



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Human Face of Workplace Flexibility

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U.S. families are experiencing serious time constraints as the demands of work and family life require more attention and involvement. Confronted with workplaces and schools that have rigid schedules, the predictable and unpredictable nature of daily life is taking a major toll on the emotional well-being of parents and their children. Stress and job dissatisfaction are on the rise, prompting demands for greater flexibility in the workplace. This paper highlights the importance of workplace flexibility and why it should become a standard for work, especially for working families, who constitute the majority of the U.S. workforce.

Current studies show that mothers and fathers spend the majority of their waking hours working, caring for their children, and performing household chores, with mothers spending more time on child care and housework and fathers spending slightly more time at work. With only 24 hours in a day, when parents with school-age children work full-time jobs, there are approximately two and half hours per day that parents cannot cover the direct care of their children. Taking into account vacation times for working parents and the time that school age children are not in school, there are approximately 55 week days a year that parents have to worry about supervising their children. It does not take too much imagination to understand why working parents, in the struggle to meet work and family commitments, report feeling stressed, emotionally and psychologically drained, and in danger of burn-out (Schneider & Waite, 2004).

Recognizing the rising importance of workplace flexibility and its link to well-being, some researchers have begun to analyze the subjective dimensions of time use to produce rich understandings of how working mothers, fathers, and children are feeling throughout the day. One important study in this field is the 500 Family Study, an analysis of the work-life balance among U.S. middle-class families that provides detailed information on mothers, fathers, and children's levels of stress experienced when at work, at school, and when at home together. This study allows researchers a window into the hours spent on household tasks and child care, underscoring how much time different family members spend on the mental labor of planning, organizing, and managing family life.

Working mothers continue to be the primary household workers and use a variety of strategies to cope with their busy, complicated lives. Chief among these strategies is multitasking which almost doubled for working parents between 1975 and 2000. In fact, results from the 500 Family Study showed that working parents multitask slightly more than half of their waking time. Multitasking has some benefits, and parents report feeling very productive when multitasking, although mothers are more likely to have these experiences at home than fathers. Yet at the same time there are liabilities; mothers, especially when multitasking at home, report higher levels of feeling frustrated, irritated, and stressed. It is not surprising that the majority of working mothers would prefer to work part-time.

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If mothers are more stressed, have less free time to be with their children, and would prefer to work part-time, why do so many of them work full time? Results from the 500 Family Study show that mothers who are working long hours at their jobs are often motivated to do so to qualify for job benefits such as health insurance, paid absences, and retirement plans. Beyond the economic necessities, work also provides positive emotional affect. Parents experience greater feelings of productivity and higher levels of involvement (both mother and fathers) and mothers experience more enjoyment when they are at work than at home. On the other hand, fathers enjoy being at home more than being at work.

Adolescents do not resent that their parents work, however they are angry when parents work late or miss events. If mothers arrive home angry from work their adolescents are more likely to also report feeling angry; this emotional transfer does not occur for fathers. However, adolescents are not accepting of instances when their fathers have to work long hours or work-related obligations interfere with their presence at activities. The idea that fathers are working out of economic necessity rather than by choice appears to be an outdated perception. Adolescents believe that the economic and emotional well being of the family are the shared responsibility of both working parents.

In our present economic environment the costs of running a household and meeting basic family needs requires two incomes. Clearly single parent households are at a disadvantage. The stress and pressures of work family conflict are only likely to increase unless more flexibility options are designed and implemented. There are essentially two types of flexibility that can help meet the needs of today's working parents: flexible work arrangements (FWAs) that allow employees more control over when and where they work on a daily basis; and formal and informal time off policies that allow for short term time off (STO). Many companies find that flexibility is economically profitable and increases employee satisfaction and productivity. Flagship employers have implemented flexibility programs that provide benefits to working parents in the form of changing the start and end times of the workday, offering compressed work weeks, reducing hours, job sharing, banking hours, and swapping shifts. Workplace flexibility is today's strategy for meeting the needs of working families and the businesses in which they work. Our social worlds have changed; working families are the human face of the U.S. workplace.