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Real Family Values: Flexible Work Arrangements and Work-Life Fit

By Sarah Jane Glynn and Emily Baxter December 19, 2013

This issue brief is part of a six-part series from the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, which outlines value-based policies that benefit all American families. For more information on our Real Family Values series, visit our series page.

Strong families are built through care. In addition to daily love and affection, families need to know that they can care for their children, sick family members, and elderly relatives. Only a generation ago, most families used to have a full-time stay-at-home caregiver, usually the mother. But today, the majority of parents work, including 90.8 percent of fathers and 63.3 percent of mothers,[1] and only one in five children has a stay-at-home parent. Most families require this income in order to make ends meet, but all too often the ways in which workplaces are structured create needless conflict between home and work. When parents are fired[2] or forced to quit their jobs because of a family emergency, it is an affront to the value we place on responsibility. When parents face stigma and reduced career options after working part time in order to care for their children or elderly parents, it goes against our values of equality of opportunity, commitment to work, and caring for those we love.

Greater flexibility in work arrangements—whether it is more control over scheduling hours, working part time, or greater stability in scheduling—gives workers more freedom in how and when they accomplish tasks and allows them to commit to both work and family. While nearly all employers report that they offer flexibility of various kinds to their workers,[3] almost half of workers report that they do not have access[4] to any form of flexibility in terms of the hours, days, or location where they must complete their work. Yet despite widespread public support,[5] such policies are often unavailable or stigmatized, so that even when workers do have access to them, they face very real job repercussions[6] for taking advantage of flexible work arrangements.

Providing American workers with the flexibility and scheduling stability they need in their jobs to help them better care for their families would give them the opportunity to be both responsible family caregivers and responsible employees. Below, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative explores the difficulties American families face when it comes to a lack of flexibility in the workplace and examines policies that will help ensure that workplace structures and attitudes strengthen American families and express real family values without unduly burdening businesses.

Falling short on flexible work arrangements

Workers' rights and the dignity of work have been core principles embedded in progressive faith movements, which have fought for just social and economic policies[7] throughout our nation's history. Policies that allow employees to perform well while also meeting their families' needs are an important component of workers' rights. While the Fair Labor Standards Act[8] protects at least some individuals from overwork—establishing a minimum wage that better enables workers to manage their working hours and helping working caregivers manage their dual responsibilities—it does not address concerns such as the prevalence of involuntary part-time work when full-time work would be preferable, or issues of scheduling flexibility or predictability.

Issues of workplace flexibility take different forms in different industries, but the roots of the problems are the same: Our modern labor standards make it unnecessarily difficult for workers to be both good workers and good family caregivers. Americans across different industries and occupations would benefit from business strategies and public policies that help them accommodate both their family and work lives.

In a nation of 155 million workers[9] within a larger global economy, flexible work arrangements require a number of different approaches in order to meet the needs of our diverse workforce. For some workers, the issue is overwork. Salaried professional employees, for example, are considered exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act[10] and are routinely expected to put in far more than 40 hours per week on the job. For workers in industries such as health services and transportation, mandatory overtime has become the norm—even though they are paid hourly wages.[11] These workers have little advance knowledge of when their shifts will actually end; while overtime pay can help families make ends meet, unpredictable hours can also make arranging things such as child care nearly impossible.[12] Finally, workers in the service industry often have problems with unpredictable schedules that can change on a whim and offer too few hours to make a living.[13]

Americans who work in shift work or lower-wage, service-based jobs often find themselves unable to balance their family lives with work expectations for other reasons. Oftentimes, shift scheduling can lack stability: 49 percent of employers cite[14] a worker's availability at odd hours or "whenever the employer needs them" as very important in the hiring decision. Beginning and ending times are rigid, yet can often change with little notice—a practice known as "just-in-time" hours.[15] When child care structures are difficult to organize or emergencies occur, shift and low-wage workers can lose their jobs with few questions asked. In a 2010 report by the Center for American Progress,[16] Joan C. Williams and Heather Boushey relayed a story about a security guard who had been fired following an incident in which she left work to tend to her 10-year-old son after he had been in a fight. The firing was eventually reversed, but she was suspended for a week without pay.

Although less discussed and researched, middle-income families—the 53 percent of American families who earn between $64,000 and $110,000 a year—often have jobs that are characterized by very rigid start and end times. In rigid shift situations with "no-fault" attendance policies—through which workers accrue points for every unforeseen absence from work, regardless of the reason—being a few minutes late can cost someone his or her job.[17] Furthermore, jobs that require last-minute, mandatory overtime can disrupt the careful balance of child care and spouses' work plans. Among those who work overtime, nearly one in five workers[18] say that they have to put in more overtime hours than they prefer. Families in the middle class are often above the poverty line only because both parents work. This can necessitate "tag-team parenting," in which one parent takes care of the children while the other is working and vice versa, leaving little time for families to actually spend together.[19]

Workers in salaried white-collar jobs may have more opportunities for some forms of flexibility. For example, some parents can leave work to pick up children with the expectation that they will work more hours from home later in the evening. But choosing these or similar options, such as working from home or working part time, can come with harmful repercussions. On average, mothers earn 23 percent less than their male counterparts,[20] in part because women are more likely to end up bearing the brunt of family caregiving and thus are pushed into jobs with lower wages but more flexibility. This may not present an issue for some families, but the majority of families[21] depend on mothers' earnings, and scaling back can have long-term repercussions in terms of future wages and retirement security. A 2010 CAP report[22] highlighted the story of a news reporter who ultimately left her job after she was told that she could not reduce her 60-hour work week to a more traditional 40-hour one so that she could spend more time with her son. She was eventually rehired on a part-time basis but without the benefits or job security she had before.

In these instances and particularly for office workers, it is not that options for flexibility do not exist, but rather that expectations and social norms around work require longer hours or physical presence in a workplace, regardless of whether or not it proves more productive. Both men[23] and women[24] who exercise options for flexibility often face stigmatizing treatment, such as lower earnings and fewer future opportunities for promotion as a result. This can help explain a contradictory statistic about American workplaces: although 79 percent of employers say they allow some of their employees to change their work schedules from time to time, only 28 percent of workers report having flexibility in their work schedules.[25] Workers may be reluctant to take advantage of the flexibility they need because they know that they will be indirectly punished as a result.

Inherent in all of these efforts across the professional and class spectrum is the resounding fact that American families are working very hard to provide for themselves and their loved ones. They are attuned to the necessity of sacrifice because they value opportunity. But real family values recognize the value of time spent with family, whether it is spent raising children or caring for elders.

Our values have not changed. Americans still value hard work and productivity. In fact, Americans work more hours[26] than most workers in other developed countries; they are also more productive.[27] Still, we expect to be treated fairly and receive just compensation for our work.

Rather than illustrating shifting values, these clashes between American families' work and home lives suggest that the workplace has not entirely caught up to the lived realities of American families. The workplace is more geared to the workforce of 50 years ago. In 1960, for example, only 20 percent of mothers worked, and a family structure comprised of a male breadwinner and female homemaker was most common.[28] This allowed for a workplace structure and culture in which the "ideal" worker was unencumbered by family responsibility, presumably because he had a wife at home to take care of children or elders and could work whenever or as much as needed.

But that is not how we live today. In 2008, 43.5 million Americans cared for a family member over the age of 50.[29] More than 40 percent of children live in single-parent-headed households,[30] and 70 percent of children live in a household where all adults work.[31] Maintaining such perceptions of how workers should be creates a workforce in which workers are commodities and must make difficult choices between their family and work responsibilities. These perceptions and practices devalue the act of caregiving and place it in unnecessary opposition to work life. Caregiving and commitment to work are not mutually exclusive. Real family values hold dear the benefit and worth of not only providing for American families but also helping them flourish and grow together.

Equality is one of our most deeply held values, yet our perceptions of the ideal worker simultaneously grow out of and play into how we structure the workplace and access to flexible work arrangements. In one high-profile[32] study from the *Journal of Social Issues*, for example, Victoria Brescoll, Jennifer Glass, and Alexandra Sedlovskaya found that managers were more likely to give "high-status" men flexible working arrangements for career-advancement opportunities such as training than they were to grant such requests from women for child care or career advancement. Notably, "low-status" working men were more likely to be granted flexible schedules for child care than high-status men. Researchers highlighted this class difference, noting that it was as if a show of responsibility and "their low status made these men's requests for more family involvement laudatory in ways that high-status men could not tap."[33]

Moreover, workers are often expected to adapt to the workplace and may face the blame of employers when they cannot. In another study, which focused on stereotypes facing low-wage mothers with work-family conflicts, managers often referenced their employees' need for greater "personal responsibility," suggesting that their workers' difficulties balancing work and family were not due to the strictures of their jobs—such as low pay, irregular shifts, inflexible hours, mandatory overtime, and no sick leave—but rather to employees' moral failings.[34] Both of these studies highlight how much perception can affect work policies, especially when these perceptions do not align with the lived realities of the workforce.

At the core of flexible work arrangements is an appreciation of the value of time spent with family and the responsibilities that parents have as caregivers for those family members who need it most. This does not negate the value we place on commitment to our work, nor does it lessen the ability of business to function profitably. Workplace flexibility does not have to come with a huge price tag for employers, as businesses are finding that offering flexibility costs little to nothing, while offering real benefits to the bottom line.[35] There is no compelling reason, business or otherwise, why one should have to choose between being a responsible parent and a responsible worker.

Increasing flexibility in the workplace

Flexible work arrangements and practices speak to our deeply held values of fairness and justice, as well as a long tradition of progress in workers' rights. Flexible work arrangements accomplish this through a number of simple methods, including modifying daily start and end times, working part time, working a compressed work week, telecommuting, and even job sharing.[36] These arrangements make it possible for parents to care for children after school and give them more time to care for family members generally.

Studies have shown that flexible working arrangements can have multiple benefits for businesses, such as higher worker retention, reduced absenteeism, and healthier, less-stressed employees.[37] Moreover, workplace flexibility does not decrease productivity but can, along with other factors such as good management, increase it.[38] As Joan C. Williams, one of the most prominent scholars in this field, said in an interview with the Center for American Progress:

People are convinced they cannot afford to change how work is organized, but if it is organized for the workforce of 40 years ago, there are a lot of costs that they are coding as the costs of doing business that are eminently avoidable. We do not always see these costs as avoidable because our identities are tied up in work [that we do].[39]

Unions have been very helpful in achieving and demonstrating the practicality of flexible work arrangements for hourly workers. One union in California, which represents grocery and drug store employees, was able to negotiate for weekly schedules that are posted the previous Friday. The union was also able to secure a contract that guarantees at least four hours of work for every scheduled shift; often, just-in-time scheduling allows workers to be sent home when business is slow, causing them to lose wages and carefully constructed child care schedules. Such changes, while seemingly small, made a huge difference in these employees' ability to plan for care and organize their families' lives.[40]

There are important examples of success from businesses that have implemented more flexible or stable working arrangements. For example, Jennifer Piallat, the owner of Zazie Restaurant in San Francisco, created a long-term schedule for her employees that allowed them to work some busy, "high tip" nights as well as less busy nights. The simple switch from week-to-week to longer-term scheduling offered her employees the stability they needed to plan for both work and family, as well as the flexibility to switch shifts with others when conflicts arose.[41] Simple scheduling solutions are mutually beneficial for businesses and their employees, as businesses are better able to retain workers and employees are treated with respect, not as commodities.

At the public policy level, a Vermont law that goes into effect on January 1, 2014, allows workers to request flexible work arrangements without fear of retaliation or negative ramifications. Under the law, employers should make an effort to grant flexibility requests unless they are demonstrably unsuitable to a business' operations.[42] A similar proposal has been signed into law in San Francisco, purposefully focusing on parents' and caregivers' right to request flexible work arrangements without repercussions.[43] Such laws recognize true family values and are useful tools in strengthening families, as well as parents' and caregivers' ability to care for those family members who rely on them.

CAP also supports the Flexibility for Working Families Act, introduced in June by Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY). This legislation ensures that all workers have the right to ask for flexible work arrangements at all levels without fear of losing their jobs;[44] similar laws have been successful and increased "worker satisfaction" in New Zealand, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, among other countries.[45]

Conclusion

By promoting flexible work arrangements without stigma and creating opportunities for workers to be more flexible within all levels of organizations, we promote greater equality within the workforce and the family. We strengthen the workforce and begin to clarify an understanding of it that represents the realities and challenges today's families face—one that does not idealize decades-old family work structures. We must codify into law the steps that help create a more just workplace and ensure that all workers can ask for the flexibility they need to thrive as both employees and family members. By holding fast to these real family values, we can create more equitable and just families and, in turn, a more equitable and just nation.

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