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# Creating a High Impact Work–Family Research Agenda

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There is no doubt that the implementation of insights from work–family research in workplaces leaves room for improvement, as Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews (2011) suggest in their article. The authors point to a decline in employer support for family-friendly policies to argue for a better link between work–family research and practice. In this commentary, we offer evidence to refute the authors' argument that family-friendly policies and research to evaluate their effectiveness are declining. In addition, we highlight several research-to-action projects conducted by Families and Work Institute (FWI) as examples of how work–family research can translate into action for the benefit of both employees and employers.

## **Employer Support for Family-Friendly Policies**

Kossek and colleagues importantly argue that many employers are dissatisfied with their work–life policies to the point of reducing or eliminating such policies. It is surprising, however, that data to make this point in a research review rely on non-representative samples, such as the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) study of its members and on a newspaper article in the *Wall Street Journal*, when

data from nationally representative studies of employees (FWI's National Study of the Changing Workforce, 1992, 1997, 2002, and 2008) and employers exist (FWI's National Study of Employers 1998, 2005, and 2008). Furthermore, data from FWI's nationally representative studies do not paint a dark picture—in fact, we find that, in spite of the recession, most employers have either maintained (81%) or increased (13%) access to workplace flexibility for their employees (Galinsky & Bond, 2009). In addition, a comparison of nationally representative data from employees in FWI's 2002 and 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) shows that most forms of workplace flexibility have remained stable, including access to traditional flextime, flex place, part-time work, paid time off to care for sick children, elder care, and vacation, while the percentage of employees who are able to take time off during the workday to attend to personal or family matters has increased significantly from 31% to 37% (Tang & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). Data from FWI's employer surveys also reveal most forms of workplace flexibility have either remained stable between 1998 and 2008 or increased (Galinsky, Bond, & Sakai, 2008).

Kossek and colleagues are right to question how work–family research may increase its impact in the real world of work. They outline several paths to bridge the gap between lessons from research and their practical implementation. However, we disagree with their premise that research

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to evaluate the effective implementation of work–family initiatives has declined in the past decade and that research has not been linked with improving practice. The problem has been described in numerous organizational publications and, at least in the case of FWI’s action research, is beginning to be published in peer-reviewed journals (Galinsky, Sakai, & Wigton, in press). Below, we highlight our *When Work Works* project and our work with the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor on its *National Dialogue on Workplace Flexibility* as examples of how work–family research can be brought to life in organizations and communities around the United States.

### **Linking Work–Family Research to Action in the Workplace**

FWI’s research clearly documents that employees need and want flexibility at work to manage their work and personal responsibilities. In fact, 87% of employees report that access to workplace flexibility would be extremely or very important if they were looking for a new job (Tang & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). The challenge, as Kossek and colleagues imply, is to encourage employers to apply the lessons from work–life research and voluntarily increase flexibility for their workers, including those in jobs deemed impossible for flexible work arrangements. Eight years ago, FWI answered this challenge by creating the *When Work Works* (WWW) project, originally with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and now in partnership with the SHRM.

WWW is a worksite-based program that brings research findings into practice with educational materials, tools, and resources for employers of all sizes (ranging from small to global employers) to create more flexible and effective workplaces for their employees. A key component of WWW are the Sloan Awards, which have a two-step application process: First, employers complete a questionnaire about their worksite flexibility initiatives. Their answers are

compared to the national averages from FWI’s National Survey of Employers (NSE). Applicants who rank within the top 20% nationally based on NSE data are selected to have their employees respond to a survey, which includes not only questions about flexibility access and use, but also about perceived “jeopardy” of using flexibility, the organization’s culture, other aspects of an effective workplace, and a variety of outcomes (e.g., employee health and engagement). These responses are also normed against FWI’s National Study of the Changing Workforce. Employee responses comprise two-thirds of the final score for the Sloan Awards.

This project addresses Kossek et al.’s call for using data to improve practice. All applicants receive a benchmarking report evaluating and comparing their flexibility programs and policies to national data, to other applicants, and to winners of the Sloan Awards. Finally, best practices from Sloan Award winners are compiled and shared in the annual *Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work Work* (e.g., FWI, 2011). Thus, the WWW project leverages multisource data from local employers and nationally representative data to create educational tools and resources for learning and change within participating organizations, their communities, and beyond.

Essentially, WWW is an experiment of bridging the gap between research and implementation, which has evolved, matured, and grown every year since its launch in 2005. Although data from our nationally representative studies do not show dramatic increases in workplace flexibility, our data do show increases among repeat applicants every year in the WWW project (Galinsky et al., in press). In addition, our WWW data show an overall increase in flexibility among all applicants between 2009 and 2010, suggesting that more employers are heeding the call to action for creating effective workplaces (Galinsky et al., in press). Granted, the employers that apply for the Sloan Awards are self-selected and, thus, the findings are not representative. The Sloan Awards,

however, address another issue raised by Kossek and her colleagues—that of scalability. We reach approximately 1,000 employers every year—a much larger group than any other action research project of which we know.

In addition, *WWW* addresses the issue of how work–family support is defined. Kossek and her colleagues call for broader definition of work–family, a tenet to which we wholeheartedly subscribe. In all of our employee datasets, we have looked at access, use of, and demand for more than two-dozen types of flexibility since the project's inception. In addition, we include five other aspects that our research indicates are indicative of an effective workplace beyond workplace flexibility: (a) job challenge and learning, (b) job autonomy, (c) supervisor task support, (d) climate of respect and trust, and (e) economic security (Aumann & Galinsky, 2009).

We believe the research-based, data-driven approach of *WWW* and its rigorous measurement processes are keys to its success. There are, however, other equally important factors. *WWW* takes a local approach and makes a point of reaching those employers who had never thought the implementation of flexibility programs would be possible in their organizations. To truly have an impact, workplace flexibility needs to be promoted beyond those jobs, organizations, and industries that have been traditionally more “flexibility friendly” than others (e.g., white-collar and professional jobs vs. manufacturing jobs). Findings from our studies suggest that employees in jobs traditionally viewed as less amenable to flexibility tend to be the ones who need flexibility the most (e.g., low-income employees; Bond & Galinsky 2011a, b; Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2010). To reach a more diverse range of employers and employees, *WWW* partners with local business and community leaders in a coalition of “local movers and shakers” who serve as champions of change within their communities. The project provides information, tools, and resources based on the latest research findings for local leaders to

organize educational events and engage other employers in a dialogue about flexibility and other business issues. This kind of employer-to-employer communication proved an effective outreach and communication strategy because employers are more likely to accept important messages about flexibility from their peers rather than researchers or advocates. Furthermore, lessons from work–family research are more likely to be embraced by employers if they are framed in the context of overall workplace effectiveness with benefits to both the organization and its employees. In summary, we believe that researchers can increase their impact on practice and policies in organizations by being mindful of how they frame and communicate their findings to employers.

In 2011, *WWW* is evolving yet again to ensure its continued reach and scalability. *FWI* recently partnered with the *SHRM* to continue and expand the project. This partnership is a prime example of the type of collaboration Kossek and colleagues propose to help expand the reach and impact of work–family research. Together, *FWI* and *SHRM* aim to leverage research and a worldwide network of human resource professionals to conduct and share research on workplace effectiveness, provide practical tools to facilitate implementation and share best practices. Finally, an annual thought leadership conference will bring together human resource professionals and work–family experts to exchange insights and ideas to enhance workplace effectiveness research and practice. In other words, partnering with *SHRM* will allow *FWI* researchers to learn from human resource practitioners about what it takes to make work–family initiatives work in organizations, while *SHRM* members gain access to the latest nationally representative research.

Kossek et al. also suggest that work–family researchers engage in outreach and collaborative policy research to ensure their findings will help shape new policies and change institutional contexts. In 2010, *FWI* in collaboration with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Corporate Voices, the National

Partnership for Women & Families, Family Values @ Work, and others worked closely with the White House to create and implement the first ever White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility. As a follow up to the forum, FWI and other nonprofits are working with the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor to facilitate and promote a *National Dialogue Workplace Flexibility*. This initiative is comprised of a series of forums, each focusing on a specific industry or issue, that bring together local business and nonprofit leaders, employers, employees, advocates, and work–family experts to discuss and learn about work–family from a variety of perspectives. FWI has been funded by the Sloan Foundation and the Ford Foundation to prepare a report for each forum and has thus far prepared reports on workplace flexibility and small employers (Galinsky, Sakai, & Wigton, 2010); low-wage employees (Bond & Galinsky, 2011a, b); health services (Galinsky & Sakai, 2011); retail (Sakai, Matos, & Galinsky, 2011); hospitality, restaurant, and tourism industry (Matos & Galinsky, 2011); and manufacturing (Bond & Galinsky, 2011a, b). Forums such as these provide researchers with a platform to directly share their insights and engage in a dialogue with people who can advocate for, change, and implement new work–family policies. At these forums, researchers also have the opportunity to hear about challenges and successes in implementing work–family policies from researchers and employers, gaining insights and ideas for future research.

The examples highlighted above clearly show how researchers can engage in partnerships to share findings and to learn how these findings resonate in the real world. Thus, the gap that Kossek and her colleagues describe may be a gap between the academy and research-to-action projects. The work that Kossek et al. describe in the NIH project is another important example of this trend that has been escalating throughout the first years of the 21st century. Other nonprofits, such as Corporate Voices, have engaged

in similar partnerships. Our experience shows that work–family research findings are more likely to translate to real changes in the workplace when research and practice mutually inform and reinforce one another through strategic partnerships and programs.

Ultimately, we believe one of the reasons why work–family policies have often failed to live up to their potential is because their implementation has been too far removed from the context of the work and business environments. The WWW project has been successful because it engages employers in a dialogue not only about flexibility but also about business issues more generally. To create truly effective workplaces, work–family policies and practices need to be embedded within job design and the organizational culture. To this end, we welcome Kossek and colleagues' call to action for work–family researchers to continue to address issues of implementation. As our current partnerships reveal, the time is clearly ripe for the right collaborations and change experiments.

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