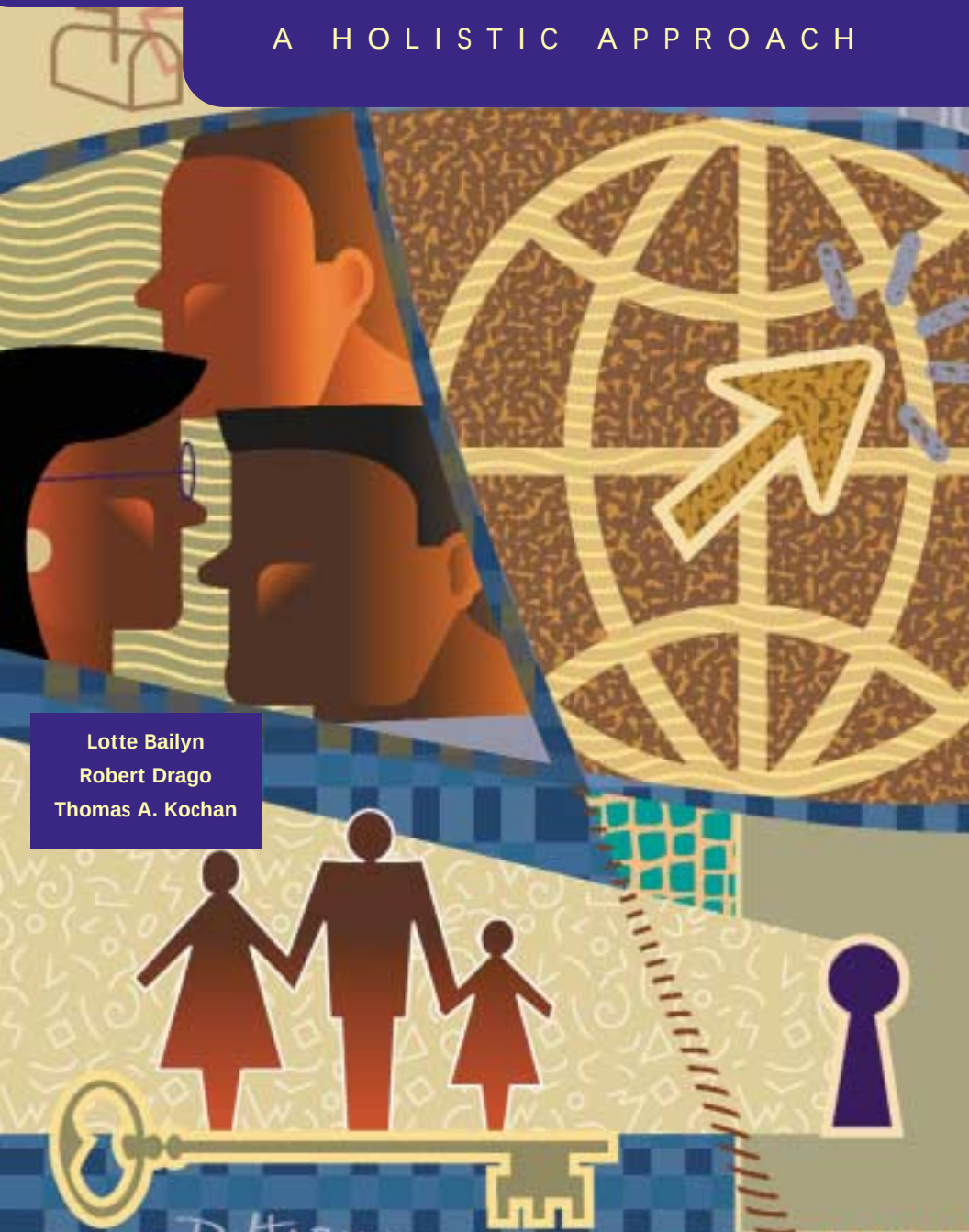
Integrating Work and Family Life

A HOLISTIC APPROACH



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A Report of the Sloan Work-Family Policy Network • Executive Summary

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For more information or a copy of the full report, visit http://lsir.la.psu.edu/workfam/ or email Susan Cass at scass@mit.edu.

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Integrating Work and Family Life:

A Holistic Approach

Executive Summary*

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Executive Summary

Reframing the Debate

The challenge of integrating work and family life is part of everyday reality for the majority of American working families. While the particulars may vary depending on income, occupation, and stage in life, this challenge cuts across all socioeconomic levels and is felt directly by both women and men. For many these challenges are experienced as:

- *An increasing time squeeze*. Many working adults, particularly single parents and those in dual-earner families, have difficulty providing the ordinary daily attention needed for the well-being of family members, including themselves. Between 1970 and 1997, the percentage of employed women working more than 50 hours per week rose from 4.5 to 9.6, and the figure for men rose from 21.0 to 25.2 percent.
- *Financial pressures*. Women who are mothers as well as employees earn less than other women, and the family incomes of single mothers are particularly low, leaving the U.S. with the highest poverty rate for children among developed countries. Two-parent families in poverty also face difficulties, since parents at work must often leave children alone, with serious consequences for their safety, health, learning, supervision, and nurturance. Well into the middle class, working parents have insufficient income to pay for the care they cannot provide

themselves; and even those who can afford it, often have difficulty locating the stable, quality care they would like.

- *A low wage ceiling for paid care providers*. Because of these limitations on family resources and the historical devaluing of care work, many paid care workers do not earn a living wage, resulting in hardships for these workers and their families and, in turn, in an unstable and inadequately trained care labor force. In the late 1990s, the starting salary for child-care employees with college degrees was $15,000 to $16,000 per year and, predictably, turnover at child-care centers averages around 30 percent each year in the U.S.
- *Spill over of stresses to other social and community institutions*. Family stresses inevitably spill over into places not designed nor sufficiently funded to deal with them—schools, social service agencies, police, courts, religious institutions—creating institutional overload and additional stressors for their employees. The fastest-growing program in American schools for the last few years has been before- and after-school care programs, but these remain of limited availability.
- *High costs of turnover, absenteeism, and lost investments in human resources*. Employers with workers facing difficulties at home experience the costs of losing valued workers as workers seek more accommodating arrangements or even leave the workforce altogether. Ultimately, the economy and society pay the price of this underutilization of human resources in both a lower standard of living and a reduced quality of life.

These problems are manifestations of a deeper, often unstated but outdated image of work and of the "ideal worker." Workplaces continue to be structured around the image of an ideal worker who starts to work in early adulthood and continues for forty years uninterrupted, taking no time off for child bearing or child rearing, supported by a spouse or family member who takes primary responsibility for family and community. In the last half century, however, we have moved from a division of labor depending generally on men as breadwinners and women as family caregivers to a way of life in which both men and women are breadwinners. But we have done so without redesigning work or occupational career paths and without making new provisions for family care. The result is a policy and institutional lag that has produced a care crisis and a career dilemma.

Unfortunately, American society is not addressing the underlying assumptions that give rise to these problems. Yet the problems this mis-

match causes working families and the economy will not go away, nor will they be solved if each of the key institutions that share responsibilities for addressing them continue the current pattern of working separately, on sometimes parallel and sometimes conflicting paths.

This report, commissioned by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and prepared by a group of work and family researchers, offers a different and, we believe, more productive, holistic approach to the challenge of integrating work and family life. Our basic premise is straightforward: Integrating work and family life today requires a well-informed collaborative effort on the part of all the key actors that share interests and responsibilities for these issues. *Employers, families, worker and family advocacy groups, government, and communities all have roles to play in integrating work and family life, but none of them can solve this problem acting alone.* Each must reexamine the implicit assumptions of what constitutes an "ideal worker" in today's economy and society, and then engage other groups and institutions in an ongoing dialogue over how to close the gap between today's work and family realities and the policies and practices that govern their interrelationships.

Now is the time for change. What is needed is the public discourse, leadership, and collective will to get on with the task.

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Responses of the Different Actors

Though most public discourse still frames these issues as private troubles, that is, logistical or "balance" problems that individuals or families should solve on their own, there have been a range of proposals for change. So far, however, such efforts have produced only piecemeal or patchwork solutions, each moving on its own, sometimes in parallel and sometimes down conflicting paths. Few question the existing organization of paid work or the fundamental proposition that paid work is the only "work" that matters. Examples of the contributions and limitations of the individual efforts of the different actors include:

- *Family advocates*, assuming unchanged work structures, seek new systems of paid care for the children of working parents and have been successful in getting the federal government to allow states to experiment with different ways to fund paid parental leave. But these efforts take

little account of how some businesses already provide paid leave as part of their benefit packages. Business groups, therefore, tend to oppose these efforts as yet another federal or state government mandate that adds costs and administrative burdens without being responsive to their specific business realities, organizational practices, or workforce needs.

- Many *employers* are offering "family-friendly" policies designed to recruit and retain valued workers in tight labor markets, and make it easier for them to work the hours that businesses seemingly require. But without changing the cultural definition of career success or explicitly designing work systems to meet dual workplace and family concerns, they do not address the fundamental issue of the inability of ideal workers to make time for family commitments. Moreover, not all employees feel free to use these policies, and those who do often feel they send a signal that hurts their careers.
- Some *civil-rights lawyers* point out that if you define the ideal worker around men's traditional life patterns, the result, legally, is discrimination against women.
- *Politicians and policy analysts* tend to propose piecemeal solutions that reflect particular ideological views or institutional perspectives. Some would leave work-family problems to the market to solve. Others see them largely as poverty issues and focus on the need to assist low-wage parents to provide for the health, education, and development of their children. Still others propose specific legislation or regulations to address particular problems, such as the need for paid leave or more flexible working hours and/overtime rules. This stance focuses the debate on symptoms rather than on the underlying causes and holistic strategies or solutions.
- Some *unions* have begun to address these issues by negotiating and funding various leave and child-care provisions, complementing the traditional union emphasis on providing health-care and pension coverage their contribution is limited, given current union-management relations.
- *Community groups* are becoming more active in attempting to provide supports for families and children. For example, they have built coalitions at the grassroots level around "livability initiatives" that link economic development, environmental protection, and the care and health of children and families. But these efforts cannot be developed and sustained without resources from business, philanthropy, and/or government.

Each of these approaches addresses only parts of the larger problem and, if implemented, would benefit only select segments of the broad population. In the end, they leave in place the default solution of unchanged reliance on the care work of women—as if their work days had not changed. And they leave most workers and families stressed by the incompatibility of workplace requirements and the needs of family care.

We believe U.S. society is ready to take a different, more holistic approach. Men and women are ready to step up to meet the problem if given the necessary resources and institutional supports. They recognize that this is a societal issue, one they cannot solve on their own by simply changing the division of labor at home or ending discriminatory practices at work. What is required is a comprehensive effort at reenvisioning paid work, careers, and care work, bringing together scattered structural "leads" from across the country into a blueprint for change.

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Putting the Pieces Together

What is needed to reach this goal is for each of the actors to work together and complement each other's efforts. The total combined impact could indeed be significantly greater than the sum of the parts. In this section we suggest steps that each of these parties might take to energize a collaborative, systemic effort, and end by suggesting specific steps for jump-starting this type of effort.

First, what changes by each of the actors are needed for a systemic approach to be put in motion?

Employers. Clearly, firms should continue to act in their self-interest by expanding the array and reach of "family-friendly" benefits and practices to better enable workers to contribute to their business objectives and meet their family and personal responsibilities. But firm-initiated benefits will inevitably be limited to those with labor market power, will not reframe the objectives of these efforts around the dual agenda of strengthening work *and* family outcomes, and will continue to be underutilized. To both increase the utilization and effectiveness of their own policies and to contribute to a more collaborative, systemic effort, we believe employers need to (1) focus on work design, (2) share control and responsibility

for designing and implementing organizational policies with employees, and (3) work collaboratively with other actors.

1. *Focus on Work Design.* Work design is a root cause of many of the problems associated with work-family integration as well as a key lever and opportunity for making progress. The problem, however, should not be framed as how can organizations design high-performance work systems, but as how can work practices be redesigned to achieve both high performance at work and a more satisfying personal and family life.
2. *Share Control and Responsibility with Employees.* Research on the underutilization of family-friendly policies documents several reasons why sharing control over these policies and practices is critical for this effort. First, front-line employees and supervisors know their work practices best. Their inputs, therefore, are critical to any effort at work redesign. Second, only by engaging employees in efforts to change the prevailing workplace culture will fear be overcome that use of part-time or flexible work options will hurt one's career prospects. Further, the culture must allow men as well as women to participate in these options. Unless this happens, flexible policies will continue to be underutilized. Third, dialogue among people in a work group is critical to overcoming both subtle resistance among supervisors and resentment of peers to benefits seen as favoring one group (e.g., young parents) over others.
3. *Move More Women into High-Level Corporate Positions.* The fastest way of elevating the priorities assigned to work and family issues is for corporate leaders to reflect the demographic profile of their staff. While work and family are not simply women's issues, the reality is that women often have more personal experience than men in dealing with these issues and are more likely than men to make them a priority.
4. *Engage Other Actors in a Systemic Approach.* The traditional tendency of managers to protect their organizational autonomy has to be overcome for a holistic approach to succeed. Employers will need not only to work together as a cohesive and responsible business community, but also to participate constructively in community, state, and national dialogues that involve unions, professional associations and other worker advocates, women and family advocates, and government agencies.

Unions and Professional Associations. Unions and professional groups also need to (1) give work and family issues a higher priority in their

organizing, recruitment, negotiation, coalition building, and joint efforts, (2) move more women into leadership positions, and (3) expand coalitions with other groups that share a commitment to better integrating work and family life.

1. *Organize for Work and Family.* Just as we urge employers to accept a dual agenda, we urge unions and professional groups to organize for both work and family benefits and concerns. This means seeing potential members as both employees and as citizens, parents, and members of households with varying needs.
2. *Move More Women into Leadership Positions.* As is true of corporations, a larger cadre of women leaders in unions and professional associations is more likely to place issues of equal pay for equal work as well as the expansion of negotiated health care, paid leave, flexible hours, quality part-time work, and other family benefits higher on their agendas than men would.
3. *Build Lasting Coalitions with Other Actors.* The power of recent living-wage campaigns illustrates the value of coalition-building efforts of unions and community groups. Joint union-management child-care and educational programs in the health-care, hotel, and other industries demonstrate the innovative potential and staying power of shared ownership and stable funding. Such partnerships represent an opportunity both to build new institutions and processes for dialogue, and to make substantive progress in diffusing benefits to broader segments of the population in ways that build on rather than conflict with or limit what already is being done.

We envision a key but very different role for government agencies as complementary participants in a systemic approach to advancing work and family integration.

Governments. We envision a key but very different role for government agencies as complementary participants in a systemic approach to advancing work and family integration. The role of government needs to be recast as a catalyst for private actions, addressing the needs of workers and families that private actors will not or cannot reach on their own. While we emphasize a recasting of the perspective and processes by which government influences private efforts, government must also be the force to ensure that basic minimum standards for work and family life are available to all. We feel that the government agenda should deal with (1) issues

of care, (2) flexible employment relations, and (3) national and local work-family councils.

1. *Paid Time for Care and Quality Care Work.* A strong case can be made in support of efforts to provide more paid time off for family responsibilities to more workers and family members. Steps must also be taken to ensure that care workers have the skills needed to provide quality care and are compensated a living wage for doing so.
2. *Work Hours, Quality Part-time Jobs, and Portable Benefits.* Following the historical trend, the long-term goal of policy should be to reduce gradually the length of the workweek and work year, consistent with growth in productivity. Further, given the substantial numbers of individuals who prefer part-time work at particular stages in life, a key policy objective should also be to improve the quality of part-time jobs. This implies providing proportionate income, benefits, and promotional opportunities and ensuring that individuals can move between part-time and full-time work without fear of discrimination or career retribution. Finally, health-care and pension benefits tied to specific employers should become portable.
3. *National and Local Work and Family Councils.* Finally, we suggest the need to establish broadly representative work and family councils at the national and local levels to promote, coordinate, and evaluate the types of systemic efforts called for in this report. The councils should have the authority and resources to promote experimentation, evaluation, and learning and should issue annual reports assessing progress toward goals laid out in this report.

Two effects of implementing a holistic approach would be to stop relying on families as the default solution or hoping that voluntary community institutions will fill the gaps left by government and other private-sector efforts.

Communities and Families. Two effects of implementing a holistic approach would be to stop assuming that families can take care of themselves under present conditions or hoping that voluntary community institutions will fill the gaps left by government and other private-sector efforts. This does not, however, mean that families and communities do not have important roles to play as part of a holistic effort. But like the other institutions, some changes in their traditional roles would be needed.

1. *Build Coalitions Across the Actors.* Community groups derive most of

their strength and legitimacy from their membership and leadership base. A key role these groups play in the holistic model envisioned here is one of bringing together and coordinating the efforts of the diverse players—business, labor, governments, and families. The broader the base of support that groups can build, the more sustainable their efforts are likely to be.

2. *Organize Cooperative Family Programs.* Children, elders, and others in need of care benefit from the services of schools, daycare centers, libraries, and various supportive programs in their communities, and from the participation of family members in such services. But few working adults have time to volunteer their labor. Working together with each other and with employers, unions, and professional associations, community institutions could promote such efforts as sustained paid leave time for volunteering, as well as networks of cooperative family care. At the same time employers need to make it possible for their employees to become clients and participants in such cooperative arrangements.

A Call to Action

The conditions leading to our current situation will not go away. Indeed, we believe the problems will continue to deepen as the population ages. Therefore, all of the institutions needed to create a successful result, one that will lead to coherent, coordinated, and systemic efforts to address the problems, have and will continue to have a strong incentive to be involved. The opportunity is there for the taking.

To jump start this approach, we suggest the parties begin working together to achieve five high-priority objectives:

- **Work Design.** Managers, employees, and employee representatives should work together to redesign work systems, processes, and schedules to meet the dual agenda of improving work and organization performance, and personal and family life.
- **Paid Leave for Family Caregiving.** American families need access to a universal paid leave policy to meet different needs over their life course. But the specific forms and means of financing paid leave should build on what leading firms and union agreements already provide some workers. State level experimentation with alternative financing arrangements and options that build on private sector practices must be encouraged.
- **Reduced Hours and Hours Flexibility.** The historic trend of reduced

hours of work in tandem with economic growth has been reversed in recent decades for many Americans. More options for working reduced hours while simultaneously increasing flexibility and responsiveness to employer and customer requirements need to be available to working families. Experiments are needed to allow employers and employees to negotiate arrangements that better suit their varying needs, to administer them together in ways that are mutually beneficial, and to prevent and reduce overwork.

- **Women in Leadership Positions.** Research shows that women in positions of leadership in corporations, unions, and government organizations give work and family issues a higher priority in decision-making. All these institutions therefore need to accelerate the pace of moving women into top-level positions.
- **Worker Voice.** These policies will only be effective if all the parties share in their design and administration and experiment with different ways to fit them to their varied work and family circumstances. This requires updating and strengthening labor law to ensure workers have their own voice in shaping workplace policies and practices.
- **Community Empowerment.** We need to recognize the importance of community- based institutions by fostering greater investment in their services, and by facilitating volunteerism in their programs. These groups are diverse, and they must have a seat at the table when work-family problems are defined and work-family solutions are created.
- **Work-Family Councils and Summit.** To foster and learn from policies and practices of employers and unions, government at all levels, communities, and others, and to keep these issues on the national agenda, we suggest creating a set of broad-based regional Work-Family Councils whose members would come together annually for a national-level Working Families Summit.

This is a summary of the full report.
For more detail and references,
please see the full report.
Request from scass@mit.edu.