

## Conversations with the Experts

### Balancing Work and Family: No Matter Where You Are



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*How do you define a corporate “family-responsible culture”?*

Family-responsible cultures are created by leaders who believe that caring for employees’ work-life balance and promoting gender equality is important, not only because it is the socially responsible thing to do but because it is good for business. Employees across the globe will probably be happy and committed when working in a company where they are given some autonomy to make decisions and when gender equality is promoted. On the other hand, employees will probably experience a certain amount of pressure when working in an organization where leaders think that good employees are only those who work more than 50 hours a week, take home work, and have the ambition to move up the corporate ladder.

Family-responsible culture is also characterized by trust between leaders and employees. For instance, employees are less satisfied when they are not given enough autonomy or some power to make decisions. This is why if the company is not family responsible, implementing work-family policies may be a waste of time. For example, flextime is a simple and inexpensive policy that could probably help employees’ work-family balance across the globe. When an employee has flextime, they are evaluated on whether or not they reach objectives rather than on their attendance. However, in some countries, leaders are not yet ready or do not know how to give employees autonomy to make a decision as to when to arrive and leave work. Even when flextime is formally allowed, most employees will not feel comfortable using flextime unless they believe that they will not be penalized for doing so.

*Which family-responsible corporate policies appear to be the most successful across the globe, influencing employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance?*

This is a tricky question. We observed that there is actually no single “most successful policy” that improves employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance across the globe. When it comes to work-family policies across cultures, one size does not fit all. Instead, the most successful family-responsible corporate policy is developed based on the needs of employees in that particular culture.

Take the case of telecommuting, which allows employees to work from home. The use of telecommuting is valued in individualistic countries where people value autonomy but may not be valued in collectivistic countries where people tend to give priority to strong social ties. Also, in order for telecommuting to work, companies need

to provide employees with the appropriate technology and there needs to be a quiet work space at home. In some countries, employees live in large households with limited space and it may be too distracting to work at home.

With that said, although there is no single policy that helps employees balance work and family across the globe, we found that across countries, having a family-responsible culture is related to positive outcomes for employees. That is, across countries, employees are happy when they work in a family-responsible environment. So instead of looking at the most effective policy across the globe, I would focus on the most effective organizational culture across the globe. When leaders create and believe in a family-responsible culture, they are likely to create an environment where employees feel comfortable to pay some bills or to take their elderly parents or their children to a doctor's appointment. Here, flexibility is not formalized but it works. Having a family-responsible culture is important because the environment supports and creates informal ways to help employees cope with work-life conflict. This culture also creates an environment that is necessary so that companies can start to formally implement and create culturally sensitive work-family policies.

*How might the presence of government public policies affect a company's decision to create a family-responsible environment? Please give several examples.*

The essence of law is to address situations of power. Therefore, government work-family policies may promote family-responsible environments in organizations because they balance the inequality of power between employees and their organizations. That is, employees may feel empowered to use policies set by the government and may not feel empowered to use policies set by their organizations. For example, in Norway, fathers have the right to take 5 to 43 weeks of paternal leave (33 weeks are fully paid). Most fathers take advantage of this leave and feel empowered and comfortable in using this leave.

*How does national culture affect how people experience work-family pressure, and how do these differences influence the selection and implementation of company family-responsible programs? Please give several examples.*

National culture can affect the types of work-family demands experienced by employees. For example, there is some research evidence that Chinese employees are more likely to experience stress from work demands than family demands. In China, family members tend to be more accepting when an employee works long hours because they believe that the employee is working for the good of the family. That is, in China, employees work long hours because they need to make enough money to provide for their family members. On the other hand, employees in the United States are more likely to experience more pressure from family. U.S. employees work to fulfill their own professional needs and not solely to make enough money to support their family members.

For example, Nini Yang explains in our book that in China, children's education is emphasized and parents spend a lot more time meeting with children's teachers compared to parents from other countries. Nini states that women professionals in Hong Kong frequently say that the cause of work-family conflict comes from time spent on children's homework and their education. So, in China, any policy that allows employees to spend more time meeting with their children's teachers or assisting them with their homework is welcome.

In addition, in Latin America, the culture about family caregiving encourages women to really commit to care for their children and the elderly in the family. Women are expected to do so, and they generally want to do so.

However, it is not only a matter of culture. It is also a matter of economical environment. For instance the hardships in Africa (e.g., low-income families who must strive to survive, high birth rates, and acute infrastructure problems) are quite different from the ones faced by employees in Europe (e.g., lower birth rates). Not only are family structures different but also accessibility to technology and the presence of infrastructure varies.

However, in South America the situation is rather different. The key issue for employees or the "most important" thing in their lives is to care for their loved ones, and they report that family life directly impacts their performance. Employees value leaders who respect them personally, including their desire to fulfill family duties,

and they do not care about career in the long run as much. Thus, family-friendly environments need to specifically facilitate children and elder care.

In Europe, the situation is rather different from that of South America and the United States. The main concern in Europe is that the population is ageing; therefore, there are fewer young professionals in the talent pool, and those in the workplace need to care for elder relatives. Thus, in Europe flexibility is a talent retention tool and is used to retain older workers who are phasing toward retirement.

What is universal is that in all regions of the globe, employees are fighting and juggling their roles to balance the different spheres of life and, as a consequence, individuals, companies, and society at large are suffering and becoming unsustainable.

*Please discuss how the influx of women into labor markets across the globe has influenced changes in family-responsible corporate policies.*

Now that women are in the workforce, several issues need to be tackled to enable them to gain access to all levels of managerial work, entrepreneurial activities, and governmental bodies. Most of the barriers and challenges that women around the globe face in professional advancement do not seem to be deliberate attempts to discourage women from managerial positions, but are subtle reminiscences of workplaces that were designed in an era when the breadwinner-homemaker pattern was considered mainstream. The challenge that lies ahead for the Spanish government, for companies, and individuals, is to enable a more effective work-life infrastructure that includes both effective legal frameworks and company cultures so that everyone can achieve their full potential.

You observe that global cultures are often guided by Western values, defined by free markets, consumerism, and individualism. How does the influence of Western values affect the implementation and usage of corporate work-family programs across the continents?

The companies that were pioneers in developing work-family policies had to do so in order to compete in a free market. This is why we see companies like Google and IBM offering all kinds of supports to their employees; they believe that the best way to compete is by treating their employees well. They realize that having healthy and happy employees is good for business. They also realize that the best companies promote equality in the workplace and empower their employees.

For example, IBM has successfully implemented Western policies in India such as flexible time and reports that flextime is used by equal numbers of men and women. Now, companies around the world look at these successful stories and start copying their programs.

However, companies need to realize that some policies implemented in the West may not work unless they have an organizational and national culture that supports these policies or unless they are creative in implementing culturally sensitive policies. In our book, Maria Victoria Caparas gives us some great examples of culturally sensitive programs. For example, one company in the Philippines called Meralco, which is an electrical distribution company, has a stock ownership plan called "legacy to the family" that does not allow employees to sell company stock. That is, company stock should be left for their children. This helps with the stress and concern experienced by Asian employees who worry about the financial well-being of their children.

The good news is that some Western companies with locations in other areas of the world are already adapting. Maria Caparas reports in her chapter that Oracle in India offers coaching classes to female employees on how to balance their professional aspirations with cultural pressures to stay home with family. This shows that Western companies are not only affecting the implementation and usage of work-family policies across countries but also are being affected by country values and adapting to employee needs.

*Could you describe companies that have created family-responsible environments?*

Hundreds of companies have created family-responsible environments. In the book, we share many examples

of specific companies that have created such environments. Moreover, we also talk about the process that those companies have followed to become family-responsible and the outcomes both for the company and for the employees in those companies.

Dell is one such company. One of the keys to its success has been its ability to work effectively with customers over the telephone. In the past, employees who worked at Dell call centers in the U.S. worked at one of the company's offices. Now, employees can apply to work in "Virtual Call Centers," which allows them to work closer to home.

Dell has seen the following benefits from these telecommuting programs in the call centers: Productivity has increased in the call centers. Employee retention has improved significantly. 'Resolve Rates' for client problems have increased; 'Escalation Rates' have decreased. Facility costs have been reduced. Community relationships have been built. Dell has been able to attract qualified workers. Employees save money on gasoline and food. Managers can spend more time working on projects and less time walking up and down the aisles to make sure people are working. Employee performance ratings are more objective. It has changed the company culture by helping employees and managers think differently about how to get work done.

For instance in Europe at Procter & Gamble, employees can access their working schedules online and make appropriate changes, and Pepsico offers a reduction in working hours (up to 2 hours paid) until a child is 1 year old, extends maternity leave up to 2 weeks beyond legal requirements, and allows employees to take a sabbatical of up to 3 months every 5 years.

A Nigerian company that stands out is First City Monument Bank. Some of the directors understand that, for people to be engaged and committed in a sustainable way, they need working conditions that enable people to recover their strengths and escape the burnout syndrome. Although policies related to work-family integration are still very limited, they have started to take steps in that direction. Working late hours is no longer considered a sign of commitment. Flexibility in days of leave is available to all. Employees may obtain unpaid leave for family or other reasons (e.g., study leave). Senior staff whose presence is not absolutely necessary may occasionally work from home to avoid long journeys in traffic jams. Office staff may consult the HR Department on questions that relate to personal and family matters that affect their work.

**The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.**



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*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*