

## Chapter 6

# Family-Friendly Policies Make Business Sense

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**I** have a two and a half year old. When he was born I was studying part-time, I was working full-time and my partner and I were renovating our house. I felt part-time at everything, which left me feeling a bit like Sybil on a bad day. I breastfed my son till he was seven months old. We used to drop him on the other side of the city from my home in the morning and go to work in the city. I walked 20 minutes to the childcare centre at lunch time to breast feed him, that's if he wanted it then. Sometimes I'd just hang around until he decided he was hungry, then I'd walk back to work.

We'd leave work and rush to get to the centre before it closed. We'd race home, put the food on, eat, bath, read books and put the baby to bed. I'd then clean up, get things ready for the next day and if I wasn't too exhausted flop in front of the television for an hour before I needed to go to bed to make sure I could get up at 6 o'clock when that little cry, meaning, "Where are you mum and dad?," came.

I don't think my story is unusual, except that I have the benefit of being in a supportive home and work environment.

## Strategy

Women, particularly, and some men, need strategies to help us pull it off if we decide to go ahead with it all.

Childcare is a major community resource or strategy that working parents can use. I will talk about strategies workplaces can adopt to assist women balance their lives.

## Options for Child Care

There are many different types of child care that parents use to care for their 0-to-13-year-old children:

- Informal care — friends, relatives, babysitters and nannies.
- Formal care — centres, pre-schools, family day care and outside-school-hours care.
- Two thirds of Australians using child care use informal care. The rest use a mixture of government funded and private, formal care.

## Major Parent Concerns

- Availability — one in six working mothers have difficulty finding suitable child care when they return to work.
- Other parent concerns include, affordability, hours and location, quality, guilt and stress.
- One of the major concerns for many women using child care is, "Am I doing the right thing? Is my child benefiting from my lifestyle of juggling paid work and child caring?"

If all the research suggests that leaving children in good quality care is beneficial to a child, why do so many women feel bad about it? A major reason may be that society is simply very slow to catch up with the changing nature and needs of modern families and the impact that having children has on women.

Where once many women may have been economically able and satisfied keeping house and looking after young children on a full-time basis, this is no longer the case.

According to an Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 1993 study, two-thirds of mothers returned to the workplace at some time before their child started school. At all children's ages the majority were working part time. The main reason women returned to full-time work was monetary and a major reason for part time was because they did not want their work to interfere with family responsibilities.

There has been numerous articles and media attention recently on the topic of women workers and how "children are suffering and women really wanting to be at home looking after children", for example, Penelope Leach's visit to Australia, Michael Leunig's cartoon, and a number of press articles, such as, Michael Duffey's in the *Independent Monthly*.

Contrary to this media attention that suggests that:

1. Children are better off at home with their mother — most of the research says that children in a good quality care environment, whether they are with a parent, a relative or in a childcare centre, will thrive.
2. Women would prefer to be at home with their children — my experience, that of my colleagues and friends and research suggests that most women with pre-school age children prefer to be in the workforce — albeit in a part-time capacity. It is true that the more educated a woman is the more she prefers to be in paid work — this could reflect the type of paid employment

she is able to obtain.

But most of us want a balance of different activities in our lives. I suggest that as well as wanting our employers to accommodate our juggling acts, many of us would like husbands and partners to contribute more to child caring, not to mention housework.

In an Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) report, three in five working mothers preferred to work in the pre-school years. And most mothers surveyed thought that their return to work had little or no effect on their child. A majority were satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their child in the pre-school years, with satisfaction being higher among those who returned to part-time work.

Other research shows that less than a quarter of women with children chose to stay at home to look after them. The media's coverage of the childcare industry often preys upon a parent's inexperience as well as reinforcing an existing feeling of guilt that they should be at home looking after their children. In my view, women should ignore these pressures and focus on their family's needs and finding the best childcare solution to give their children the opportunity to develop in a caring environment.

## What Workplaces Are Doing

Many companies are now recognising the difficulties women face when trying to combine paid work and child care and are implementing work and family strategies as part of reforming the workplace.

In 1993, 6 percent of the 1.2 million families with children aged 11 years and under, and at least one parent who was in paid work, were offered childcare assistance from their employer (ABS).

According to the survey done by AIFS, mothers who have used work-based child care were more satisfied with this type of care than other formal care. The main perceived advantages were that it was convenient and the hours fitted in with work commitments.

So what can workplaces do to assist women who are finding it stressful and difficult to manage work and family responsibilities?

What could your workplace do, or what are they doing, to assist women with their childcare responsibilities?

## Stage 1

Some of the initiatives Families at Work have been involved in are:

- At Michael Johnson and Associates (small business) a nanny is provided for emergencies and for consultants when they travel.
- Armstrong Jones (small business) provided training to assist their employees to balance their work and family responsibilities better.
- Matildas (medium business) is renovating a

residential house into a 10-place childcare centre.

- Department of Industrial Relations (large organisation) has set up a family room. Parents bring their children in in an emergency and work in the room with the children.

## Stage 2

But it is not good enough to put in place one or two programs and think the workplace is now family friendly, it is important to develop a number of strategies. For example, Westpac and Sydney Water have a whole series of policies and programs in place to assist staff with their family responsibilities.

## The Westpac Approach

There are many different approaches a workplace could take when investigating and implementing a childcare strategy. The following is an account of Westpac's approach to providing child care for their staff. All the programs they have implemented or are in the process of implementing are pilots and they will be evaluated before they are continued on a permanent basis.

- 1992 — Childcare information service for staff in Sydney.
- 1993 — Childcare needs assessment survey of staff in Epping.
- 1994 — Childcare options assessment and cost-benefit analysis on best options.
- 1994 — Feasibility study on the best geographical areas to reserve day-care and vacation-care places in Sydney and Brisbane.
- 1994 — Reserved day-care places in Sydney city.
- 1994 — Childcare placement service in Melbourne.
- 1994 — Reserved vacation care places in Brisbane.
- 1995 — Reserved childcare places in Epping.
- 1995 — Vacation care program in Epping.
- 1995 — Paid maternity leave.
- 1995 — Reserved family day-care places in Perth.
- 1996 — Teenage vacation care program.
- 1996 — Westpac childcare centre for staff in Adelaide.
- 1996 — Evaluating all services with the view to continuation if they are successful.

## Sydney Water Approach

It is important to consider the gamut of family life when developing policy and programs, as caring for small children is only a part of the many family responsibilities staff have. Many will need assistance with teenagers, or relatives with a disability or older and frail relatives, or even with ways to improve their relationship with their spouse.

Sydney Water is a good example of a workplace that

has a comprehensive work and family strategy. Below is an outline of some of their achievements.

- Surveys of staff indicated that one of the major contributing factors to the female attrition rate was a lack of childcare facilities.

- The board employed a full-time project manager whose role is to develop work and family policies and programs, implement changes and establish programs.

- The manager also advises staff of facilities available in their area for vacation care and assist in placing children with the service.

- In 1992 two childcare centres were established in areas where particular need was evident, CBD and Liverpool.

- Employees who use the centres, salary package their childcare fees making it less expensive than it would otherwise be.

- In the early 1990s, the corporation decided to make changes to existing work practices, for example, the existing leave-without-pay policy was able to be used for phased retirement and career breaks. In addition, an amendment was made to the part-time work policy to allow employees to initiate part-time work arrangements and job sharing. Also, the maternity-leave policy was amended to allow for part-time work and part-time leave without pay for a total of 24 months.

- The Lady Gowrie Corporate Child Care Advisory Service has contracted to provide a resource and advisory service.

- A social worker provides information about community services and support groups and refers staff to appropriate services to assist with elder-care responsibilities.

- 100 days paid, special leave over two years is available to care for sick relatives or arrange care.

- An employee-assistance program is available to staff to provide personal counselling on a range of personal and work-related problems, retirement, government and community services initiatives that are being considered currently are: family day care at Blacktown and Northern areas, working from home as a short-term option, and a more flexible span of hours, three 12-hour days or six six-hour days.

There are a number of suggestions Sydney Water has for other employers who are developing strategies and they are worth mentioning here:

- Consult with managers, employees and unions to get a range of experiences and ideas.

- Use existing provisions as a basis and improve those that work well to make them work better. Discard anything restrictive.

- Leave ample room within policy for negotiation at

a local level to meet individual and business needs.

- Have policies and practices that are flexible in what they provide and how they provide it. They should be guidelines rather than prescriptive.

- Be prepared to adjust and adapt policies in line with mainstream business requirements.

- Educate managers and employees about how to use these policies.

- Integrate work and family policies and strategies into the mainstream planning cycle.

- Monitor implementation and outcomes. This

should be an integral part of the policy development stage.

- Pilot schemes in parts of the business before developing corporate policy.

- Find champions among managers.

### Stage 3

Families at Work believe that to have a truly family-friendly workplace it is not enough to have policies and programs in place if the culture of the workplace does not accept that employees have priorities outside their work.

### U.S. Work and Family Research

The following story is about research that was recently done in the U.S. A research team from a university decided to use the notion of improving companies' responsiveness to employees' family responsibilities to change company culture.

One company that participated did so because they thought that they were very family friendly, and they did have a lot of programs and policies in place.

It was an exhaustive survey. Focus groups throughout the company found, much to the surprise of management, that although employees appreciated the work and family policies they felt they were still expected to put in long hours or be seen to be, if they were to be considered for promotion. This was not conducive to their family responsibilities.

Management thought they were an exemplary company and were shocked to learn that was not what employees thought. They, therefore, worked with the researchers and staff to change the culture.

They decided to get rid of standard hours and divided the workplace into teams. They gave each team their objective and then the team worked together to meet the objective. It was up to the team to organise their own hours. Their job was to ensure the objective was met — the number of hours worked was

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not relevant.

The company has prospered and staff feel the workplace culture is now truly accepting of family responsibilities.

This is a story of how working towards being family friendly was the way the company actually changed the workplace to accommodate many of the innovations now being implemented around the world by forward-thinking companies.

## How to Go About It

The most important and difficult areas to deal with are culture change.

It is important to:

1. Ensure the workplace sees the issue of work and child care in a broader context of work and family or even work and life.

2. Integrate work and family programs with other culture-change efforts. Work and family and other human resources policy issues need to be considered under the umbrella of wider, strategic questions such as where organisations want to be in the future and how to get there.

3. Involve key stakeholders. Ownership of changes and commitment to make them work is important for changes to occur. Particularly, involve at the early stages any individuals or groups who might oppose new measures. Potential opposition may therefore be minimised. Joint consultative committees can ensure ongoing involvement of stakeholders. The committee can list work and family options and current policies and practices.

4. Identify concerns of employees. This can be done through questionnaires and focus groups (pros and cons of each).

5. Deal with the issues raised. Managers need to accept the validity of findings and ask more questions such as, "What is the significance of the attitudes expressed? What are the implications for organisational effectiveness and performance?" and, "In what ways do management practices need to change in order to create a workplace environment more conducive to employee satisfaction?"

If a childcare service may be an option for the workplace, the committee may need to deal with the following issues:

- Discuss plans with outsiders.
- Review other employers' initiatives.
- Identify opportunities.
- Identify options.
- Assess costs and benefits.
- Decide best options.
- Write up findings and recommendations.
- Present report to decision makers.
- Implement policies.

6. Train and support managers. Training managers in balancing work and family more effectively is best

integrated with more general training on team leadership and people-management skills, and motivation and commitment and the manager's role in creating a motivating work environment.

Motivating is an ongoing process of creating a work environment in which people are able to satisfy their own needs while working towards the achievement of the organisation's goals.

Families at Work have a number of training modules on work and family, some specifically designed for managers and others for staff in general.

## Conclusion

Whatever you do in your organisation will require patience and commitment, but I urge you to spend some time thinking about what needs to happen in your workplace to ensure it is considering employees' family responsibilities. I can guarantee, from my own experiences in business and my clients' experiences, that companies that do have a much better chance of survival and prosperity in the years ahead.

Women want to be able to have choices about what they do, whether it is to undertake paid work full-time, care for children full time or as more and more women want to do, balance both child-caring and paid-work responsibilities. Whatever choice is made women should not have to feel guilty or stressed about their choice.

Australia has got strategies and resources in place to assist women and their families. We have a good quality childcare system and it is improving all the time. And many workplaces are assisting parents by putting in place family-friendly policies and programs and slowly the workplace culture is changing to accommodate our diverse activities.