

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY

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The American family is in the midst of an historical upheaval, characterized by major social, cultural and economic shifts which have taken place over the past several decades. The now-familiar litany of demographic changes are worth noting, if only for their contrast to the previous generation of the family.

In just a single generation, this "typical" family structure experienced what some demographers have referred to as a radical transformation. Again, statistics shed some light on the degree of change.

The size of the female labour force has doubled in 20 years. Today, over half of all married women work outside the home (General Mills, 1981).

Sixty percent of married couples with children under age 18 are dual-earner couples (Grossman, 1982).

Nearly half of the mothers with a child of age one or younger were in the labour force in 1984 (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 1986).

Corporations will be increasingly confronted with proposed policies, programs and legislation on a number of issues related to work/family conflicts. In the most recent legislative session, for instance, Congress saw a flurry of bills which attempted to reconcile the conflicts, including these: parental leave, pay equity, and child care.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) are in a position to assist employees whose work/family stress often spills over into the work place and results in impaired productivity. It is worth noting that family issues seem to be replacing substance abuse as the most frequently reported problem category of EAP's.

Dependent-care Issues

The issues of child care, paternal leave, flex time, family benefits and elder care are coming to the forefront of employees' lives.

In other companies, EAP's have championed the development of day care and elder care, or served as vehicles for examining career obstacles for working women. In these instances, the EAP does not act as a program-solving agent, but as a catalyst whose role is to help bring together relevant stakeholders and resources so that the issues can be discussed and acted upon.

Ten years ago, managers had little or no interest in accommodating special employee circumstances related to supporting the family. Home life, they reasoned, had no bearing on the ability to work. Management systems of the time generally focused on productivity and ignored social issues like dependant care.

Today, American industries are becoming more service-oriented and, coupled with labour shortfalls, they are motivating employers to create new corporate strategies for keeping skilled personnel. Because women now comprise 54% of the working population and have permeated all strata of many industries, companies are using creative strategies to retain valuable female employees during their child-bearing years.

Ten years from now, it is anticipated that corporate policies will accommodate employees' home life circumstances as a matter of "standard operating procedure." Traditional ways of measuring employee productivity will by and large, be replaced.

The most pressing issue related to the family that EAP's are contending with is dependant care. According to A.C. Crouter, Ph.D., "The middle-age work force is coming to be known as the sandwich generation, because many of