

## Introduction

# How Organizations Can Alleviate the Traffic Jam at the Intersection of Work and Family

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There is a need for traffic control at the intersection of work and family, a potentially high-casualty location with frequent traffic jams, quick stops and starts, and high-speed chases as almost everyone moves through work and family transitions that often collide. Increasingly, the traffic is becoming even more congested as more family members enter and remain in the workforce for longer periods of time than in past generations. A majority of mothers of newborns and infants are employed outside the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002), and older workers are remaining in the workforce, albeit in new ways, at older ages than any previous generation (Halpern, 2005a; Hudson, 2005). Thus, the metaphor of an intersection of work and family with traffic jams and frequent stops, starts, and vehicles moving at different rates of speed captures some aspects of what is to come in this double issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*. And like the traffic metaphor, there are many solutions—some simple, such as working from home or taking the train—that can ease the traffic jam or make the commute more pleasant. Like the traffic metaphor, other simple solutions, such as having carpool lanes on congested freeways, have failed because most people will not give up cherished lifestyle habits such as driving alone in their cars.

In Part I of this two-part issue, authors from a variety of backgrounds including public policy, business, psychology, and economics address the issues of work and family from the organizational side of the street. In Part II, the same wide range of perspectives is used to find ways to make work and family work together from the perspectives of working families. Travel along with us as we explore what is perhaps the most personal and socially important issue of our time—how to align work and family in ways that create win-win situations.

## The Organizational Perspective

At a recent meeting with an employer of a large corporation, he interrupted my presentation to ask, "Why should I care about my employees' life outside of work? If they have six kids or no kids, it makes no difference to me." It was clear from this question

that despite a fairly sizable research literature on the benefits of what have come to be known as “family-friendly” work policies, many employers and the general public still maintain an old-fashioned view of business—a view of business where “face time” or hours present at work are more important to employers than the outcomes of the work itself. There is a substantial “return on investment” to employers who adopt policies and make an organizational commitment to help employees better manage the needs of both work and family. Cascio and Young (2005), for example, conducted an extensive study of those companies that are identified as the “best companies” to work for by *Working Mother* magazine and *Fortune* magazine. These award-winning companies were compared with industry averages on multiple measures of financial and stock market outcomes. Cascio and Young concluded that there is a payoff in stock returns for organizations that adopt family-friendly policies and provided this assurance: “Investors should take comfort in knowing that what might appear to be frivolous expenses on noncore activities really do have positive payoffs in terms of improved stock performance” (p. 61).

Positive outcomes resulting from an organizational commitment to help employees with family and work demands show up in indirect ways as well. For example, data from a random sample of working adults in the United States show that both women and men missed fewer days of work; were less likely to come to work late, leave work early, or miss work deadlines; and were more committed to their employer when their employer offered a greater number of family-friendly policies, such as the ability to set their own time for arriving or leaving work (within a 1- or 2-hour window), to work at home some of the time, and to work part-time if needed (Halpern, 2005b). Despite the fact that these sorts of findings translate into tangible profits that any accountant can calculate, only 11.1% of all full-time wage and salary employees participate in formal employer-sponsored flextime programs (Appelbaum & Golden, 2002). Thus, only a small percentage of organizations are taking advantage of the possible gains that come with being a family-friendly employer. Organizations that support families can also reduce employee turnover and improve morale. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) called on organizations to become “family allies” by developing career paths that offer flexibility and cross-training employees so they can cover for each other as a way of allowing flexible scheduling. Other suggestions are found in the report of the APA Presidential Initiative on Work and Families (American Psychological Association Presidential Initiative Task Force, 2004).

Organizations need to adapt to the needs of the 21st-century workforce, but they cannot do it alone. Changes in public policies are also needed to support societal change. In the first article in this issue on organizational and public policy issues, Barbara Gault and Vicky Lovell address the public policies that are needed to support the kind of work and family integration that working families require and that employers need to bring about change so that children, the elderly, and others who necessitate care will get high-quality care, even when the traditional caregivers for our society are in the workforce. We need public policies so that parents can stay with sick children and other sick family members when the necessity arises and not have to choose between keeping their jobs and caring for their family at critical times. Public policies

need to ensure that small businesses are not penalized when they care about their employees and the best of our free market economy operates freely. These are not contradictory statements, although some simplistic thinking often pits a caring society against a free market economy as though they cannot coexist. As seen in the brief review of family-friendly policies, it is good business to keep families working and out of poverty: family-friendly is good for business.

It is unusual for a slim issue such as this to have two articles cowritten by one author, but E. Jeffrey Hill is an unusual person. In "Twenty Years of Work and Family at International Business Machines Corporation," Hill, Andre'a D. Jackson, and Giuseppe Martinengo document the change in the company's policy in response to employee needs during the past 20 years in 48 countries. International Business Machines is a company that "gets it." It is fascinating to see how the company's flexible time policy increased and broadened in definition during the course of two decades, along with social acceptance for working from home and a growing awareness that it could not afford to lose good employees. This is a multinational and cross-cultural study of the growing importance of considering how employees live and work and how they want to live and work when thinking about how to design work. In "Researching the 60-Hour Dual-Earner Workweek," Hill and his colleagues test a total-work-hour hypothesis about work, family satisfaction, and productivity for families with two adults (parents) and children in the home. They test the idea that there would be more work satisfaction and other beneficial outcomes in both work and family arenas when the combined work hours were 60 hours per week (in any combination between the two parents) when compared to both parents working full-time or one parent working full-time and the other not employed outside the home. This hypothesis takes into account the positive benefits achieved from employment outside the home and from parenting, while minimizing the stress of overwork and the stress from conflicts between work and family schedules. Readers will have to see for themselves how well this full-time/part-time employment model works in achieving a good outcome for both parents in dual-parent households.

Obesity has become one of the most prevalent health problems of our time, so it is not surprising that many have wondered about the relationship between work and family variables and their influences on the growing obesity problem. In the fourth article of this issue, Tammy D. Allen and Jeremy Armstrong examine how work and family conflict relates to obesity and other physical health outcomes, recognizing that there are different effects when family life interferes with work as opposed to when work interferes with family life. Given the high cost of obesity in both health care dollars and human costs, it is surprising that there has not been more research on the ways in which these important variables affect each other. The authors suggest ways that organizations can respond to improve employee health and reduce obesity in their employees.

It seems that even when organizations do respond by providing necessary leave for new parents, there are often unspoken social constraints against using the leave. In the next article, Robert Drago and his colleagues examine the phenomenon of "biased discounting" among university faculty, which is the practice of minimizing or hiding

family commitments in ways that are often detrimental to careers and families. The reason faculty members engage in disadvantageous behaviors, such as not taking paternity leave, is that they perceive, most often correctly, that despite formal programs that are friendly to families, there are negative consequences to faculty members who use these programs. It is not enough for organizations to have helpful policies on their books; they actually have to support these policies and integrate them into their organizational culture for the policies to be meaningful.

Noelle Chesley and Phyllis Moen are “ahead of the curve” in the sixth article, as they examine what happens to couples who are caregivers. The demographics of the United States and many countries throughout the world show that we will soon have a greater proportion of the population who is elderly than ever before in history, resulting in a greater need for caregivers of elderly adults than our society has ever faced. Working adults will be caring for their older parents and relatives in ever-increasing numbers. With both partners in dual-earner households in the workforce, there will be more couples where both members need to negotiate caregiving arrangements. Chesley and Moen found that the results are not the same for women and men and that it would be wise for couples, organizations that employ them, and organizations providing care for the elderly to begin preparing for the increasing need for adult care.

In the final article in Part I of this double issue, Stewart D. Friedman presents a new vision for management for the 21st century. It is a vision in which leaders are trained in all levels of their life because work and family are not easily separable. New leaders are able to take advantage of the synergy among the domains of work and family. It is a model that allows for the sort of exercise and eating plan that Allen and Armstrong’s article identifies as needed for better health or for family caregiving as described by Chesley and Moen in their article. The new leaders decide what changes they need to make, taking both work and family into account and finding ways to integrate these two spheres of life.

The articles in Part I provide excellent ideas for organizations and public policies that will help to alleviate the traffic jam at the intersection of work and family. Part II will focus on family perspectives. Taken together, this double issue will substantially help organizations and working families travel between work and family and better integrate these two primary life roles. Be sure to look for Part II of this double issue—Psychology at the Intersection of Work and Family: Family Perspectives.

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