Work and family: shaping the fit

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The past few years have seen increasing focus on so-called work and family policies. But there are vast differences among organisations in commitment to them.

Until recently, adoption of these practices was largely dependent on managerial enlightenment and the negotiating power of employees and their unions. Now, however, Australia has a firm legal framework which makes their introduction almost mandatory.

The *Workplace Relations Act 1996*, which regulates employment conditions nationally, includes at *section 3* the following statement:

'The principal object of this Act is to provide a framework for co-operative workplace relations ...by... (among other things) (i) assisting employees to balance their work and family responsibilities effectively through the development of mutually beneficial work practices with employers'.

Achievement of this balance is now one of the formal goals of our system of industrial relations law and practice. Future debate about family-friendly employment arrangements must therefore focus on 'how' rather than 'if' they should be introduced.

Useful ideas are presented by Macquarie University's Robin Kramer, who recently conducted case-study research funded by the Work and Family Unit in the Federal Department of Workplace Relations and Small Business. Writing in the current edition of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources,* Ms Kramer releases results of her in-depth analysis of large Australian organisations which were recently recognised in the Affirmative Action Agency/Business Review Weekly Affirmative Action Awards.

She emphasises the need to recognise equity and social justice, on the one hand, and economic efficiency aspects, on the other, in arguing for improvements in work and family policies. These should not be seen as mutually exclusive or conflicting concepts. While introduction some years ago of parental leave and formal equal opportunity programs clearly resulted from social justice considerations, lasting mutual benefits are more likely to be achieved by also acknowledging practical issues affecting employees' capacity to work productively. It is from this latter focus that such initiatives as telecommuting, childcare services and flexible working hours can often result.

Even though external factors such as affirmative action legislation and revised industrial relations laws are often major stimuli for initial organisational interest in work and family policies, the research data shows clearly that they are not sufficient in themselves to guarantee effective practices. At the workplace level, the existence of practitioners with skills and interest in the subject is of paramount importance in turning formal policy statements into real and workable processes.

Kramer's research confirms that organisations which had successfully introduced major work and family programs were almost always headed by senior managers who took an active role. The Royal Women's Hospital in Brisbane, for example, introduced a twenty-four-hour childcare centre for staff after the concept was personally championed by the chief executive. Similarly, childcare services were introduced by ABC TV after very strong support from members of the ABC Board.

Equally significantly, success seems much more likely when the potential positive effects of family-friendly policies on business outcomes are stressed. Those organisations which focus on, for example, improved motivation, reduced turnover and attraction of skilled staff as goals appear invariably to achieve much better results than those which elect merely to comply with basic legal requirements. The research clearly justifies an active rather than passive approach.

Critical success factors identifed in the research include clear communication of goals and processes, training of managers and staff in application of the program, systematic monitoring and evaluation of progress and, especially, continuing involvement of senior managers who support the policy. Kramer says there will inevitably be opposition, but organisations should not be deterred by it. Rather than searching for unanimous support, management should deal patiently with sceptics yet proceed despite them. Case studies indicate hostility is reduced if work and family poli-

cies are presented as a people practice which can be good for the business rather than as merely a 'women with children' issue.

Despite much discussion, Australia has been slow to act on legal and political encouragement of effective work and family policy. A recent study by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT), for example, found that of all Australian enterprise agreements, only two per cent contained childcare provisions, just 1.4 per cent included work from home arrangements and

a miniscule 0.1 per cent catered for career breaks. Clearly, there is a long way to go.

Effective work and family policies are highly significant for library and information sector workers. That much is clear from calls to the ALIA National Office Industrial Service from members. And with working hours increasing markedly at present, they can only become more important. We are aware that some libraries are developing innovative programs and we would like to hear more about them. I would welcome calls from members about their experiences. ■

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