



APPOINTMENTS

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR

Concern for family issues may boost performance

Employee support programs are vulnerable to elimination in times of economic downturn due to bottom-line-only decisions according to Susan Lambert, Associate Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.

In a new book, *Work and Life Integration: Organizational, Cultural and Individual Perspectives*, co-edited by Susan Lambert and Ellen Ernst Kossek, Lambert argues that the business case for providing workers with supports for their personal lives is currently outdated and needs to be changed. "The field's quest to make a business case may have come at a cost," Lambert said. "Many early, formal employee supports largely operate as employer supports. They were designed to help workers keep their personal responsibilities from interfering with their job involvement and performance. The more time you spend with your children, the less time you're likely to have for your work."

Lambert considers that this attitude is slowly changing. In particular, a group of not-for-profit organizations concerned with work and family issues has begun to argue that the business case should be addressed at the bigger picture and move from "a narrow focus on short-term profitability to a longer-term strategy of investing in employee and community well-being."

For example, programs such as on-site day care have been offered and promoted by some businesses as a means to improve profitability by reducing employee absenteeism and turnover, said Lambert, who, along with doctoral student Elaine Waxman, also reports on research conducted in Chicago-area corporations in the book.

Still, a business case needs to be made for accommodating family interests when dealing with employees. Employers must group work-life policies with other human resource strategies that invest in workers, Lambert said.

Contributors to the book contend that

firms should be reminded that they gain a competitive advantage when they pursue their profits through quality enhancement, rather than cost containment. In doing that, they need to discuss ways employees add value to service and production.

"Part of making the case for the importance of workers' contributions to firm success would be to highlight how lower-level workers are on the front lines of customer service and technological innovation," Lambert said. That position would show that firms gain competitive advantages when they design jobs that allow employees to add value to firms through their work.

Those changes provide the basis of broader policy improvements discussed in the book. Current research also shows that laws to improve situations for workers seeking to deal with family responsibilities have been ineffective. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows workers unpaid leave to care for newborn children or other family members with serious health problems, is available to workers at about 11 percent of the nation's work places and covers 55 percent of the work force.

Lambert and Waxman found that workers in lower-level jobs often do not receive sick or vacation time or employer-sponsored health insurance. "Thus, an important step in a new business case would be to focus on barriers to distributing supports that are available in many work places today, at least on the books," she said.

Lambert said employers who implement work-life policies and researchers should



work together to develop a new understanding of the role of work-life issues. "It has been our experience that few employers systematically collect data to quantitatively or qualitatively evaluate the effectiveness of their work-life policies."

Longitudinal studies would help employers define the links between work and family life, and multi-method studies also could contribute to understanding the causes and outcomes of frictions between workers and the workplace, Lambert said.

Lambert added that in general, research in the work-life field needs to become more rigorous, so, for example, definitions of various terms have more consistent meanings, and so researchers look beyond two-income, married couples and their problems to

examine the issues that affect low-income, single heads-of-households. Researchers also have focused a great deal on individuals and their family needs and not enough on the nature of work itself, she said. *Work and Life Integration: Organizational, Cultural and Individual Perspectives* is intended to overcome that problem.

"The book chapters help direct attention to the ways in which conditions of employment are critical to worker and family well-being, revealing multifaceted and reciprocal relationships," she said.

Lambert examined hospitality, transportation, retail and financial service jobs, and found a high degree of turnover and very limited opportunities for workers to organize their work life around family needs. She also found that in some workplaces, temporary workers fill lower-level jobs with low wages and few benefits. These temporary workers share the workload with regular employees who have job-related benefits. In general, employers often distinguish jobs by status rather than tasks, which is leading to increased stratification in the workplace, she said.

"Given the widening gap in well-being between citizens lodged at the top and the bottom of America's income distribution, it seems important to develop insights into how workplaces might play a role in diminishing inequality in those opportunities essential to balancing work and family life, and ultimately, to improving the well-being of workers, their families and communities," she said. -hrmguid.com

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More Fun at Work: Is it another fringe benefit for highly paid employees?

The best paid employees get the highest material benefits from working, but it also seems that they have the richest social lives.

A study published in a recent issue of the journal *Social Science Quarterly* found that highly paid workers were more likely to participate in social activities with co-workers. The highly paid also reported greater cohesion and solidarity among their colleagues.

"The social attractions of the workplace are strongest for those who are already rewarded with the biggest paychecks," said Randy Hodson, author of the study and professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

According to Hodson, highly-paid employees tend to have jobs with more freedom and autonomy in which they can interact with their co-workers and develop friendships. They are also more likely to work in teams in which interaction with others is both necessary and encouraged.

On the other hand, lower-paid workers - for example, those in manufacturing - are likely to spend more time working with things, rather than people, and may not have the time to interact with their colleagues.

The research was based on a detailed analysis of 124 book-length studies of employees in a variety of workplace settings. Occupations included meat packers, taxi drivers, lawyers, doctors and people from a wide range of other jobs.

Hodson and three graduate students organized and coded information from all of these books to measure the degree and type of social interaction at a variety of workplaces from around the world. Hodson was then able to build a data set that allowed quantitative, statistical comparisons of different workplaces and different kinds of employees.

Results suggest that when people develop friendships at work, it is because they enjoy their work and co-workers, said Hodson.

"It is the carrot of having an enjoyable and well-paid job that leads to rich social lives at work, not the stick of worrying about job loss," Hodson said. "But of course, only some people are offered the carrot." It appeared that women tended to report less rich social lives at work than men. The researchers found that this was because men tended to have jobs that made workplace friendships more likely.

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