for child care and family elder-care, despite a rapidly increasing number of "sandwich" families (those caring for both children and elderly relatives).

Employee assistance programs, which provide help to employees dealing with problems and pressures in their lives, have increased, with 65 per cent of businesses now offering this service.

Maybe the most useful analysis the report provides is a synthesis of what the research revealed about the companies that provide attention, programs and policies that help employees balance work with family responsibilities. The report concludes that the most family-friendly companies are:

- Nonprofits: Nonprofit businesses offer more family-focused policies, programs and benefits than their for-profit counterparts.
- More diverse at the top level: Employees who tended to have more racial and ethnic minorities in upper-level management and more women in their workforces tended to pay more attention to child care, elder care, health care and economic-security issues where their employees were concerned.
- Able to hire hardworking self-starters: Interestingly, the most flexible and family-oriented companies appear to have less trouble finding hardworking, self-starting employees who tend to have increased company loyalty. Galinsky notes that there seems to be a correlation between a company's work/family policies and their satisfaction with their employees' performance.

If you are looking to make a move to a more family-friendly work environment, or if your present company wants to increase worker productivity and loyalty, take a look at this important report from the Work and Family Institute, available at <http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/2008nse.pdf>

Dr. Malcolm Smith is Family Life and Family Policy Specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension and teaches in the UNH Family Studies Program. He can be reached at (603) 862-7008, or email: malcolm.smith@unh.edu