

A LINE ON LIFE

9/14/97

Home and Work: Adversaries or Allies? *

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The media typically discuss the *conflict* between the demands of work and the responsibilities at home. They make it seem like a "win-lose" situation. People can only succeed in one area, if they harm the other. However, combining work and family can be much more positive. Good experiences at work can cushion workers from stress at home. Likewise, positive home lives can reduce stress experienced at work.

Dual-earner families face increased time pressures as they try to balance the responsibilities of both home and work. However, psychologist Rosalind Barnett (Brandeis University) has also found positive effects. She studied 300 dual-earner couples randomly selected from two Boston suburbs. The couples represented a broad range of income levels. These families did well. They were generally happy, healthy and well adjusted. In Barnett's words, "*They're coping very well with their situations.*"

For these couples, the benefits of work are greater than the stress encountered. Other studies support this finding. They have found that employed women seem to have greater psychological well-being than those who are unemployed. Dual incomes also provide financial security that cannot be matched by most single-earner families.

Barnett did another study with a group of 400 working women. Loaded down with a major portion of child-care responsibilities, these women suffered from depression and anxiety. However, the picture was different for women who had *challenging and rewarding jobs* – especially if the jobs offered good chances for advancement. These women were able to cope better, because they had positive experiences on the job. They were able to deal with child-care issues without becoming depressed or anxious.

On the other hand, a good home life can insulate workers from job stress. Barnett examined the 300 men in her dual-earner study. Of them, 180 had children at home. If they had positive relationships with their families, they experienced less job stress and coped with work problems better. The same is true for women.

Typically, industry views men only in their role as workers. Barnett believes it is better to widen this outlook. She found that the family environment was a good predictor of *men's physical health*. In contrast, a similar relationship did not exist between work and health.

Most employees and administrators in large companies still hold common **stereotypes** of men and women. The men are perceived as "*workers*," while women are seen as "*home makers*." Many companies assume that good employees will make work their *top* priority. They think employees should be willing to devote endless hours to jobs with inflexible work schedules and overtime. These work conditions fail to consider their employees' family lives.

In contrast, three large companies – Xerox, Tandem Computers and Corning – have tried another approach. With researchers from the Institute of Family and Environmental Research in London, they tried to cooperate with their employees. They wanted to integrate work and family without sacrificing productivity or profit.

This required the restructuring of the work environment to improve employees' personal lives. As they did this, there was an increase in productivity and innovation at work.

For example, in one company, they examined an administrative department, which was made up of administrative work teams. The employees were mostly women with problems combining their work and

family obligations. In addition, the company's efforts to get these groups to be more autonomous and creative were failing. Corporate policy allowed no leeway on work conditions or hours. Work-family benefits – compressed workweeks, flexible hours, part-time work – were in place for everyone. However, these benefits were only rarely granted to employees.

Management started to release their strangle hold on these benefits. The workers were allowed to use these benefits as they wished. Working together, the administrative work teams planned schedules that would fit their personal needs. They also scheduled workers to cover assigned duties throughout the workweek.

With these changes, there was a 30% reduction in absenteeism. Employees could respond better to customer demands, because office coverage was extended. All the administrative work teams became more effective, self-directed and independent.

**If companies become "*family-friendly*,"
rather than ignoring family responsibilities of their employees,
everybody wins."**

Like Xerox, Tandem and Corning, other companies can develop a family-friendly approach. In their development, many companies have been making "*environmental impact statements*" before they finalize decisions. Barnett suggests that these companies carry the process one step further. When analyzing work policies and reorganizing, they can make "*family impact statements*." This would move the family concerns of employees into sharper focus, so they are less likely to be ignored. In Barnett's words, "*...in this scenario everybody wins, and the bottom line is enhanced in the process.*"

* Adapted from Beth Azar's "Quelling today's conflict between home and work," [*The APA Monitor*](#), July, 1997, pages 1, 16.