

Striking a Balance between Work and Family Life – A New Societal Reality

By Marcel Faggioni

In our contemporary world, many aspects of society have undergone tremendous change. This is especially true in modern society's definition of the whole notion of "family". In the not-too-distant past, the term "family" traditionally conjured up images of a married couple (husband and wife) and a number of offspring (typically 2 or 3 children). In recent years, the notion of family has been altered to include a much broader definition of family groupings and lifestyles. Today's family may consist of the following permutations:

- Two parents with children
- Single parent with children
- Two adults with children from one or more marriages
- Parents in a common-law relationship
- Children whose parents live in separate residences
- Children who live part-time at one parent's place and part-time at the other parent's place
- Same-gender partners living with or without children
- No children at all
- Two or more generations of family members living in the same dwelling

The other major societal shift in recent years is the increasing number of women joining the workforce. Much of the change has occurred with respect to women assuming positions with greater responsibility and accountability on a full-time basis. This shift has contributed to additional stress in trying to balance family life with work life. The whole phenomenon of "latch-key" kids has cropped up during this societal shift.

The other key societal shift of great importance is a product of our evolving demographics. The number of elderly requiring care is increasing at an exponential rate. The post-war baby boomers are reaching their golden years, and are living longer as a result of modern advances in health care. This increasing swell of an aging population is forcing the offspring of these baby boomers to undertake a greater role in the care of their elderly parents.

These societal shifts are requiring employers to consider ways of providing more flexible workplace arrangements in order to allow workers to balance their work obligations with their ever-increasing family obligations. In many successful organizations, management is constantly seeking ways of creating a workplace environment that helps employees meet their work and family responsibilities. This fundamental paradigm shift within some organizations is based on the philosophy that if employers can respond creatively to work and family issues in a proactive manner, the organization can minimize the

negative impact of the competing obligations between work and family, while enhancing employee relations/morale, productivity and public image.

In various organizations, management offers employees a number of ways to strike a balance between family and work life. Some of these include:

- Job Sharing
- Temporary part-time arrangements
- On-site day care centres or subsidies for day care services
- Enhanced leave provisions for child care and elderly care
- Flexible work schedules (i.e., compressed work weeks, staggered start and end times, flextime)
- Flexible workplace (i.e., allow employee to work from home)
- Employee Assistance Programs

The growing number of working families and the ever-increasing number of elderly in our communities will likely place more pressure on employers to take a long and hard look at instituting some of the above programs. The benefits will undoubtedly out-weigh the effort and costs associated with their implementation. In fact, by taking a proactive approach in assisting its employees in better managing work and family needs, employers can assure themselves of greater rates of retention and productivity, while ultimately fostering employee loyalty and commitment.