

Creating effective Workplace Cultures

The Work-Life Evolution Study

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The focus of the work-life professional has, in the past, mainly been on creating HR policies and programs. The Boston College Center for Work & Family spent the past year further exploring the benefits and effectiveness of work-life programs beyond just policies and programs. This article is an overview of the center's most recent work: *The Work-Life Evolution Study*.

One of the most interesting initiatives at the center during the past year was a project dubbed the *Work-Life Evolution Study*, which was funded through the center's corporate partners (i.e., member organizations that have a long-term relationship with the center and our work). Many total rewards, HR and work-life professionals are keenly aware that the work-life field has evolved in many new directions during the past 15 years. These new directions encompass virtually every aspect of an employee's

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ The work-life field evolved from a narrow focus on child care to a more comprehensive profession focused on a wide range of employee work-life issues.
- ⇒ Influencing CEOs and line managers is a critical priority if the work-life field is to be successful in impacting workplace cultures.
- ⇒ Employees should be educated and supported in making good professional and personal choices.



FIGURE 1: THE MANY “HOMES” OF WORK-LIFE



working life—recruitment, retention, development, rewards and evolving corporate cultures.

In fact, the work-life field evolved from a narrow focus on child care to this new, more comprehensive HR profession. Work-life initiatives can be housed and led from virtually any HR function, whether it’s talent management, total rewards, diversity, organizational development or employee health and wellness. The fact that work-life has so many different homes speaks to the tremendous breadth of the field and the myriad challenges that HR professionals help employees address. (See Figure 1.)

Understanding Growth and Change in Work-Life

Using the *Work-Life Evolution Study*, researchers focused on better understanding how the field has grown and changed in recent years, with an eye toward making predictions about the future, which is certainly never an easy undertaking. A variety of approaches was used to gather the data and develop

was used to gather data and develop the findings, including reviewing literature, interviewing experts and reviewing transcripts of interviews with leaders in the field who were recipients of The Conference Board’s Work-Life Legacy Award (one of which was WorldatWork Work-Life Director Kathie Lingle.) Most innovatively, the team gathered 25 thought leaders (including many leading academics and practitioners) at Boston College in the summer of 2006 for a “future search conference,” which explored where these leaders thought the field was heading in the future. The study yielded some interesting findings. One set of findings related to the trends that leaders in the field feel will have the greatest impact on corporate work-life efforts. The experts indicate that the major trends include:

1. The increasing importance of diversity that has driven the need for creating more inclusive workplaces.
2. Changing workforce demographics, most notably the aging of the workforce. This trend has raised

- important challenges for older workers and, perhaps more importantly, for workers from different generations in terms of how they interact and work with one another.
3. Increased workload and stress levels among employees that may well be contributing to rapidly increasing health-care costs (another important trend). This workload issue seems, in many ways, to be aggravated by technological tools that are intended to make us more productive, yet seem to have an adverse effect on quality of life.
 4. The impact of globalization, which creates enormous challenges for working virtually across cultures and geographies. It has truly led to the 24/7 economy (and many middle-of-the-night conference calls).

In and of themselves, none of these trends is too surprising. Work-life professionals have discussed these issues many times at the center’s Work & Family Roundtable and Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP) meetings, as well as at other professional conferences. More surprising, however, is the call to action from the thought leaders who participated in the study.

The focus of work-life as a profession has, thus far, mainly been on HR policies and programs. Forward-thinking thought leaders participating in the study developed a list of potential ways that work-life could have the greatest positive impact on the challenges employers face. According to study participants, developing and implementing policies and programs placed third in terms of what HR and total rewards professionals *should* focus on. So, what should HR professionals be thinking of in terms of work-life?

A Shift in Focus

By far, the highest priority was influencing organizational leaders—working in a consultative manner with leaders at

all levels of the organization to ensure effective work-life practices. This shows clear insight into how study participants thought lasting cultural change could be accomplished. While the implementation of policies is important, it can only happen in the context of supportive leadership. Thus far, the emphasis of the work-life field has been more on instituting policies and programs, and less on how to get leadership to embrace and even champion work-life as a means to attract, retain, and motivate and develop top talent.

Why is it so important to influence leaders if the goal is to seek to change corporate culture? As Professor Edgar Schein, Ph.D., one of the country's leading experts on corporate culture, has said, leadership and organizational culture are so closely connected that it is virtually impossible to treat the two separately. How, according to Schein,

do leaders create a culture? They do so primarily through what he refers to as "embedding mechanisms." These include the following, among others:

- What leaders pay attention to, measure and control
- How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crisis
- What leaders deliberately model, teach and coach
- How leaders allocate rewards
- Criteria leaders use for recruitment, selection, promotion and firing.

For this reason, influencing CEOs and line managers is a critical priority if the work-life field is to be successful in impacting workplace cultures. Yet influencing this audience is no easy task. Many leaders are skeptical about the impact of work-life programs on their critical business metrics, most especially on "bottom line" financial performance. Perhaps Jack Welch spoke

for many when he said in his book *Winning*, "Bosses know that the work-life policies in the company brochure are mainly for recruiting purposes and that real work-life arrangements are negotiated one-on-one in the context of a supportive culture."

The challenge, therefore, becomes clearer when one views work-life as a cultural-change endeavor. The difficulty in modifying organizational culture has been well documented in recent years. The question of *what* is changing when organizational policies are changed is critical. Are work-life leaders changing the culture, or simply something at a more surface level? Policies are *necessary* and important, to be sure. They ensure corporate visibility, can be easily communicated and offer some degree of fairness in how employees are treated when they request some form of flexible arrangement. But they are

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not sufficient to change an organizational culture. Only leaders who truly believe in these innovative approaches to workforce management can do that.

How can HR professionals support leaders in order to get them to support these initiatives? According to study participants, the top five ways to do so included:


- **Make a clear business case for work-life** by providing data, research results and anecdotal evidence that support the notion that work-life integration makes business sense.
- **Train all managers in flexibility.** Because this movement represents a significant cultural change for most employers, one must assume that most managers are not familiar with or skilled at managing employees that are utilizing (or requesting to utilize) flexible work approaches.
- **Use internal surveys and focus groups** to demonstrate that employees need and want this support from their managers and that such an

approach will help the organization retain top talent and ensure their productivity.

- **Provide managers with career-life training** that will help them address their own work-life challenges.
- **Identify and support champions.** Find those line managers who are pioneering flexible arrangements and nontraditional approaches to working. Partner with these managers, support their pioneering efforts and share their success stories widely across the organization. They in turn will be the best salespeople to make the case for flexible work arrangements. The second-most important priority in the study was to help individuals make and negotiate good career choices. Employees should receive education, consulting and support in their efforts to make good professional and personal choices (for them and their employers). They should proactively manage their own career and work-life options. While

the components of this training are well understood, most organizations still do not offer training that can empower individuals and ensure they have the skills needed to effectively manage their careers.

Conclusion

Addressing these challenges will require new skills for future work-life practitioners. It will involve them more directly in employee/career development, leadership development and culture-change initiatives, as well as with the work of the organization. This focus will likely not diminish the need for the provision of innovative policies and services. Rather it adds a new and exciting dimension and challenge to the role of work-life practitioners—that of cultural change agent. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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