

*revisiting the*  
**work-**  
**life**  
*dialogue:*

*past, present and future*

**i**n the United States, lip service continues to be paid to the importance of employees and the valuable expertise and skills they bring to the table, while companies move toward a knowledge-based, service-oriented and global economy. Also significant is that at the same time a “jobless economic recovery” is becoming an unexceptional event. Many companies continue to increase profits and productivity with a stable or shrinking employee base. Given this context, what can be said about the future of work-life policy? Does management view employees from the perspective of a “war for talent” or more from a “disposable worker” mentality? Is work-life policy a part of the competitive landscape or a discretionary and temporary solution? This article explores U.S. work-life policy — past, present and future — in order to help readers understand what works and what doesn’t in this constantly evolving arena.

**How Did We Get Here?**

To place work-life initiatives in context, a quick scan of these policies and their redefinition during the last 40 years provides perspective. Viewed in terms of an ongoing dialogue between the changing expectations of the workforce and shifts in corporate/organizational policy to address them, work-life policy has

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**QUICK LOOK**

- ➔ The presence of women in the workforce has proven to be a catalyst for new policies reframing the stereotypical male “breadwinners” and female “caregivers.”
- ➔ With both parents committed to working outside the home and increasingly committed to parenting responsibilities, the standard model of the “unencumbered worker” could no longer be upheld.
- ➔ Based on benchmarking interviews, organizational strategies have been clustered into three possible outcomes which are termed: the Faux Painting, Fair Weather and Harbinger approaches.

been shaped by macro-level societal and industrial shifts. These include changes in demographics, technologies, law, and economic and social policies, as well as cultural redefinitions of the workforce itself.

Starting with the '60s and substantially increasing during the next three decades, the demographic resurgence of women into the workforce has been a force to place the issue of “family friendly” policies on the corporate agenda. It's proven to be a catalyst for new policies reframing the image of men as the “breadwinners” and women as “caregivers.”

In response to the increased number of women in the workforce, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. federal government began offering expanded benefits options and use of flexible work arrangements such as flexible and part-time schedules. Corporate America responded with similar initiatives to broaden flexibility in discretionary work scheduling. A second primary issue was the lack of quality, affordable child care. Given that companies were making significant investments in hiring and training young women of childbearing age in a competitive job market, the need to ensure access to child care was clearly evident. Many companies responded by establishing on-site or near-site child-care centers. In some cases, this was supplemented with child-care resource and referral services to better assist employees in locating care that met their family's needs.

The early 1990s brought a further shift in emphasis with increasingly visible numbers of dual-career earners and a redefinition of “working fathers.” With both parents committed to working outside the home and increasingly

committed to parenting responsibilities, the existing stereotype of the “unencumbered worker” could no longer be upheld. These “new” types of employees challenged the image of workers without significant outside responsibilities or commitments beyond the workplace, with uninterrupted career tracks and with unlimited time and energy to commit to the company's goals. These trends intensified pressure on companies to meaningfully embrace “family friendly” policies and redefine the employee-employer contract. The contract had to expand to address the needs of employees *beyond* individual work responsibilities.

A third shift has extended this rethink of the employee-employer contract. This emphasis focused on work-life *balance*. No longer limited to only gender or family-friendly consideration, this dimension questioned the preeminence of the “long-hour working culture” and high-pressured jobs as the primary source of personal satisfaction. This approach was inclusive of employees with or without families who were seeking opportunities to pursue personal activities outside of the workplace resulting in a more satisfying lifestyle. Flexibility and individual discretion became the new focus.

A fourth evolution, coinciding with the competitive labor market of the second half of the 1990s, has moved the discussion toward creating a “healthy” work environment. This latest phase can be seen in many respects to encompass the previous shifts in the employee-employer contract and expand it to a broader view of overall quality of life within the organization or organizational

culture and its impact on the employee's health and well-being. This concept of creating healthy work environments, where individuals can fully contribute to the organization without compromising their prospect of a fulfilling life beyond the scope of the workplace, promises yet another and more holistic redefinition of work-life.

### **View from Within: Strategic Policy or Retrenchment?**

Looking across organizations, work-life policies have become institutionalized to a varying degree. Based on benchmarking interviews, organizational strategies have been categorized into three possible outcomes. (See Figure 1 on page 42.)

#### **Faux Painting Approach**

The first approach describes organizations that may have developed active policies over a number of years with management. However, the policies are frequently piecemeal in application, and often determined by individual managerial discretion. While these organizations appear to be offering a set of progressive programs, these may in reality be unevenly applied across the workforce or even within departments. This strategy has been labeled “Faux Painting,” suggesting that the policy is visible, but the application may be deceptive in practice.

#### **Fair Weather Approach**

The second group, on the other hand, has experienced a more active engagement in disseminating work-life policies. Programs are in place with ongoing work-life councils, flexible work arrangements, work-life support services, etc. There may be an active return-on-investment

FIGURE 1: WORK-LIFE INITIATIVES, BY CATEGORY

Strategy	Ownership	Implemented	Evaluation
Faux Painting Programmatic	Human resources	Unit level/individual manager	Employee satisfaction
Fair Weather Policy initiatives	Human resources/ organizational development	Across divisions	Return on investment
Harbinger Integrated with business- and organizational-development strategy	Senior/midlevel management	Throughout the organization	Organizational assets

discussion with senior management. This approach, however, is characterized by a variable work-life policy that is dependent on the fluctuating economic conditions of the company and the degree (or lack) of leadership support at senior levels. While not exactly seen as a fad of the month, the policies are not thoroughly integrated into the culture of the company and may experience slippage or even disappear, depending on individual work-life champions. This has been labeled the “Fair Weather” approach.

#### Harbinger Approach

The third strategy is of significant interest, given that the term “work-life initiatives” has lost its separate designation. Instead, policies such as flexible work arrangements may be considered an integral piece of the organizational environment and, more significantly, a part of the general employment contract, extended uniformly to all employees. Supporting policies and programs are championed by the senior management and integrated throughout the organization. Progressive employment practices are not viewed to be a hiring/retention device but considered an essential part of the organizational strategy.

#### Where Are We Going?

This third cluster of organizations suggests that a further shift is occurring

in terms of the employee-employer contract. The conversation has moved away from piecemeal improvements in the work environment for employees to more strategic aims linked to overall organizational effectiveness. This suggests that the “target” is no longer that of adding on more bells and whistles for employees, but rather that of developing a progressive work environment that is an integrated part of the organization’s strategic business plan.

Similarly, for employees, motivation may not be tied to a specific service or benefit but, as described by one senior executive from Innova Healthcare, simply “a great employment experience, which recognizes that a human being is on the other side of the contract table with changing needs/demands over the lifetime of an employment contract.” This suggests a more complex motivational basis than money, services or discretion. It supports an evolving relationship between the employer and the employee, tempered by the economic conditions of the company and the changing work-life situation of the employee.

These initial observations confirm that the agenda contained within the work-life dialogue continues to shift. Whether this will be in support of progressive harbinger-style work environments or a retrenchment to

more modest support is dependent on many factors, including the changing economic, legal and political landscape. However, it is encouraging that companies continue their experimentation, which suggests that these practices have implications for offering competing models to engage and support employees in the emerging future. WS

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