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A Longitudinal Lens on the Evolution of EAP, Work-life and Wellness Benefit Programs

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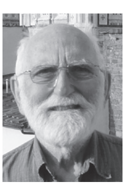

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How have employee assistance (EAP), work-life and wellness programs changed in the businesses that were recognized as "family friendly" 15 years earlier? Harsh economic conditions have threatened discretionary benefits that positively affect talent recruitment, retention, employee productivity and corporate image over this very same time period (Smyth et al. 2009). Thus, the authors investigated these changes in three progressive benefits programs in light of the economic and sociological changes that had occurred in the interim. EAPs provide counseling for substance abuse and other mental health issues; work-life encompasses programs that help employees balance the demands of family and work; while wellness programs aim at improving employees' overall physical health with the goal of decreasing health-care costs. The label "family-friendly" is used throughout this paper for benefits plans involving some mix of EAP, work-life and wellness offerings.

Prior literature has sought to identify the motives for adopting family-friendly policies (Davis and Kalleberg 2006; Bond et al. 2002; Glass and Fujimoto 1995).

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A logical extension to this scholarship is to ask how such programs, once adopted, are shaped by factors both within and external to the organization. Changing conditions, especially fiscal stress, may lead to the adulteration or elimination of benefits (Kelly et al. 2008). Firms adopt family-friendly policies when attracting or retaining committed staff (Csiernik 2005; Davis and Kalleberg; Osterman 1995). Thus, it follows that these benefits may be reduced or terminated as firms downsize. A plausible, alternative scenario is that the noneconomic factors supporting family-friendly benefits protect these programs when companies hit hard times.

The study's findings are based on ethnographic data collected via telephone interviews from 28 companies designated as family-friendly in 1993 (Herlihy 1997). The survey instrument was designed to compare recent practices and policies of EAP, work-life and wellness programs with the responses from a 1993 Boston University study that surveyed firms ranked most family-friendly by *Working Mother* magazine. The authors inquired about the status of the benefits, changes in the scope and structure of the benefits, internal and external factors influencing these changes, and an explanation of the strategic choices made by management in response to those factors.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

The data are based on semi-structured telephone interviews of EAP, work-life and wellness professionals employed by those organizations ranked most family-friendly 15 years earlier. In 1993, a Boston University team surveyed 79 of these 100 exemplars. Only 30 organizations existed at the time of the authors' 2008 study. Mergers, reorganizations and bankruptcies explain most of the attrition. One firm refused to participate while another did not complete all three phases. In all, the authors interviewed 47 benefits administrators from 28 of the original corporations. Respondents agreed to participate with the understanding that all comments would remain anonymous. Table 1 summarizes the comparisons between the 1993 sample and the remaining companies available for the 2008 study.

Respondents were asked a common set of questions, and were encouraged to elaborate. Deviations from the questionnaire were allowed, provided that the testimony was relevant to the provision of family-friendly benefits. One advantage of the informal approach is that respondents are permitted to give qualitative input. For this research, the semi-structured interviews made it possible to gather ethnographic detail on the idiosyncratic histories of benefits, internal and external factors shaping benefits policy, and the decision-making processes. The authors especially sought a fuller understanding of the non-economic factors that shaped courses of action. Directors or account managers of all three programs were approached individually or collectively, depending on the company's wishes. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes.

The data were examined for evidence of common themes. Each member of the research team independently sorted and reviewed the data for factors shaping

TABLE 1 Sample Comparisons Between 1993 and 2008 Study

1993 Boston U. Study (N=79)	2008 Study (N-28)
Top 100 family-friendly companies (Working Mother) were approached	Approached same 79 Companies from 1993 Boston University Study
Only companies with 1,000 or more employees were approached	29 of 79 of original companies researchers were unable to locate
All 100 companies approached were based in the United States	20 of 79 original companies had merged 3x or more times, thus deemed inappropriate for comparison
79 of 100 companies completed the entire interview process. N=79	Remaining 30 companies were approached: One declined and another didn't finish the entire process. N=28

the content and administration of family-friendly benefits. The research team convened to identify patterns of decision-making within firms and pressures external to firms that reportedly affected the provision of these benefits. The authors reached a consensus on six main themes, which are discussed in the following sections.

THEME 1: FAMILY-FRIENDLY BENEFITS RESILIENCY

Many respondents expressed concern for the continuance of family-friendly benefits; layoffs were frequently mentioned as a triggering event. However, all firms retained some semblance of the benefits programs from 15 years earlier. Program resiliency suggests that personnel find value in, and grow accustomed to, these benefits, and that employee expectations for benefit longevity constrain top-level managers or new owners from diluting or terminating these programs. Respondents described several competing factors that both threatened and supported family-friendly benefits.

Two factors were identified as a threat. The first threat revolved around fiscal stress due to an erosion of profitably caused by a loss of market share or declining business climate. Here the experience was not uniform as some firms were affected by the broad downturn in the economy, while others were more strongly affected by the shock of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and other disasters. For the latter, the crises presented an opportunity to showcase the value of EAP, work-life and, to a lesser extent, wellness programs. Still, despite this visibility, several firms negatively affected by 9/11 or Katrina resumed fiscal restructuring once the crisis period passed. Respondents described a loss of support for family-friendly benefits a year or two after these catastrophic events.

The second threat to benefits policy was leadership volatility caused by CEO turnover, mergers and acquisitions. Occasionally a new CEO would strive to preserve family-friendly benefits. Two of the 28 firms that grew through acquisitions adopted the "best practices" of the consumed entities, resulting in an incremental upgrade in benefits. More often a merger or acquisition threatened family-friendly programs, as new corporate leaders demanded a re-evaluation of benefits policies, which frequently resulted in the downgrading of some of those services.

Nonetheless, every firm that experienced a CEO turnover, merger or acquisition retained core elements of their benefits programs. Incoming CEOs would frequently demand quantifiable evidence of program effectiveness, and HR departments would comply, but programs were never fully abandoned. Instead, respondents described benefits as reshaped by a new CEO, usually with the objective of cutting costs. A major reason for benefits continuation was pressure by internal stakeholders to sustain benefits. Benefits administrators, at times in concert with supportive mid-level managers, lobbied to preserve programs, and new CEOs acquiesced to secure employee cooperation.

Another factor that helped sustain and shape family-friendly policy was the relationship between program administrators and professional associations, such as the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), Alliance for Work Life Progress (AWLP) at WorldatWork and International Health and Productivity Management (IHPM). Professional associations give benefits administrators a forum to interact with peers and share information on the latest ideas for improving cost-effectiveness of these programs. The authors observed that active membership in professional associations roughly correlated with corporate program emphasis. In addition, the researchers found employers that had a large global presence frequently participated in both international and local organizations based in the host countries.

Another explanation for program continuity is the desire to protect corporate image. Becoming recognized as a leader in providing progressive employment policy creates an indefinable amount of goodwill that helps to lure talent and build loyalty among employees. In one instance, benefits expanded after a misstatement by a new CEO, which triggered intense national negative publicity and a demand from employees for better services. In that context, benefit administrators secured large funds to upgrade the work-life program.

Benefits stability was especially strong where workforces were unionized. For those firms with labor unions (46 percent of sample), respondents report near universal support for family-friendly programs by labor leaders. The codification of family-friendly benefits into a labor agreement stabilizes benefits during times of fiscal stress or CEO transitions. Collective bargaining also affects the introduction and modification of benefits. In numerous cases, new benefits were initially negotiated with unions, which later served as a blueprint for the non-union workforce.

A fifth factor that has aided program longevity is Web-based technology. One option during a financial downturn, or when a new management team demands that a program demonstrates cost-effectiveness, is to find a less expensive method of delivering services. Consistent with Sharar and Hertenstein (2006), Web-based and telephonic services were perceived as appropriate media for general information dissemination and less intensive types of counseling, and were adopted by some firms. Respondents indicated that Web-based technology reduced benefits cost and provided a solution to fiscal stress that falls short of program elimination (Murphy et al. 2009). Several respondents did however express concern that Web-based technology might lead to benefits being viewed as superficial commodities.

Resiliency Theme: Key Findings

- Family-friendly benefits utilization rates are countercyclical in relation to the fiscal health of the firm, which aids in the short-term survival of benefits. Family-friendly benefits are more vulnerable to program cutbacks in cases of a protracted retrenchment.
- New CEOs and owners hesitate to dramatically alter or terminate family-friendly benefits because these benefits become valued by personnel. Sustaining benefits helps ensure employee cooperation during leadership transitions.
- Benefits administrators with active relationships with EAP, work-life and wellness professional associations tend to be early adopters of innovations and have stronger program resiliency.
- Family-friendly programs were more stable and had greater longevity in situations where the labor force has greater power, either because of skill levels or labor unions.
- Firms under fiscal stress are more likely to adopt Web-based benefits applications. Web-based services potentially increase access and utilization; however an over-reliance on Web-based technology may lower the quality of services.

THEME 2: TARGETED VERSUS STANDARDIZED BENEFITS

Numerous respondents indicated that family-friendly benefits are becoming more targeted in application. In some cases, targeting is caused by the need to recruit and retain highly skilled employees. Some examples include: tailoring programs for military families; parents with disabled children and dependent elders; and gay and lesbian families. Firms with a significant international presence modified family-friendly programs in response to cultural, ethnic and religious contexts. All these forms of targeting were motivated by a perceived need to expand or diversify family-friendly policies.

An alternative form of targeting is motivated by a desire to achieve a higher return on investment (ROI). Several respondents reported moving to a less-expensive, Web-based model for general inquiries, and being more selective when administering intensive "high-touch" counseling. A wellness program, for instance, might offer general health advice through the Web, and supplement this service with one-on-one training for employees with high-risk physical conditions such as diabetes, obesity and cardiac issues. Targeting of the first type, creatively meeting the unique needs of populations, was more frequent with growing firms or those with international operations. Targeting of the latter type, a reach for cost-effective programming, was likely under conditions of fiscal stress or when ROI criteria were imposed by management. Either form of targeting provides fertile ground for family-friendly benefits innovation.

One constraint on the targeting strategy intended to lower service cost was the presence of labor unions. Two explanations were given. First, unions typically demand equal access to benefits for members, and thus oppose plans that allow management to select benefits recipients. Once benefits are codified, labor unions will educate members in order to promote high utilization; any rule or procedure that restricts access is counter to this goal. Second, family-friendly benefits are always part of a larger negotiation package, and any proposal to shift from "high touch" to "low touch" might be perceived as a concession. In such cases, substantive changes to the benefits will require bilateral negotiation. In this way, the institutional role of organized labor imposes standards and on-going stability for family-friendly benefits.

Finally, Davidson and Herlihy (1999) found responses that hinted of an association between corporate culture and the degree of benefits standardization, which was consistent with findings of the original Boston University study. Companies that operate based on a command-and-control model, such as that found in the military, are more likely to standardize benefits programs. A uniform application of benefits implies fairness and clarity of policy. Companies featuring less hierarchy, or firms that rely on unsupervised employee cooperation, are willing to allow family-friendly benefits to vary among employees. A flexible application of benefits recognizes unique individual contexts or group characteristics, and may be consistent with pluralistic management models.

Standardized benefits are a disappearing entity due to the promotion of "flexibility" in the workplace, which is a prevalent issue in the benefits world. But there was one of the 28 companies that had very standardized models throughout all three branches of service. The respondent called it a "one-size-fits-all" approach. As suspected and mentioned earlier, this was entirely related to the long-standing corporate culture of this particular company.

Targeted Versus Standard Programs: Key Findings

- Growing companies innovate with family-friendly programs that address diverse family arrangements, obligations, social norms and culture.
- Companies under pressure to develop cost-effective programs, either because of fiscal stress or new management, will innovate by using technology to more efficiently inform and service employees.
- The presence of labor unions will standardize and stabilize benefits.
- Benefits policy is shaped by corporate culture. Command-and-control operations favor standardized benefits; decentralized operations favor variation in benefits application.

THEME 3: GLOBALIZATION OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY PROGRAMS

Over the intervening 15 years, many firms expanded family-friendly benefits to their international operations. In some circumstances, there was a deliberate corporate strategy of extending benefits to a growing segment of non-Western countries in Asia and the Middle East. Respondents indicated that U.S.-based programming was insufficiently equipped to serve the needs of non-Western families.

Firms used two strategies to fill this void. The most common was to contract with nation-based firms to create a hybrid benefits package that was consistent with overall corporate company policy, yet sensitive to religious, ethnic identities and cultures of the host country. An alternative approach, adopted by one firm, was to empower constituency groups from various cultures by allowing employees to provide input for refining a generic benefits program. The intent behind asking for employee input was policy acceptance and higher utilization rates. Both methods required contractors from a host nation to administer the benefits.

In general, respondents in companies that were expanding their global operations sought to refine family-friendly benefits through the assistance of professionals from the host country and by participating in local associations of that country.

Globalization: Key Findings

- International firms are more likely to diversify family-friendly benefits in response to the cultural, religious and ethnic contexts of the various host countries.
- The policy to adopt culturally diverse benefits can come from corporate leadership, or occasionally, from the international employees themselves.
- The most common method for cultural diversification is to outsource family-friendly benefits administration to a nation-based provider.

THEME 4: COST-BENEFIT JUSTIFICATION

Verifying a financial return to the firm was increasingly necessary in order to protect or acquire program resources. An acceptable method for assessing the ROI of family-friendly programs would aid administrators in making the case for growing benefits (Sharar and Hertenstein). Such an endeavor is complicated.

Measurement is a serious obstacle to establishing an ROI methodology. The "investment" component is relatively easy to compute by totaling costs; assessing the "return" is problematic because the returns from family-friendly programs accrue at the firm, family and social levels. Personnel-related statistics, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover, can be quantified and analyzed. Far more difficult is measuring the value of the benefit on personnel and society. How does one, for instance, quantify the positive effects of EAP counseling on family well-being? What about effects that emerge over a longer time horizon, such as the three-to-five year time period required for a reduction in cardio-vascular disease attributable to an effective wellness program? Or the generational returns to society when a work-life program enables single mothers to spend time with their children?

At issue is whether the return from a program is narrowly restricted to include corporate interests or whether the return should factor in the improvement in the lives of affected personnel. The distinction and choice have implications. Measuring returns, while never easy, is comparatively straightforward when returns are to the business only. Absenteeism, tardiness and turnover incur quantifiable costs. Likewise, changes in employee productivity are measurable. A firm that desires to test ROI can calculate the administration of family-friendly benefits across work units to assess whether the benefits reduce costs or increase productivity. Innovations, such as Web-based applications, can be similarly tested using experimental methods to refine benefits.

However, this approach would clearly understate program returns because it fails to quantify the value of the benefits to employees and their families. Respondents that expressed discomfort with the ROI criteria sent down by top management were sensitive to this limitation. Benefits administrators witness how family-friendly programs improve the lives of employees and families, and know that such outcomes are not captured by standard ROI formulas. Likewise, programmatic shifts from one-on-one counseling to less expensive Web-based advice have negative implications for benefits quality that will escape detection in most evaluations. A worthy, challenging assignment for family-friendly practitioners is to develop an evaluation method that reaches beyond a typical ROI approach in order to incorporate changes in the value of benefits to affected employees and families.

Measurement Issues: Key Findings

- The development of an accepted methodology for assessing ROI would further the growth of family-friendly benefits.
- In computing ROI, the return to the firm is easier to quantify and evaluate using experimental methods than are returns to employees and families.
- There is often tension between top corporate management and benefits administrators over ROI criteria. Corporate managers favor ROI criteria that assess returns to the firm, measuring changes in factors such as absenteeism, tardiness and turnover. Benefits administrators prefer an ROI model that includes a broader set of criteria, one that includes returns to employees and families.
- Moving beyond standard ROI models to capture the effect of family-friendly benefits on firms, employees and families will include an inherently subjective component to the valuation of benefits.

THEME 5: OUTSOURCING VERSUS IN-HOUSE

A fifth strategic dimension was whether employees of the firm administered the family-friendly benefits (in-house program) or whether the firm hired contractors (outsourcing) to deliver services. Related was the issue of whether a contract was with one provider or multiple providers. A few firms adopted a mix of contracted and in-house capacity, which was referred to as a hybrid model.

Most firms contract for all or some of their family-friendly benefits. Nonetheless, satisfaction with vendors varied greatly. Numerous respondents indicated that they had to shop among vendors to either find a good fit with corporate culture or to control costs. Aside from cost and quality, choosing to outsource involved several considerations. Listed high as a reason to outsource was access to Web-based services or some other service specialty. A few respondents also perceived contracting as advantageous for shielding the company from liability for breeches in client confidentiality. Firms that chose in-house programs frequently cited the need to be responsive to particular needs of employees who deal with sensitive materials and are in highly stressful situations that might affect public safety.

Firms that opted for a mix of outsourced and in-house programs blended these considerations. For instance, one firm with extensive international operations had in-house programs for domestic sites, yet contracted with benefits providers specializing in the culture of the appropriate nation for international offices. Another kept the most intensive aspect of its EAP benefit, psychological counseling, as an in-house program for certain specified employees while contracting with a vendor for less-intensive, Web-based service for other employees. These firms were attempting to optimize benefits by combining the strengths of in-house and contracted operations.

A preference for outsourcing was affected by the department home for the benefits. While EAP, work-life and wellness share a common purpose of enabling employees through intervention and accommodation, the three benefit types achieve this goal in different ways. As such, the three programs are not always administered through the same corporate department. When there was a split, it was more common for EAP and wellness to be paired in the same department, reflecting perhaps a shared emphasis on mental and physical health. Table 2 represents the various models of partnering that were reported by the respondents. Note: 25 percent claimed that all three services were collaborative partners.

TABLE 2 Various Combinations of Collaborative Models

Reported Collaborative Efforts	Percentages based on responses of 47 interviews*				
Internal EAPs*	18%				
EAP & Work-life		62%			
EAP & Wellness			23%		
W/L & Wellness				15%	
EAP, Work-life & Wellness					25%

NB:* (1) Slightly higher level of Internal EAPs in this sample (2) Some companies reported different alliances dependent on who in that company was being interviewed

Outsourcing of services was more likely when multiple departments were responsible for various family-friendly benefits. Respondents indicated that it is easier to consolidate the three benefits as in-house functions, or contract the programs to one vendor when the benefits are administered from the same department.

Outsourcing Versus In-house: Key Findings

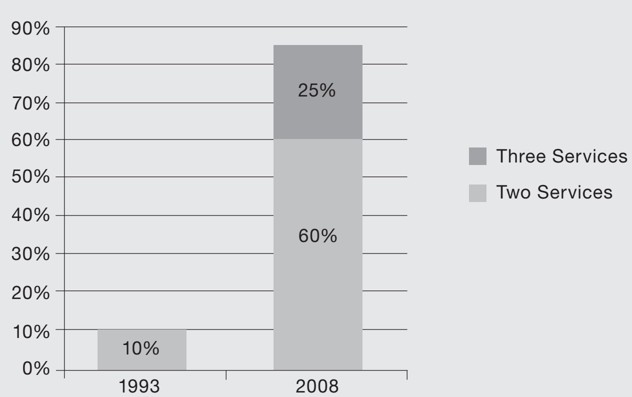
- Companies that place a priority on Web-based technology for the delivery of family-friendly benefits are more likely to outsource.
- Companies that place a priority on benefits quality and security will more likely provide benefits with internal staff.
- Companies that try to optimize benefits through a mix of internal and external providers will select the most familiar or intensive aspects of a service for internal delivery, and contract the less familiar and less intensive service aspects.
- Outsourcing is more frequent when separate corporate departments administer family-friendly benefits.

THEME 6: INTEGRATION OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY BENEFITS

Because of recent interest in the integration of EAP, work-life and wellness programs (Attridge et al. 2005), the survey asked how the coordination of benefits changed over the past 15 years. Many respondents mentioned consolidating the three benefits within a single department, or "administrative integration." Less common were arrangements where a department served as a point of entry for professional assessment and referral of individuals to benefits providers. Rarer still were models that allowed the referral of persons across service providers, or "functional integration." Responses clearly reflected a range of conceptions for EAP, work-life and wellness collaboration. Figure 1 illustrates the dramatic growth in the concept of reported integration over the past 15 years.

Outsourcing to multiple firms for EAP, work-life and wellness services partially

FIGURE 1 Levels of Reported "Integration" in 1993 and 2008



explains why functional integration is rare. Vendors tend to guard their operations and have a disincentive to refer a client to another vendor. Moreover, benefits administrators often prefer that vendors do not share client information to protect client confidentiality. Finally, with functional integration, measuring individual program effectiveness and utilization becomes more complex, which in turn makes the task of holding separate contractors accountable more challenging. For these reasons, several respondents preferred to keep EAP, work-life and wellness programs operationally independent. The most functionally integrated examples were when the firm contracted with a sole benefit provider for all three benefits, or when in-house staff delivered all three services.

One factor encouraging greater levels of integration is the consolidation of benefits providers in the field. The purchase of smaller niche providers by larger firms allows prospective vendors to offer a more comprehensive menu of benefits options for businesses. Those businesses, in turn, can lower transactions costs when there is one contractor. These collaborations frequently involved a hybrid model of in-house and vendor contracts, especially on the work-life portion of these family-friendly benefits.

A final, program-related factor that inhibited benefits integration was the history and treatment aspects of the benefits. Although all three programs are family-friendly, EAP, and to a lesser extent wellness, are burdened by negative connotations relating to individual weaknesses or over-indulgence. One respondent preferred to keep EAP and wellness functionally and administratively separate to shield work-life offerings from stigmatization.

Integration: Key Findings

- Administrative integration of family-friendly benefits has clearly increased over the past 15 years (from 10 percent in 1993 to 85 percent in 2008). This might be due to a growing appreciation for the shared mission for these benefits, corporate reorganization or industry consolidation.
- Functional integration is less common. One obstacle to functional integration grows out of turf concerns from the three professions, a limitation that is exacerbated when separate contractors provide the services.
- Benefits administrators are usually responsible for evaluating programs and protecting employee confidentiality. Functional integration complicates this task, and for this reason, many administrators prefer to have family-friendly components operate independently.
- Functional integration is more easily instituted when in-house staff provides benefits or when one vendor supplies all three services.
- A final obstacle to functional integration is the stigma frequently associated with EAP services, and at times, with wellness programs aimed at dealing with unhealthy behaviors. Administrators occasionally separate work-life benefits from EAP and wellness to prevent the transfer of a stigmatization.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted with a retrospective lens to understand changes over time in these family-friendly benefits, specifically EAP, work-life and wellness programs. The discussion part of this paper describes in depth the six themes that emerged from the process or re-interviewing these companies 15 years later. The three most important points to walk away with from this data are:

1 | Resiliency. EAP, work-life and wellness programs are here to stay, perhaps in different configurations but nonetheless they have become part of the corporate landscape.

2 | Integration. On the surface, it appears that integration or collaboration of services has mushroomed in the intervening years (10 percent in 1993 and currently 85 percent). But when one scratches the surface, it becomes clear that administrative integration was common, but functional or operational integration is still fairly rare.

3 | Globalization. This was the most frequent concern of all respondents. Most companies today are operating in a global environment. They report significant challenges in how to provide these employee benefits in all their numerous countries and yet retain their own cultures while altering programs to fit the needs of the host country.

Therefore, the challenge for the next research project is to explore the area of delivery of benefits service models in a global society. Of specific interest is exploring various models available to provide these services in an effective, efficient manner while respecting both the host country as well as maintaining the company's core corporate culture. ∎

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