

Conversations with the Experts

Better Work Life Campaign of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community



Shifra Bronznick

Bio: Shifra Bronznick specializes in launching new initiatives, fostering collaborations, and helping not-for-profit organizations navigate change. Shifra is President of *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community*, recognized publicly as one of the most effective innovators in the field. She is the co-author with Didi Goldenhar and Marty Linsky of, *Leveling the Playing Field*, a guidebook of tools and strategies used by action learning cohorts and has been chosen three times by the Forward as one of the fifty most influential Jews. Previously she served as Executive Vice-President of Swig, Weiler & Arnow Mgt. Co., Inc., one of the premier commercial real estate firms in New York. She is a senior fellow at the NYU Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, and she teaches strategic leadership in the NYU Executive Masters in Public Administration program.

An Interview with Shifra Bronznick
by Judi Casey

What is the mission and focus of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (AWP)?

The mission of AWP, founded in 2001, is to advance the leadership of women professionals in Jewish organizations and communities, to promote new models of shared leadership, and to advocate for work-life policies that allow women and men to pursue meaningful careers and lead personal lives infused with Jewish values around family, education, culture, justice, and spirituality.

Why are gender and work-life issues important to the Jewish community?

Jewish organizations are staffed predominantly by women, yet men continue to dominate in the top leadership roles. Partly as a result of AWP's efforts, we have seen more women advance into leadership positions in recent years. Continued progress is essential to achieve a true meritocracy that capitalizes on the community's diverse talents. Despite the success stories in our community, we still see the need for a fundamental shift in values. As long as there is unequal pay, gender-biased search processes, insufficient visibility of women as thought leaders in the public sphere, and inflexible work environments, the gap between the values we espouse and our actual behaviors will persist.

Tell me about the goals of your organization's Better Work Life Campaign.

AWP's **Better Work, Better Life Campaign** started with a specific target—to enlist 100 Jewish organizations of every type and size in improving their parental leave and flexibility policies. Our goal is to make healthy work-life policies an established norm in Jewish organizations and to influence the nonprofit sector and American society to adopt these same standards.

We know from research and experience that the challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities affects everyone across the life span. Recent studies, such as research from Columbia University's Center for Work Life Policy, show that 89% of younger workers and 87% of baby boomers rated

work-life balance as a key attribute of desirable employers. For women, intelligent work-life policies are not only desirable, they are essential. Flexible work arrangements are often the decisive factor in women's advancement and access to leadership opportunities.

At AWP, we recognized that changing work policies was an important way to level the playing field for leadership advancement. Unfortunately, many Jewish nonprofits cling to the traditional notion that leadership requires near-total sacrifice of personal life. Through this Campaign, we are changing the discourse about the bifurcation between ambition and caregiving and opening up new conversations about the possibility of doing great work *and* leading good lives.

More than 40 organizations have joined the Campaign, from the Joshua Venture Group and Joint Distribution Committee to United Jewish Appeal-Federation-New York and Repair the World. These organizations benefit from AWP resources, including cutting-edge research, consultations, and peer mentoring. As the Better Work, Better Life Campaign moves steadily toward the goal of 100 organizations, AWP has become the central address for Jewish agencies that want to create smarter, healthier workplaces and influence the nonprofit sector and American society.

What are some of the principles that guide the Campaign?

- Work-life policy affects women and men of every generation and background, every day and throughout their careers.
- Work-life policy is a dynamic tool for the advancement of women professionals who still carry the majority of personal caregiving and household commitments.
- By championing work-life policies and creating healthy workplaces, the Jewish community can live out its stated values of the importance of family, education, community, and spirituality.
- Our goal of 100 organizations is about systemic change. By creating new standards for work-life policy, the Jewish community will move to the forefront of the nonprofit sector, comparable to our contribution in earlier labor movements.
- The Campaign is an opportunity to define our values around work, shifting the focus from hours and activities to outcomes and impact.
- Work-life policy and practice have become key indicators for job satisfaction and employee retention.

You conducted a survey of the work-life policies of Jewish organization. What were some of the key findings?

Our national survey of 227 Jewish organizations, in collaboration with JESNA's [Jewish Educational Services of North America's] Berman Centre for Research and Evaluation, was the first study of flexible policies and parental leave in Jewish organizations. The study was fielded to 626 Jewish organizations and completed by 227 organizations, a 36% response rate.

We found that:

- Fewer than one-third of responding Jewish organizations have formal written flexibility policies. Nearly 90% of the Jewish organizations in this sample allowed some degree of informal, unwritten flexibility.
- Just over half (59%) have a formal written maternity leave policy. Many organizations—totaling 41%—do not have a formal written maternity leave policy.

- Sixty-five percent of responding organizations offer no paid maternity leave. For the remaining 38% that do provide paid maternity leave, approximately 10% offer between one and four weeks, and 18% provide between five and ten weeks. Only 7% of the responding organizations provide 12 weeks or more of paid maternity leave.
- Of responding organizations, 10% do not provide any paid or unpaid maternity leave.
- Formal paternity leave policies exist in only 33% of responding Jewish organizations. Sixty-one percent of the responding organizations offer no paternity leave, paid or unpaid. Seventy-seven percent of the responding organizations offer no paid paternity leave.

Based on these findings, what are the recommendations to improve work-life policy and practice?

AWP encourages every Jewish organization to start the conversation about the link between work-life balance and organizational effectiveness, to focus on new standards of professional excellence, and to focus less on “face time” and more on stated goals and measurable results.

Although we focus on formal flexibility and parental leave, we recognize that caregiving stretches across the life cycle, and that personal commitments need not be limited to family life. Care of a child or an elderly parent should not be seen as more “deserving” than engaging in volunteer activities or obtaining a graduate degree. This kind of thinking is often new to the organizations with which we work.

For organizations that are ready to develop new or expanded work-life policies, we recommend that organizations:

- **Open the discussion** to organizational stakeholders about how to create the right environment for these changes to take root.
- **Review and revise work structures** so that new policies and schedules are aligned with organizational strategy, goals, and habits.
- **Formalize policies** to derive the full benefit in productivity and organizational effectiveness, as well as employee satisfaction.
- **Train managers** to provide effective support and supervision.

Formalized flexibility can be challenging. Senior managers feel greater control with ad hoc flexible arrangements; they also fear that employees will take unfair advantage of formal policies.

For parental leave policy, AWP is being responsive to evolving employment law. We recommend that each organization customize its policies, following consultation with legal counsel. The following AWP “gold standard” recommendations are presented as aspirational goals. What has already been achieved by some Jewish organizations can serve as models for the entire community.

- **Paid Maternity Leave.** AWP recommends that all Jewish organizations aspire toward 12 weeks of paid maternity leave. This can be linked to tenure, with four weeks of paid leave for each year of employment, up to 12 weeks.
- **Paid Parental Leave.** AWP supports the aspiration to provide generous, equal benefits to all parents. At a minimum, AWP recommends six weeks of paid parental leave to all father/partners and adoptive parents.
- **Parental Leave for Part-Time Staff.** AWP recommends that organizations offer parental leave benefits on a pro-rated basis to eligible part-time staff.

- **Unpaid Parental Leave.** Under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), organizations with 50 or more employees are required to offer 12 weeks of unpaid leave to both parents, following childbirth or adoption. At the very least, AWP recommends that Jewish organizations, regardless of size, adhere to the FMLA for parental leave.
- **Formal Flexibility Policy.** AWP recommends that Jewish organizations develop formal, written flexibility policies, with consistent guidelines for accessing and retaining these privileges. Informal flexibility already exists in many organizations.

How can interested organizations join the campaign? What are the minimum requirements?

The minimum entry requirements are:

- An organization already offers **one month paid parental leave**, *and/or*
- An organization already offers **formal flexibility**, *and/or*
- An organization qualifies as a **Pioneer of Work-Life Policy and Practice**—with work-life issues approached from a new angle and willingness to mentor other organizations

While we hope that many organizations adopt AWP's "gold standards," we recognize that this may not be feasible. Therefore, we also invite organizations to join as a "**Work in Progress**" to benefit from our research, forums, consultations, and support.

Our elastic categories allow organizations to place themselves along a continuum for change. AWP's work on these issues did not begin (and will not end) with this Campaign. Some organizations had been in dialogue with us for several years. Others have started the process more recently. Because of our history with this work, we now have organizational "cases" that demonstrate the benefits of flexibility, and we have "mentor leaders" ready to help other agencies integrate these new practices.

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