

How to get started

An effective program begins with careful planning

Many employers are at a crossroads – somewhere between an historic workplace culture that stayed out of personal matters and an evolving culture that considers adopting work/life benefits as a statement of its organizational values.

Today, many leaders in every sector of the American economy are making a crucial conceptual shift – they are recognizing the importance of aligning their organizations’ business strategies with their people strategies. Such leaders recognize that work/life initiatives are integral components of corporate efforts to improve profitability and customer service.

However, resulting changes in programs and policies are more effective when they are part of a compendium of services. One challenging aspect of incorporating new work/life policies is integrating them into the workplace. As with any culture, the workplace has a system of shared values, which are expressed and shaped by day-to-day decisions.

A careful planning process will help to determine which policies will work for you and your employees. The critical questions to consider when planning your work/life program are:

- What do your employees need?
- What will employees utilize?
- What should the process for assessment and consideration include?
- What solutions best match your organization’s goals in meeting the needs of employees and enhancing profitability?
- What steps should your organization take to implement such initiatives?
- How can a program’s costs and benefits be measured?

stages of work/life culture development

stage

1

The organization begins exploring possibilities for supporting work/life balance. A task force is appointed and an assessment process begins.

stage

2

The organization shares with all staff the results of the assessment, determines the level of interest and commitment, outlines a plan for implementing policies, and elaborates possible evaluation processes.

stage

3

The organization puts several strategies in place, often beginning with resource and referral and expanded family leave.

At this stage, management needs to fully realize the importance of supporting these policies with communication and training, and by having managers participate in the program.

stage

4

A balance of work and family becomes a part of the company culture, providing a supportive environment (with child care, elder care, and other work/life strategies). Management

encourages participation in the program through ongoing training, consistent communication, and by example (using the benefits themselves). Recognizing the value of these strategies, the company uses its policies to recruit, retain and motivate employees and, in doing so, contributes to the wellbeing of the community at large.

Appointing a task force

A good first step to adopting work/life programs is to establish a task force or work group. This approach has two benefits:

- A group approach offers the opportunity for employees from many levels of the organization to have input and to become invested in the program that may eventually be adopted.
- The process of developing and implementing work/life policies is time consuming; a group process allows for shared workload, and for a full "buy-in" from staff.

When establishing a task force consider the following:

1 Composition

This factor is extremely important. If possible, task force members should include:

- male and female employees;
- employees with and without dependent care needs;
- line employees from several levels;
- representatives of top and mid-level management;
- a diverse age group;
- union and non-union members; and
- personnel management staff.

Legal, financial, and public relations representatives on the task force would be helpful. You also may want to consider hiring a work/life consultant to assist the group.

2 Management Support

When convening the task force, state the preliminary nature of its work, as well as the commitment of management to seriously consider its recommendations.

3 Objectives

The task force should be charged with clear objectives that have management support. Give members as much flexibility as possible within the parameters of their assignment. Establish a time frame and a mechanism by which the task force regularly communicates its progress to management and obtains feedback.

4 Administrative Support

Provide administrative support to the task force to assist with such tasks as preparing meeting notices, minutes, and the final report.

Task force activities

Once the task force is underway, suggested activities include:

- analyzing the pros and cons of various work/life benefits and policies; assessing employee needs and preferences through surveys and/or focus groups (*See Employee Needs Assessment*);
- reviewing existing community resources and opportunities;
- assessing costs and benefits, including preparation of a proposed budget;
- developing a means for ongoing evaluation of the programs adopted; and
- delivering recommendations to management.

Once the program is in place, it is advisable to have an ongoing task force charged with monitoring the program or policies and making regular reports to management.

Alternative start-up process for the small employer

If you are a small business owner, a task force may not be necessary. Instead, consider gathering your employees for a group meeting to discuss work/life needs. Or you may decide to begin with a written survey of the workforce (*See Employee Needs Assessment*).

Key components of successful work/life program implementation

Management support is essential to the success of any new program. A successful work/life program will include the following key elements:

- 1 Clear statements of the organization's commitment to the change by top executives.

Share with employees the information and analysis that led the company to institute the changes, along with the message that the company stands firmly behind the change. This should be done more than once and communicated in a number of ways.

- 2 Management training in the use of new policies

Training programs should include information about the importance of work/life policies and the analysis that led the company to adopt them. The training helps managers understand how the changes affect them and their employees. Provide examples of situations that might occur as employees use the new policies and a variety of acceptable responses. Some companies also include responsiveness to work and family issues as part of their managers' performance reviews.

- 3 Establishment of written policies

While flexibility is important, employers who do not have company-wide, written policies may lose control over personnel decisions. Written policies help ensure that all employees will have access to the same policies

- 4 Communication of new policies

Communication of new work/life policies to employees should be clear and continuous. Employees need to know what the policies are; how they were developed; and how to use them.

- 5 Dialogue among managers

Agreement among managers is essential to ensure uniform application of policies and to develop consensus on issues such as the circumstances under which use of flexible work hours will be allowed. Discuss with managers any evaluation criteria that will be used to determine the success of the program (productivity indicators, unanticipated leave, etc).

- 6 Dialogue with a cross section of the workforce

Input from all employees is important in formulating and implementing the policy. Information from all parts of the organization will enable company executives to develop and implement a plan responsive to employee needs and in harmony with the organization's goals.

- 7 A plan to evaluate the implementation of the new policies or programs

A checks and balance system should be developed to monitor the plan's implementation and quickly correct any problems that might develop. Manager input will be critical to this process.

- 8 Management participation

Studies show that in the most successful work/life programs, management demonstrates its commitment to a balanced work/life culture by setting the example. It is one thing to say that the families and personal well-being of your employees are important, but if you and your management team consistently work an 80-hour week – to the detriment of your own families and personal life – you will be giving your employees a mixed message.

In developing a plan, evaluate your in-house resources first – who might have the skills and experience to plan and implement your work/life program? If necessary, hire a consultant (*See Getting Outside Help below*). There also are a number of resources that can assist you (*See Additional Resources*). Finally, it is often helpful to contact other businesses and organizations that have adopted the policies you are considering. They may be able to help you avoid potential pitfalls in implementing your plan.

Getting outside help

A business may want to consider hiring a consultant to help implement a work and family program.

Consultations are most helpful to companies that required specialized knowledge and services outside of the company's normal areas of operation. A consultant specializing in work and family issues can assist a business throughout every phase of assessment and implementation or may only work on a portion of the process, such as conducting a needs-assessment.

A business may also want to consider an attorney or accountant to assist with the legal, accounting, and employee relations issues that may be considered in implementing some kinds of programs, such as a child care subsidy or dependent care assistance plan.

Hiring a qualified consultant is similar to hiring a new employee. It is important to know that the consultant will have the skills, work ethic and approach that is compatible with the needs and values of the business.

Information concerning consultants who specialize in work/family issues, early education, care giving and out-of-school time programs can be secured from the Maryland Child Care Resource Network c/o The Maryland Committee for Children, 608 Water Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21201, 410-752-7588. Another resource is the national directory of consultants, found in most public libraries. Or you may wish to consult with the small business center located at your nearest community college.

Regional Child Care Resource Centers in Maryland

The State of Maryland has developed a unique system of supports for parents, employers, child care and early education providers, and others to help meet the needs of the community. These resource centers include:

Anne Arundel County Child Care Resource Center

80 West Street
Annapolis, MD 21401
410-269-4466

Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center

8 Charles Plaza, Suite 205
Baltimore, MD 21201
410-685-5150

Carroll County Child Care Resource Center

Westminster Shopping Center, Suite #12
Westminster, MD 21158
410-751-2769

Child Care Choices

(Frederick County)
263 West Patrick Street
Frederick, MD 21701
301-662-4549

Child Care Links

(Baltimore County)
1101 North Point Blvd, Suite 112
140 Englar Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21224
410-288-4900

Howard County Child Care Resource Center

3300 North Ridge Road, Suite 380
Ellicott City, MD 21043
410-313-1940

Lower Shore Child Care Resource and Referral Center

(Somerset, Wicomico, Worcester Counties)
10776 Grays Corner Road, Unit 6
Berlin, MD 21811
410-629-0701

Montgomery County Child Care Resource Center

332 West Edmonston Drive
Rockville, MD 20852
301-279-1260

Open Doors Child Care Resource Center

(Harford and Cecil Counties)
1250 Brass Mill Road, Suite 5
Belcamp, MD 21017
410-297-6590

Prince George's Child Resource Center

9475 Lottsford Road, Suite 202
Largo, MD 20774
301-772-8420

Resources for Children and Families (Western Maryland)

(Allegheny, Garrett, Washington Counties)
325 W. Memorial Blvd.
Hagerstown, MD 21740
301-733-0000

Southern Maryland Child Care Resource Center

(St. Mary's, Charles, Calvert Counties)
26530 Three Notch Road
Mechanicsville, MD 20659
301-373-8433

Upper Shore Child Care Resource and Referral Center

(Kent, Queen Anne, Talbot, Dorchester, Caroline Counties)
Chesapeake College
P.O. Box 8
Wye Mills, MD 21679
410-822-5400, ext. 358