

BOSTON COLLEGE

CENTER FOR WORK & FAMILY

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING SERIES

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Work-Life in Sweden

Sweden lends itself well to work-life studies, since it stands out in its enforcement of statutory requirements in this field. Public day-care of high quality, paid parental leave for 480 days and right to reduced work hours until children are 8 years of age are a few important examples. However, statutory support for work-life measures may not be sufficient to address a number of important challenges on the work-life agenda. Cultural values, both at the family and company level, are important forces to contend with, and they do not always equate with women's advancement.

Economic background

With a geographical size roughly corresponding to that of California, Sweden is the largest economy in the Baltic region. Experiencing unprecedented growth during the decades after the Second World War and leading up to the first oil crisis in 1973, Sweden was able to build one of the most generous welfare states in the world (History of Sweden, 2009). Despite diminishing economic growth in the past decades, most elements of the welfare system remain intact: Sweden still provides tax-financed schools, child care, elder care, health care, pensions and social services to all its citizens (Sweden in Brief, 2009). In the wake of the global recession, Sweden's GDP growth was 0.9% in 2008 and is expected to remain weak until 2010 (Background Note Sweden, 2009).



Political and social context

The Social Democratic Party dominated politics in Sweden for most of the 20th Century, interrupted by brief stints of conservative governance. In the 1920's, the party laid the foundation for what many have considered the perfect compromise between a socialist system and a capitalist model (Sweden in Brief, 2009). Class distinctions were to be replaced by the "people's home", an egalitarian society that builds on cooperation and understanding. This was the start of universal health care and free education for all. It was also the beginning of the labor movement in Sweden. Labor unions

in Sweden have always played an important role in the development of government policy, and they lobby actively for more progressive legislation on a number of social policies, including work-life issues. Union membership is still extremely high at 71 %, compared to the EU average at 26.3 % (Trade unions across Europe, 2010). Several labor laws and collective agreements support work-life issues and

companies are by law obliged to ensure a work environment that supports work-life (Allard, Haas & Hwang, 2007).

Today, Sweden is governed by a conservative/liberal coalition¹, led by the Moderate Party. The latter advocates for a welfare society, but wants to reduce people's dependency on state subsidies and place greater emphasis on entrepreneurship and increasing individuals' incentive to work (Moderaterna, 2010).

"I am reshaping part of Sweden, I am not tearing it down."

– PRIME MINISTER FREDRIK REINFELDT,
(WALL STREET JOURNAL, 2007)

Not surprisingly, the Swedish tax burden is high, at 47 % of GNP in 2008 (Ekonomifakta, 2010). However, there is less "tax revolt" in Sweden compared to many other nations; most believe their taxes contribute to their own well-being and to good causes such as the welfare of children and elders. If the conservative/liberal coalition retains power in the elections in the fall of 2010, they will likely continue to press for lower taxes as well as a more liberal labor market and increased incentives for entrepreneurship. If the liberal Social Democrat Party-led coalition wins, they will likely work towards more work-family benefits such as an extension of parental leave to fathers, an increase in taxes on the wealthy, and higher wages

for younger employees. Unemployment, however, has to be considered: peaking at 9.2 % in July 2009 (Eurostat, 2009), it is the most pressing issue for voters in view of the upcoming election (41 % cited unemployment, followed by the economy, cited by 11 %) (LO, 2010).

Demographics

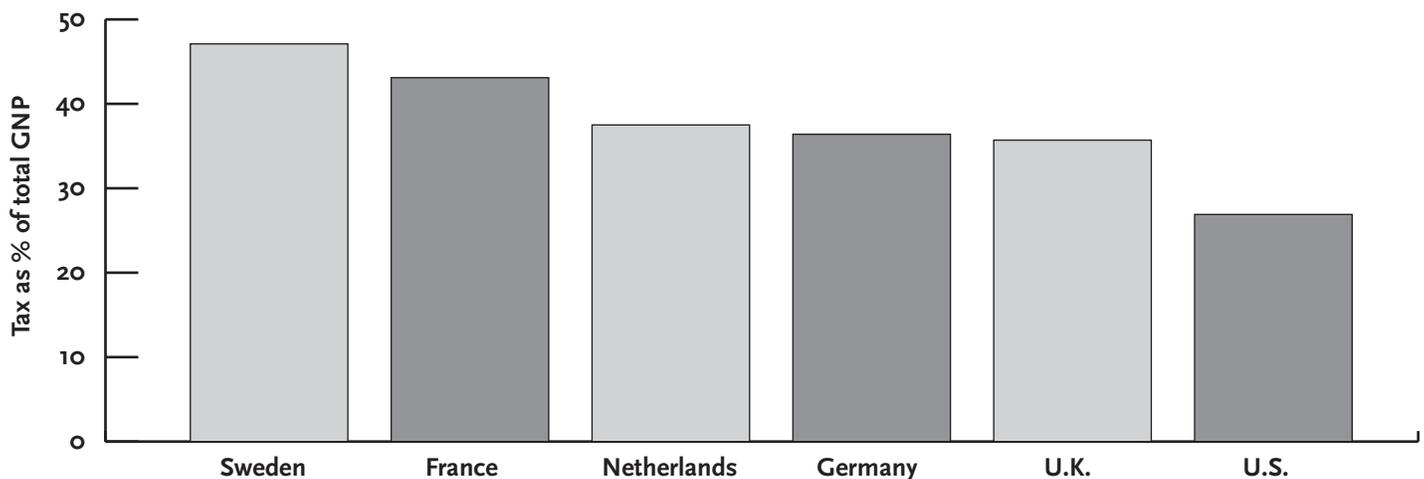
Sweden's population is just over 9 million. It has become a more heterogeneous society in recent decades because of a generous immigration policy. Almost a fifth of the population has roots in other countries (Background Note Sweden, 2009).

Swedish couples often cohabit, rather than marry; cohabitation has the same legal standing as marriage. Swedes tend to want to establish themselves in the labor market before becoming parents; the average Swedish man becomes a father for the first time at 31; the average woman becomes a mother at 29. Less than half (44%) of Swedish children are born to married parents (SCB, 2008).

The birthrate is high by European standards (1.9) but Sweden still faces a challenge in an aging population; about 18% of the population is over the age of 65, compared to only 13 % in the U.S (OECD, 2009). Only 59 % of Sweden's population was of working age in 2001. This is lower than most OECD countries, and the figure is expected to drop to 54 % in 2030 (Eurofound, 2010).

Sweden has free higher education and the government provides easy access to financing studies, through educational grants and loans. Thirty two percent of the Swed-

FIGURE 1: TAXES AS % OF GNP 2008, SWEDEN AND COMPARABLE OECD COUNTRIES



Source: Ekonomifakta, Sweden

¹It is hard to make a direct translation here, because the politics differ widely from the U.S., where the current coalition in Sweden would most likely be classified as liberal.

ish population has completed higher education (Högskoleverket, 2005).

Swedish culture

Sweden is a highly individualistic society with low power distance (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). Class distinctions are few, wage differentials are lower than in most countries and most people would call the Prime Minister by his first name. Some argue that the drive towards equality has gone too far, hampering personal liberty and limiting the economic incentive for individuals. Not surprisingly, Sweden is a society characterized by modesty and understatement. This is perhaps best illustrated by “Jantelagen,” a saying coined by a Danish author, that states; “do not think you are anything special” and “do not think you are better than anyone else” (Sverige Turism, 2010).

Sweden’s strong egalitarian roots prevent many people from hiring others to do their housework, perhaps best illustrated by the controversy spurred by a new law allowing individuals to deduct household services from their taxes. While supporting working families, some critics argue that the law reinforces class differences by keeping low-earning workers in jobs of low status. It is easy to see how a resistance to delegate domestic services helps maintain the domestic burdens of a working couple with children.

Sweden is a highly secular country; only one in ten Swedes thinks religion is important in daily life (Sweden.se, 2009). At the same time, the country is characterized by a strong Lutheran tradition and high work ethic. Somewhat contradictory, the country has one of the world’s highest numbers of people dependent on disability benefits, although the numbers have decreased in recent years (Sydsvenskan, 2007).

Since the end of the 1960s, policymakers have advocated for the development of a gender equal society (Alberg et al., 2008) and women are encouraged to see themselves as breadwinners and to safeguard their economic independence (Haas, 2010). Sweden has one of the highest proportion of working women in the world. In 2007, 81% of women ages 20-64 were in the labor market, compared to 87% of men (SCB, 2008). Many labor laws pertain to non-discrimination and equal opportunities and Sweden scored in fourth place in the latest Global Gender Gap Report, which assesses the extent to which societies divide resources and opportunities equally between women and men (World Economic Forum, 2009). One of the reasons the Nordic countries scored so high was that they “make it more compatible for women to combine family and

work,” according to one of the authors of the report (New York Times, 2010).

Shaping the work-life agenda

As evidenced in Work-Life Provisions for Employees, the Swedish government provides many supports for employment that in the U.S. would be up to individual workers or employers to provide.

It is worth noting that while the government provides great support for working families, the social infrastructure, including wages, is *designed* for a family with two breadwinners. For many families, the model of two working parents is less a choice than a force of necessity, once they get habituated to a certain standard of living. Some argue that this leaves the individual with less choice whether to stay home with their children or not. In fact, to rectify this, the Moderate-Party-led government introduced a “childrearing allowance” in 2006, offering \$415 a month to families in which one parent stays home (Haas, 2010).

In this section we will look at three areas in detail, briefly discussing the extent to which Swedish policies have had a positive effect: the division of domestic labor (including childcare), women’s advancement and the degree to which Swedes experience work-life balance.

Division of domestic labor and childcare

In 1974, Sweden was the first country in the world to offer fathers paid parental leave (Haas, 2010) and today it is one of only four nations to grant fathers individualized rights to highly paid parental leave. Swedish fathers perhaps more than fathers elsewhere are dedicated to developing close relationships with their children and involve themselves more in physical care giving, especially in comparison to past generations (Johanson & Klinth, 2007). Women still spend more time doing unpaid domestic work and men’s hours spent in unpaid domestic work has not increased since 1990 (SCB, 2008).

The proportion of fathers taking parental leave has increased significantly from 7 % of total parental leave days in 1987, to 22% by 2009 (Haas et al, 2009). However, the fact that women still take close to 80% of parental leave days (SCB, 2008) is seen as an important political problem in Sweden. Policymakers want a more equal distribution of parental leave, since prolonged leaves reduce women’s productivity when they return. A study by Evertsson & Duvander (2009) found that women who took a leave from work of 16 months or more were less likely than women who took shorter leaves to experience career advancement once they returned to work.

Women also tend to stay home with a sick child, and are more likely to work part-time. In 2006, women took 4.6 out of the total 7.3 temporary leave days taken per child (Eriksson, 2009). This proportion has remained unchanged since 1980. When a couple has two children, with the youngest aged 1-2, about half (48%) of mothers work part-time, compared to only 7% of fathers (SCB, 2008).

Taken together, it is plausible that gender disparity in terms of childcare and domestic work has a bearing on women's career advancement, as described in the next section.

Women's advancement

In 2009, the current government presented a new strategy for gender equality in the labor market, in order to provide women and men the same opportunities to develop a good balance between work and family life. There are a number of reasons for the government's impetus to

act. While the Swedish government and parliament are virtually unique in their equal gender distribution, the labor market is one of the most sex-segregated in the world (SCB, 2008) and women are typically underrepresented in power positions. Consider the table Swedish women in numbers.

It is also important to note that while half of women work in government jobs associated with women's traditional roles – health care, teaching, and social work, most men (82%) work in the private sector for corporations (SCB, 2008). Further, after controlling for sector, occupation, and work hours, women still make only 91% of what men earn (SCB, 2008).

Work-family balance

With substantial governmental support for work-life and fairly extensive access to flexible work arrangements, one would expect Sweden to rank high on any work-life balance scale. Surprisingly, compared to seven other

Work-Life provisions for employees

Annual leave

- Employees are entitled to 25 days of paid annual leave (Annual Leave Act, 2009). People with seniority typically receive up to six weeks' paid vacation.

Working hours

- The Working Time Act stipulates that normal working hours shall not exceed 40 hours. Overtime is allowed, but never to exceed 200 hours per year (Eurofound, 2009).

Child care

- Guaranteed placement of all children aged one to six in a public daycare center. Care costs about \$200 per child per month (Haas, 2010). In 2007, 81% of all children ages 1-5 were in public childcare (SCB, 2008).
- Children between six and twelve are provided with after-school care free of charge (Sweden.se, 2009). In 2007, 72% of all 6-9 year olds used this care (SCB, 2008).
- Child care is considered to be of high quality: only 1 % of voters consider child care to be a pressing issue in view of the upcoming election in 2010 (LO, 2010).

Maternity leave

Mothers can take leave for a period of seven weeks leading up to birth and seven weeks following the birth of a child. Between 1994 and 2004, around 25% of pregnant women took pre-birth leave for an average of 38 days (Haas et al., 2009).

Paternity leave

- The father of a newborn or adopted baby gets 10 days off work with 80% pay (Sweden.se, 2009). In 2004, about 80% of fathers took paternity leave, for an average of 9.7 days out of the available ten, and according to a recent study, mothers' earnings increase 6.7% with each additional month that fathers remain on parental leave (Haas et al., 2009; Johansson, 2010).

Parental leave

- Under the Parental Leave Act, parents are granted 480 days of paid leave, applicable from the first day of employment. Since 2002, 120 days are non-transferable; each partner has the right to 60 days (Haas et al., 2009). The remaining 360 days the parents can divide between them as they see fit, but they cannot take leave at the same time.
- For 390 days, parents are paid 80 % of salary, up to a ceiling of 424,000 SEK/year (\$60,000). (The ceiling was raised in 2008, to encourage more high-earning fathers to take leave.) The remaining 90 days are paid at a flat rate of 180 SEK a day.
- Since 2008, a couple who opts to divide parental leave equally (50-50%), receives a tax exempt bonus amounting to SEK 13,500 per year (Haas et al., 2009).

Reduced working hours

- The Parental Leave Act stipulates that parents with a child under the age of eight are entitled to shorten their workday up to 25%, but without wage compensation (Försäkringskassan, 2009).

European countries (including the Netherlands and the U.K.), Sweden experienced the least work-family balance (Van der Lippe, Jager & Kops, 2006). A government study conducted in 2003 found that 36% of mothers and 31% of fathers of children aged 3-6 said that they never or seldom experienced balance between work and family life. Mothers who worked full-time (who also tended to be well-educated) were more likely to report a lack of balance than mothers who worked part-time. Fathers who worked over-time were more likely to report a lack of balance than fathers who worked just full-time (Nylin, 2008).

The same study showed that only 16% of women and 12% of men wished to work fewer hours; women were significantly more likely than men to say this was because they wanted more time for childcare and housework. These numbers appear fairly small, given that almost a third of parents found it hard to experience work-life balance. It is possible that women and men both have a strong desire to work but they need more support in the domestic area.

It is interesting to note that Sweden has always had high numbers of people on sick leave, and those leaves tend to be fairly long, in an international comparison (Sydsvenskan, 2008). Women take an overwhelming 2/3 of the total days (SCB, 2008). One might speculate whether the Lutheran heritage in Sweden contributes to the high demands that Swedes put on themselves. Perhaps there is a tendency towards high performance both in the workplace and in the private arena, not least in terms of one's family. This makes it difficult to experience satisfaction in either, and perhaps this is even more salient for women.

Why have the efforts not paid off more?

While statutory support for equality at the workplace is important, it may not be sufficient. It is important to distinguish between norms operating at different levels: 1) country culture, 2) company culture(s) and 3) culture prevailing at the family level. For example, a person may live in egalitarian Sweden, but be more influenced by working

Flexitime

- Many workplaces in Sweden apply flexible working hours, also called "flexitime". An employee can start work between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. and go home after the fixed amount of working hours has been accomplished, between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. (The Working Hours Act, 2010).
- Many parents use flexitime and/or reduced working time to share responsibility for drop-off and pick-up at daycare or school.
- Among employees aged 25-65, about half (48%) have access to formal or informal flexitime (Jonsson, 2007). Access to flexitime appears to depend on both salary and status (Allard, et al., 2007): employees with higher income tend to have more flexitime than those with lower salaries, and women have less access than men (Nelander & Golding, 2003).

Part-time work

- By European standards, a sizable proportion of Swedes work part-time (27.3% in July 2009) (Eurostat, 2009).
- Women are more likely than men to work part-time, with the majority working 30-34 hours a week. This pattern of "long" part-time work is unique to Sweden. In 2007, 34% of employed women ages 20-64 worked part-time, compared to 10% of men (SCB, 2008).
- Fifty percent of people who work part-time want to work more hours. Most of them (280,000 out of 500,000) work part-time because they are not allowed more hours or cannot find a full-time job (Larsson, 2009).

Temporary parental leave

- Temporary parental leave allows parents to take compensated time off to tend to sick children, or to care for children when their regular caregiver is sick. It is available for 120 days per child per year until the child turns eight (Haas et al., 2009).
- For children aged 12-15, leave is granted with a doctor's certificate.
- Parents are paid 80% of their regular income, up to the same income ceiling as regular parental leave.

Retirement

- There is no mandatory retirement age, but you cannot receive a pension before your 61st birthday (Pensionsmyndigheten, 2009). Most people retire around age 65, although there is a growing trend towards encouraging people to retire later.
- People receive a public pension, based on their life income. There is a guaranteed pension for people who have turned 65 and expect to receive little or no income-based pension. Women are more likely than men to receive this guaranteed pension (SCB 2008). In addition, many employers pay into occupational-based pension plans for their employees and individuals save for retirement on their own.

Elder care

- Elder care is generally of good quality and low cost, although availability of services can vary across the country.
- An important aim of the government is to provide support to ensure that older people can live in their own homes for as long as possible. About one-fourth of women and men aged 75-84 benefit from such help (SCB, 2008).

at a U.S.-influenced consultancy firm which demands long hours, or live in a family where one's partner is very ambitious so has little time for domestic work.

Social scientists attribute the gap between gender policy and practice in Sweden to the persistence of a traditional "gender contract" which permeates all social institutions, including the family and the economy. One important feature is the gender-based division of labor for income-earning and parenting, which Swedish policymakers have challenged more directly. The traditional gender contract, operating at the family and organizational level, however, is harder to tackle.

Swedish women in numbers:	
Fertility rate	1.9
Mean age of marriage	32
% of academic degrees held by women	61 %
Parliamentary seats held by women	47 %
Ministerial positions held by women	48 %
% of women who are legislators, senior officials & managers	31 %
% of women employed in top management positions	21 %
Company CEO's who are women	2 %
<i>Source: World Economic Forum & SCB, Sweden.</i>	

Family dynamics. The vast majority of Swedes say they agree that men should take on a bigger role in helping to care for children and doing housework, but equal sharing is still rare. Some researchers argue that while women have been encouraged to see paid work as an obligation, men's participation in active parenting is still seen as more of a choice (Alberg, et al., 2008).

Research shows, for example, that Swedish couples rarely report spending much time deciding how they will achieve the type of gender equality widely publicized as an important political goal and cultural value. In the absence of the detailed and difficult negotiations required for this to happen, it is easy for couples to fall back to traditional norms about employment and childcare (Alberg, et al., 2008).

Employers' support. Another common reason couples give for their mainly traditional lifestyle is that the man's workplace (predominantly in the private sector) is not very supportive of active fatherhood, while the woman's workplace (often in the public sector) helps her shift

between parental leave and long part-time work for a few years while the children are small. Ironically, just as couples engage in little real discussion between themselves over these issues, men appear to rarely explore the extent to which their workplaces are willing to accommodate their needs for work-family integration (Bekkengen, 2002).

A recent study comparing large for-profit Swedish companies in 1993 and 2006 indicated that there has been a dramatic increase in corporate support for fathers taking leave, especially in providing formal policies and programs that were once almost nonexistent. However, the majority of companies are still not supportive of fathers taking parental leave. The most support for fathers' leave taking takes the form of informal encouragement by co-workers, but even there the majority does not react positively because fathers' leave taking tends to put more work on their shoulders (Haas & Hwang, 2009). Companies were found to be more likely to be supportive of fathers taking leave when their corporate values revolved around being "a caring company," in connection with employee welfare and social responsibility, and when they promoted equal employment opportunity for women (reflected in women's share of the workforce and management and corporate priorities). However, large profit-seeking companies had not become more caring over time, and the proportion of their workforces that was female stayed low (at one-third). These companies now included dramatically more women in top management, but the percentage (18%) was still low and not in proportion to women's share of the labor force. It is clear that companies will need to find "new ways to work"; harmonizing productivity goals and the desire of fathers to spend more time with their children. This might involve dramatic change in the culture of profit-seeking companies quite rooted in a traditional view of the ideal worker as one unencumbered by family responsibilities.

Company initiatives

Company benefits are to a large extent driven by statutory mandate, but private companies often supplement the governmental support with their own provisions. Some of this is a result of collective bargaining.

Since 2003, a yearly prize, "Guldnappen" (the golden pacifier) is given to a company, organization or person that has excelled in its efforts to allow members or employees to combine work with family life. "Guldnappen" is awarded by Unionen, Sweden's largest union among private companies. In 2009, **CSC** won "Guld-

nappen”, justified by its standing as a prime example of a parent-friendly company (Unionen, 2009). It has a generous policy for people who want to telecommute, flexihours (including the possibility of prolonged leave) and provision of household services. Salary review takes place during parental leave, and a career plan is established once the parent returns to work. CSC tops off the salary during parental leave and its equality policy emphasizes the following:

- The need for employees to control their working hours
- The need to schedule meetings at times that ensure everyone’s participation
- The possibility for job-share at management level

Axis, a large IT company based in Lund, supplements the contribution from the social insurance during parental leave. For up to a year, the company pays the difference between the ceiling amount and 90% of the person’s real salary. This bonus applies to both men and women and is quite frequently utilized by fathers. Parents get the same benefit when they take temporary parental leave to tend to sick children.

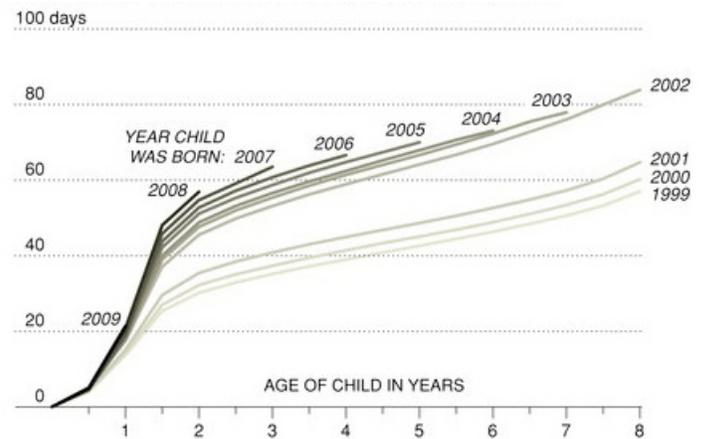
In 1996, **Skandia**, the large bank- and insurance group, set some concrete goals to increase the number of women in management. In the early 1990’s, the company had less than 20% of women in management positions. Today, that number is 40%. The company addressed the issue in a number of ways (Svenskt näringsliv):

- Recruiting equal number of men and women to trainee program.
- Encouraging women to go through training and apply for management positions.
- Aiming for gender balance in all project- and working teams.
- Offering 90% of salary during parental leave, and encouraging fathers to take their share.
- Offering employees the opportunity to set aside 20% of salary to be utilized for domestic services such as cleaning.

Ericsson Microwave is a male-dominated division within the Ericsson group; 26% of employees are women and among engineers the corresponding figure is 14%. In a labor market with an increased shortage of talented engineers, supporting fathers’ taking leave has become a “question of survival” for the company, according to Louise Heine, Head of Equality and Diversity (Svenskt Näringsliv). Employees are offered 80% of their real salary for six months during parental leave. They are also offered a reintegration program upon

AVERAGE LEAVE TAKEN BY SWEDISH FATHERS

According to the age of the child and the year he or she was born



Source: Bennhold, 2010

return from leave. Perhaps more importantly, the company has worked to change attitudes towards fathers taking parental leave by making the issue more visible. Articles have been written both in internal and external media. When the company was picked as a case study for students at the Business School in Göteborg, the company received even more publicity. Today, both managers and employees expect men to take leave and in increasing numbers, fathers take as much as 5-6 months (Svenskt Näringsliv).

The benefit offering of **FM Global** in Sweden follows statutory requirements, but certain aspects are reinforced. Feedback from employees at FM Global indicate that parental leave is an area where the company can differentiate itself by enhancing statutory benefits. Male employees in Sweden seem to want the time off to share in the care of their young children, a pattern which differs from other countries. Today, initiatives taken by the company include the following:

FM Global offers 30 days of paid vacation and flexible hours are available to allow employees time for personal appointments, such as a doctor’s or dentist appointment. In line with the company’s global HR policy, FM Global provides generous incentives for vocational study and development opportunities. Employee health is an important aspect, with a *Shape Up FM Global program* encouraging employees to undertake fitness/health activities or weight loss plans for approximately 12 weeks each year in teams to add a competitive edge. FM Global also offers a global reimbursement for a yearly gym membership (up to SEK 3,500) and fresh fruit is provided for all employees at the office every week.

Conclusion

Sweden's push to tap into the talents of both men and women in the labor market is inspiring and important in a world still struggling with great disparity between the sexes. On the one hand, Sweden's generous policies theoretically allow both women and men to raise a family while advancing their careers. On the other hand, public family provisions may have unfortunate, and unintended, consequences for work-life balance and women's advancement. It appears that statutory rights are necessary, but not sufficient. How will these things shift?

- At the family level, women and men who desire to stay in a career-focused job may have to demand an equal sharing of the parental roles.
- Men must request more support from the workplace and as a critical mass is gained, fathers taking extended parental leave may become the norm, rather than the exception.
- The hard work ethic in Sweden may contribute to perceived work-life imbalance. Companies may help by including seminars that discuss combining career with family life with a focus on changing attitudes geared toward perfection to more realistic demands on the self.
- At the company level, more has to be done to reorganize work to accommodate the needs of working parents. A few suggestions include:
 - Actively encouraging men to take parental leave via incentive structure (e.g., financial support).
 - Make fathers' use of parental leave visible and work on changing attitudes. Communicate in internal and external media, put spotlight on managers who take extended leave and point out unique abilities and new perspectives fathers gain from staying home with their children.
 - Work on reflecting equal opportunities for women in management's corporate priorities.
 - Ensure that corporate values are aligned with goals towards equality and work-life balance.

Family-friendly policies and the push toward equality in the labor market are relatively new phenomena. The model of two working parents is only a few decades old, and deep-rooted cultural beliefs may not have changed at an equal pace. Time will tell whether the "Swedish model" for the labor market is ideal, and if so, how long it will take for necessary cultural changes to occur, both at the family and company level. Meanwhile, Sweden provides much invaluable support for working parents and Swedish children are continuously ranked among those enjoying the highest quality of life in the world. There is something to be said for that.

A Publication of the Boston College Center for Work & Family

About this Series

Written for an executive level audience, the Boston College Center for Work & Family Executive Briefing Series addresses topical and strategic issues of particular relevance to the current business climate. The series highlights research findings, data trends and best practices in a concise format, aiming to foster action-oriented dialogue within organizations. Each issue features an accompanying PowerPoint presentation that captures key points and includes a section for practitioners to customize and add organization-specific data.

About the Center

Since its founding in 1990, The Boston College Center for Work & Family has been a national leader in helping organizations create effective workplaces that support and develop healthy and productive employees. The Center provides a bridge linking the academic community to the applied world of the work/life practitioner and has three main focus areas: research, membership, and education. The Center is committed to enhancing the quality of life of today's workforce by providing leadership for the integration of work and life, an essential for business and community success.

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