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From The Work-Life Clearinghouse

More help from the Sloan Foundation

We visited the Alfred E. Sloan Foundation Website this week and were – again – in awe at the huge contribution this organization is making to U.S. employers, workers, their families and those in the work-life field.

Demonstrating the value of flexibility

We've written about several Sloan initiatives in the past few years – **Workplace Flexibility 2010**, **Corporate Voices**, **The Bold Initiative**, **The Employment Policy Foundation** and **The Families and Work Institute** – all working on projects to raise awareness, show dollar savings and otherwise demonstrate the value of workplace flexibility. What we haven't written about are the Sloan-funded research centers, and they're fascinating indeed. There are five of them. After speaking to just three Center directors we amassed 25 pages of notes (typewritten, single-spaced) and feel like we've taken a course in the relationship between the American family and the workplace.

Their purpose is to reflect reality

While Sloan's Program on the Workplace, Workforce and Working Families does have an agenda (to be a catalyst for family-friendly workplace policies and practices) these centers are agenda-free. They're staffed by sociologists, social scientists, anthropologists, economists, professors and students, both graduates and undergrads. Each has a distinct research area and all share three goals: to conduct research in their specific areas, produce, analyze and disseminate data that "reflects the concrete realities of family and work," and train and prepare the next generation of academics to focus their attention on U.S. families. Along the way, says program director Kathleen Christensen, "we hope they discover how to help employers attract and hold on to employees while contributing to their well-being, and the well-being of the American family."

Myth and Ritual plays a role

The American family, says Dr. Bradd Shore, is bent on its own destruction. Dr. Shore is an anthropologist, and his Sloan-funded center at **Emory University** is called the **Center on Myth and Ritual in American Life**. What do myth and ritual have to do with workplace flexibility and the destruction of the family? To help us understand, he gave us a little sociology lesson. American families, unlike those in Europe, South America, Samoa and elsewhere, have our children's independence as our goal, and we do everything we can to make it happen. Success means they move out and start families of their own, shifting the focus away from the family of origin. Like birds, middle class parents begin to kick them out of the nest early with sleepovers and overnight camp, even saying, "I can't wait for the kids to leave."

Flexibility can be friend or enemy

Because Americans are nostalgic, we realize there's something wrong with this picture. So we attempt to construct our own myths, rituals and "sacred time" to hold our families together. Workplace flexibility can be either enemy or friend in this effort, and it's this interaction that the center is studying, with about 22 research projects. For some of us, the new workplace flexibility offers the control we need – for example, to make the dinner hour sacred. But many find that the 24/7 workplace and increasing work demands are weakening the family structure by forcing us to work different shifts, tag-team parent and work at home evenings and weekends.

This center will report new results within a few months, but here's one early finding: When children are well-grounded in their family's history, they perform much better on tests that measure self-esteem and resilience to stress. Like all scientists, Dr. Shore is cautious about saying this is a magic bullet. "It may be that the actual knowledge gives them a boost in security, and it's possible that families that talk together and pass on history also do other things that strengthen resilience. But we know kids do better."

Aging workforce is a key factor

After spending 10 years and \$60 million researching families and work, Christensen is clear that the aging workforce is a key factor in understanding how workplace flexibility can be a win-win. So the **Boston College Center on Aging & Work**, Sloan's newest center, is using its \$3 million grant to study how the workplace and its aging workers might evolve to meet each others' needs. They now have 13 different studies being conducted by 17 investigators. This is probably the most collaborative of the centers, having pulled together a group of business leaders to coach them to make sure the work they're doing is related to company needs, and answers their most pressing questions. They've also formed a research advisory committee to make sure they focus on future issues as well as current ones.

Helping us understand our choices

The handwriting is on the wall regarding the changing workforce, says this center's co-leader, BC professor Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes. As boomers retire, U.S. companies will not only face a severe shortage of workers, but will also have to deal with the loss of knowledge, talent and experience. We may know it's coming, but that doesn't mean we know what to do about it. So this center's job is to look around the country to find out what's working. "We want to help companies better understand the choices they have and what the outcomes might be. How does this fit into what we're doing now or planning for the future? What happens when our boomers leave? How can we transfer knowledge to the next generation of leaders? And what about the immigrants on whom we've grown to depend, who are now going back to their own countries?"

Studying what works and what doesn't

They're looking at "bridge jobs" (no longer is it the norm to go from full-time work to full-time retirement). They're studying a retail chain with a strong commitment to both flexibility and older workers to find out if it manages to do it all and still maximize business goals. An economist is analyzing state man-dates to see which motivate companies to respond to the needs of older workers. And Pitt-Catsoupes and co-director Michael Smyer will study workplaces that already offer flex options to older workers to learn their outcomes. The findings will be presented in a series of reports and articles that target business leaders, academics and older workers.

We have to put the brakes on

"We didn't start by thinking workplace flexibility mattered," says Barbara Schneider. "Social scientists don't begin with answers." But she and fellow **University of Chicago** professor Linda Waite have answers now, after nine years of Sloan-funded research. Their center has just published the results of the 500 Family Study in a 500+-page book called *Being Together, Working Apart*, and will talk about them at a two-day conference in Chicago that begins May 16th (call 773-256-6352 to learn more). The study has been widely praised. "Other studies have attempted to achieve this degree of breadth," said one academic, "but they are like a pool one mile wide and one inch deep. Here, depth is not sacrificed." Like the Emory research, this concludes that families and children are at risk. "It's not perilous," says Schneider, "but there's no question that we are now in a situation where we have to put the brakes on."

150% commitment to the job is expected

They divided their 500 families into two groups, one with kindergartners and the other with adolescents, and began to try and understand interactions, the kinds of tradeoffs being made and what the implications were – for companies as well as families and children. Some findings: Women enjoy work as much as men, but while they'd rather work *fewer* hours, they're adding in nights and weekends instead. The expectation that full-time professionals must have a 150% commitment to the job and be willing to forego family obligations is colliding with, and overpowering, family needs. "It's just very difficult," says Schneider, "to get that family time."

We must engage in a national discourse

"We've gone so far overboard in our attempts to be a productive society. Everyone is multi-tasking, doing 16 things at once, and it's taking a huge toll on family life and on children. We know that the lack of quality time with families has a spillover effect; the solution has to come from both employers and employees. We must engage in a national discourse about how we can have a more reasonable family life." Adds Christensen, "There's no substitute for the care parents provide. If these issues aren't addressed, we run the risk of having workers resenting their jobs, spouses resenting each other and children who suffer the consequences." It's nothing most of us didn't already know, but with Sloan behind the message, it may finally be heard by those who count.

– Susan Seitel