

Graeme Russell argues that there needs to be a concern for the impact that workplace policies and practices have on family and relationship wellbeing, and on the wellbeing of the community.



Making a difference to work and family outcomes

Recently when negotiating my own elder care issues I was motivated to reflect on what my ideal family-friendly organisation would look like. The indicators that rested best with me at the time were as follows.

- Employees are able to manage (or importantly to have control over) their work and family commitments, meaning all aspects of family life (time, care, relationships, financial support) so that they are able to lead a life that is consistent with their own family and work values/needs/expectations.
- There is workplace support for establishing and maintaining quality family and personal relationships, and to enable employees to achieve their desired work–family balance.
- Work and family issues are mainstream in the organisation – the work–family factor is seen as an effective enabler of organisational outcomes.
- People are motivated to stay with the organisation because they are able to achieve their desired balance between work and family commitments.

Understandably, for an organisation both to achieve and sustain this ideal work and family state, a number of necessary organisational change processes would need to be implemented. From my experience in working with a range of different organisations, these change processes will vary from one industry, location, workforce demographic profile, community context to another. But what should be more common across organisations are the data that make a difference, both to establish that the work–family factor *should* be on organisational agendas, and to ensure that a focus on work and family is sustained.

Work and family will only be sustained as a core organisational issue if it can be shown to make a significant contribution to personal and organisational sustainability, by enabling effective performance over a longer period of time in the same way that organisations accept that a focus on safety or team building do.

Data needed to generate the will to act

A key shift occurred some time ago in arguments used to justify the work–family factor. The emphasis changed from identifying and responding to employees' dependent care needs, to a focus on a more broadly based business case. The business case discourse has been dominated by arguments associated with changes in workforce demographics (for example, there are more workers with dependent care responsibilities) and on the impact the work–family factor can have on recruitment and retention. To a lesser extent the business case has also embraced an argument that a lack of focus on work and family will result in a reduction in employee productivity – for example, because of unplanned absences from work or because of an inability to concentrate while at work.

However, the approach commonly taken within organisations and in public presentations has really been about engaging managers using data aimed at persuading them that work and family is not a soft, but a *hard* business issue. Associated assumptions are that the work–family factor can be measured and that it has a positive impact on the bottom line. The pitch to senior managers therefore has mainly been about appealing to their rational thinking, or cognitive side.

When successful, this process usually leads to the establishment of a set of work and family policies and practices signed off by senior management using an external rather than an internal frame of reference. From the viewpoint of the senior manager there is likely to be an acceptance that this strategy is good for employees

and for the business. But it is far less likely for her or him to recognise or publicly acknowledge that the work–family factor is directly relevant to them or their family (family is used here in the broadest sense) or their close relationships.

Fundamentally, what is missing are data that successfully engage the hearts and feelings of leaders and managers in organisations. As a consequence, policies and practices are often implemented without commitment and passion, without genuine leadership, and without a fundamental change in role models, organisational culture, or management skill sets. More importantly, the opportunity presented by the effective integration of the work–family factor is missed both by individuals and the organisation.

What is the alternative? Which data have the potential to engage both the heads and hearts of senior managers? Data that does and should make a difference are summarised below. It is important to recognise, however, that these data are more likely to be sourced from mainstream academic social sciences research than from the business or management literature.

Indeed, the recent inclusion of these data in the work–family discourse is one of the more exciting developments in the field. Examples of recent publications that have addressed these critical issues included: Barnett and Hyde (2001), Galinsky (1999), MacEwen and Barling (1994), Russell and Bowman (2000), and three articles in this current edition of *Family Matters* (Lewis and Hand; Millward; and Weston, Qu and Soriano).

Data that should be particularly useful in making a difference by engaging hearts and feelings include:

- Data that emphasise the critical links between family and relationship wellbeing, and (i) effectiveness in personal and work spheres of life, (ii) family outcomes (for example, for children), and (iii) community wellbeing (for example, participation in community activities). The purpose of these data would be to establish that quality family life and having quality close relationships are fundamental to our wellbeing and to the contribution we are able to make to society and to the workplace.
- Data that examine the positive impact workplace support for work and family – both by way of organisational policies (for example, paid parental leave), the support given by work colleagues and immediate managers/supervisors/team leaders, can have on: (i) perceived effectiveness in family life (for example, feeling competent and effective as a parent); and (ii) satisfaction with involvement in family life (for example, being able to attend a child’s school activities) and with relationships (for example, having a quality intimate relationship with a spouse/partner).

- Data that show the extent to which workplace support for work and family (especially from a person’s immediate manager) contributes to key organisational indicators such as commitment, loyalty and discretionary effort. The work of Bond, Galinsky and Swanberg (1998) is particularly powerful in this regard. The key issue here is the demonstration that strong workplace support for work and family is a significant driver of employee behaviours that matter to an organisation.
- Data which show that active involvement in family life (for example, caring for children) is associated with the development of personal confidence and a new skill set (for example, the effective management of competing priorities), both of which have a positive impact on workplace performance (see Haas, Hwang and Russell 2000).
- Data that involve assessing the current work–family and relationship condition of managers themselves. A highly effective process to engage men is the one used in the Men at Work program (Russell and Llewellyn-Smith 2001). Men are given the opportunity to evaluate their own involvement in key aspects of family life (for example, time spent alone with children, quality partner time, family time) using a colour-coded time diary. The dramatic display of key aspects of how their lives are currently being lived invariably leads to a high motivation to change. Other data that can quickly get the attention of senior managers are those provided by their partners (Russell and Bourke 2000). When confronted with data from partners which show a very different picture of satisfaction with relationship quality and the involvement of the manager in family life, managers tend to become engaged, and often concerned.

Sustaining the work–family factor

Which data are critical for sustaining the work–family factor in organisations? What is important here is having an evaluation or monitoring strategy in place to ensure that the work–family factor becomes part of the day-to-day operations of an organisation. The key to keeping work and family on the agenda is knowing whether it has made a difference, and the extent to which it enables personal and organisational sustainability.

In order to monitor the process of change and to measure outcomes, it is important that data be collected at regular intervals (such as annually). The following are examples of data that are critical for this process.

Employee survey data that measure involvement in family life. This is important specifically in terms of the extent to which employees feel they are able to manage or have control over their work and family commitments; employees feel satisfied with their involvement in family life, and their

family and relationship outcomes (such as the quality of the parent–child relationship).

Indicators to demonstrate there is workplace support for work–family balance and for establishing and maintaining quality family relationships. This would include employee survey data that focus on employee perceptions of the level of workplace support, both in terms of the availability and effectiveness of policies and practices. The assessment of supportive practices would include: (i) perceptions of general workplace demands and expectations (for example, whether people are rewarded for long hours, whether work and career options are organised in such a way that they facilitate flexibility to meet work–family commitments); (ii) the extent of support from workgroups and colleagues (for example, whether workgroups are flexible when a member has a work–family need); and (iii) the degree of support from immediate manager/supervisor/team leader (for example, considering work–family issues when decisions are being made about work, whether he/she is an effective role model for work–family balance).

Work and family issues are mainstream: having a work–family strategy is seen as an effective enabler of organisational outcomes. Indicators of this would include: work and family are included in organisational value statements; measures of work and family are regularly reported along with other business outcomes; the work and family factor is integrated into mainstream business processes and is seen as a key enabler of personal and organisational effectiveness; and managers and workgroups are skilled in using the work–family factor as a key business tool (for example, as part of a work redesign process).

Reasons for turnover are unrelated to work–life conflict. People are motivated to stay at the organisation because they are able to manage work–family tensions. This would involve collecting data on reasons for turnover and analysing this in relation to workforce demographics (for example, age, gender, family responsibilities). Ideally, this should be done by an external provider to ensure confidentiality.

The organisation receives public recognition, or has an accepted reputation, for enabling employees to meet their work and family commitments. One way of measuring this is to conduct surveys of employees who apply to an organisation to determine if they do so because they perceive work–family balance to be a core value of the organisation. Conversely, another measure would be that potential recruits are not dissuaded from applying for jobs in the company based on their perception of a lack of emphasis on work–family.

The employee profile reflects the community family demographic diversity at all levels of the organisation. The measure here would involve an analysis of gender and family characteristics of employees at all levels, but especially in management positions. If the work–family factor is having

an impact it should be clearly demonstrated by a change in the gender and family responsibility profile at senior levels. A related measure would be whether or not employees with specific family demographics do not apply for promotions or developmental opportunities based on their perception that they would find it difficult to balance their work and family commitments in the other position. This is a key issue for organisations to ensure that they are not excluding talent on the basis of their family responsibilities.

Finally, a more fundamental indicator of a sustained and genuine focus on work and family would be that an organisation demonstrates a broader concern for the impact workplace policies have on family, relationship and community wellbeing. Most organisations currently accept responsibility for the impact their operations have on the physical environment, and most are concerned about the physical safety of employees in the workplace.

There needs to be an equal concern for the impact that workplace policies and practices have on family and relationship wellbeing, and on the wellbeing of the community. It does not make sense that an organisation can continue to place demands – in terms of performance, hours and travel – on employees without consideration of the potential impact these have on the capacity of an employee to sustain the quality of their family life and close relationships, factors that for most are at least equal to, or more to the heart of the matter, than the workplace.

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