

Managing the work-family conflict

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Work and family are organically linked by the people who split their days between home and workplace. Inevitably, there are conflicts between these two worlds, and the way we manage those conflicts determines the health of our society.

When faced with a conflict between work and family responsibilities, the majority of Canadian employees put work first, according to Linda Duxbury, business professor at Carleton University. They also strive to meet their family commitments, with the result that the employees themselves can become the victim of burnout and depression. The Globe and Mail series on mental health last week provided vivid personal histories of some of the victims.

Some of the most “toxic” working conditions affect professionals who serve the public – nurses, doctors, teachers, police, military and public service executives - according to Bill Wilkerson, chair of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.

And Dr. Duxbury's study of 6,400 employees working for large employers from business and the government shows that work-life conflict is affecting more people every year – rising from 47 per cent of the work force in 1991 to 58 per cent in 2001.

People are working longer hours, they are coping with email messages into the night and early in the morning, and some are off-shifting so one parent can be at home while the other works. What gets squeezed out is sleep.

The main indicators of distress are rising absenteeism and increasing costs of disability leave, with about 40 per cent of disability claims generated by depression. Other indicators relate to the health of the children and the number of adults who are limiting family size or deciding not to have children because of the pressures of work.

Doug Willms, Canada Research Chair at the University of New Brunswick and author of *Vulnerable Children*, says that 28.6 per cent of Canadian children exhibit cognitive or behavioural problems that mean they are not ready to learn at age 6. Children living in low-income households are more likely to be vulnerable, but, overall, 60 per cent of vulnerable children are not living in poor homes, and many live in well-to-do homes.

Why would children in well-to-do families experience these problems?

“What matters most is the kind of family environment a child lives in: the benefits of good parenting skills, a cohesive family unit and parents with good mental health far outweigh the negative effects associated with poverty,” Dr. Willms says.

How then, as a society, do we support men and women to be the best they can be in the world of work and in the home? Barack Obama, in his instantly famous Father's Day Speech, started from the proposition that family is the most important rock on which we build our lives.

We need families to raise our children, Mr. Obama said. Only families can set the standard of excellence, pass along the value of empathy, and give the gift of hope – hope that something better is waiting for us if we're willing to work hard for it.

Much of his speech focused on the personal responsibility of fathers, but, he said, “if fathers (and mothers) are doing their part, then our government should meet them half way.”

So, too, should employers. In a recent Health Canada publication – *Reducing Work-Life Conflict: What Works? What Doesn't?* – Dr. Duxbury gives two reasons why having family-friendly policies on the books is not enough: the policies are not being applied effectively; and many employees fear repercussions if they ask for help.

There are two concrete things for employers to do to meet employees half way: Give employees a greater sense of control over their hours of work and their work schedule. Clear criteria should be agreed and transparent, the process for changing work hours should be flexible, and there should be mutual accountability.

Increase the number of supportive managers within the organization – managers who make work expectations clear, plan the work to be done, and openly discuss decisions that affect the employee's work.

As for Canadian governments, there are four priorities: Ensure that people who work full time can earn a living wage by consistently adjusting minimum wages to reflect inflation and by expanding the Working Income Tax Benefit introduced in the last budget.

Expand access to affordable early childhood education by offering day-long junior and senior kindergarten, expanding child care spaces for children who are 3 and under, and making access to maternity and parental leave universal. (Only 2 in 3 working women are eligible under current EI rules.) Expand after-school options for recreation, the arts and homework clubs.

Ensure that every neighbourhood has a resource centre to support parents and healthy child development.

In acknowledging the organic links between work and family, employers and governments give parents choices about when they work, about giving their children a good start in life, and even about how many children to have.

In any aging society, we want every adult to be able to work to their potential, and every one of their children to be ready, willing and able to be a great parent as well as a great worker.

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