

# the delicate balance: work and family

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## **Why Study Work and Families?**

Studying the relationship between work and families in business, industry, and government agencies is important. First, administrators and workers need to know the extent to which one system contributes to the health or illness of the other. Second, those concerned need to know the elements in each system that make it vulnerable to the problems of the other.<sup>1</sup> These are long-range purposes and will only be reached after much more study in all the major work places of American society.

## *Reasons*

Human health is the first specific concern. Work can be an important source of health because a person's job usually provides a sense of purpose and well-being. By contrast, boring, low-status jobs are hardest on health.<sup>2</sup>

Another important consideration is that family-oriented policies have paid off within two years.<sup>3</sup> Whether the work is business, industry, or military, the level of devotion and longevity depends largely on family support of the worker. Further, when jobs absorb almost all of a person's time, a harmful effect spills over on families.<sup>4</sup> This disruptive effect is true of corporate executives, ministers, professors, and Extension staff.

A fourth concern is that trouble at home also means trouble at work.<sup>5</sup> The time is gone when employers can ask people to behave at work as if they had no other life outside the job.

## *Effect on Families*

Specifically, it's helpful to look at some ways work affects families. Jobs help to determine whether a couple will decide to have children. Jobs also determine how much time off the parents have at birth, the level of fatigue, and how much time a parent can spend with children. And, the job influences how people will rear their children.<sup>6</sup>

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Work also has tremendous influence on marriage. Marriage when seen as "companionship for life" requires some priority away from jobs. Marriage and family need to be seen as intrinsic values, not as instruments to get work done.<sup>7</sup> Too often, especially in the military and sometimes in Extension, work is seen as the absolute value, while family is only a matter of choice that may end up in a low third or fourth place.

Self-identity is another basic area to consider. The job and a person's placement can arouse a whole set of feelings that are brought home. Whether these feelings are related to positive self-identity or vicious hostility, the family catches the result.<sup>8</sup>

During the mature years of adulthood, work helps determine how well a person can deal with the concerns of midlife and retirement preparation. For example, the level of absorption in work helps to determine whether a person can take part in family events through the years. Employees who work day and night and skip many important family events may find themselves strangers at home during the middle years.

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**The Extension professional's family is one of the most valuable resources he/she has for helping to reach and maintain quality on the job. Extension professionals and administrators must continually keep the needs of the family in mind as they evaluate the demands of the job. A delicate balance of the two helps the Extension program run smoothly.**

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### **Family Perspective**

Boulding's research shows that all sorts of "familial households" are formed to help people adapt to social change. When she studied families in boomtown situations, she concluded that throughout history, families have helped to shape local communities so they'd be conducive to better family living. She says our changing times call for new types of "household inventiveness," but she expresses optimism that families will again shape the future to their needs.<sup>9</sup>

Kanter observes that many farm families are full partnerships with a married couple taking equal responsibility for the whole operation. There's also evidence that farm wives have great influence on the work done by husbands.<sup>10</sup> Families will help shape the work environment whether or not those in charge agree that's the case. The point is: families adapt when necessary. And over time, family members try to influence

employees and employers to modify job requirements to make them more compatible to family living.

Many in Extension think seriously about the balance of work and family. One group of 35 Extension home economists in a class for in-service training gave 41 answers to the question, "If the Extension Service could grant you one reasonable wish to help your household function more efficiently, what would it be?" Thirty-two (78%) of the answers related to some type of compensatory time. The most popular answer was to have the privilege of reporting to work at 9:00 instead of 8:00 when the home economist has been to a late meeting the evening before.

Regardless of the specific item, the families of Extension staff are slowly but surely influencing Extension toward policies that favor the family.

### **Implications for Extension**

Implications of this discussion can be seen from the viewpoint of family members and from the viewpoint of Extension administration. The two perceptions aren't necessarily far apart.

#### *What Can Extension Staff Do?*

Here are several things Extension professionals can do:

1. Each family can decide that family is an essential priority. If a lot of stress exists between work and family, the professional needs to make sure the situation isn't of his/her own making. It's generally known that no good Extension professional can be "caught up." Extension personnel have a touch of missionary zeal or they probably wouldn't work for the agency. That's good! But missionary zeal can sometimes reach everyone except family members.
2. At the beginning of the year, household members can get together and mark all important family dates. This doesn't mean that an Extension employee will never work on one of these days. But the professional can say, "That day or weekend is already scheduled."
3. Extension staff must build a reputation for responsible and professional work. Then, when a real and important family need exists, the professional can take time off without question. Specific details about time away from work will be decided, of course, in consultation with the supervisor.
4. Extension staff can use the flexibility of their agency carefully and wisely. Having professional privilege of taking time off during family emergencies may be

much better than a strict flextime schedule that demands exact hours.

5. Extension staff can be encouraged to bring family members to the office or to a few meetings to help them understand what the person does. The professional who loses the support of a spouse or family will eventually dislike the job and want to move on to something else.
6. Finally, all Extension professionals can develop more sensitivity to family needs.

*What Can the Organization Do?*

What implications does this discussion have for Extension? Since this concern for a balance between work and family is so important, it probably would be wise to conduct a study where Extension staff can express themselves. An example of such a study was done at Northwestern National Bank of Minneapolis, the 16th largest bank in the United States. This bank formed a Social Policy Task Force on Work and the Family. The task force has made recommendations related to management style, flexible schedule options, flexible benefits, child care, and a new policy for retirement.<sup>11</sup>

Such a study within the Extension Service would assure new and experienced staff that their family needs are considered important.

In addition, the Extension Service could use such studies to help explain policies. Proposed policies such as flextime, compensatory time, and half-time or shared jobs appear simple when first considered. However, when such policies are examined in the light of federal, state, and county policies, the picture is far from simple.

**Conclusion**

Professional workers and administrators in Extension are always trying to improve the quality and efficiency of Extension education. Such improvement requires that workers be vitally absorbed in their work.

However, the very nature of Extension work brings some tension between the job and the family. Night meetings and travel are usually required. Then, if the staff member becomes so absorbed that the person begins to neglect his/her family, the delicate balance between work and family is upset. This family stress is reflected at work.

The Extension professional's family is one of the most valuable resources he/she has for helping to reach and maintain quality on the job. Extension professionals and administrators must continually keep the needs of the family in mind as they

evaluate the demands of the job. A delicate balance of the two helps the Extension program run smoothly.

### Footnotes

1. Rosebeth Moss Kanter, *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1977), p. 81.
2. "Boring Jobs Are Hardest on Health: A Study of 23 Occupations Reveals," *IRS Newsletter*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Spring, 1975.
3. Janet Dudrow and J. Richard Fowler, "A Report to the Management Policy Committee" (Minneapolis: Northwestern National Bank of Minneapolis, Social Policy Task Force on Work and the Family, August, 1981).
4. Rosebeth Moss Kanter, *Work and Its Impact on Families* (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, Agricultural Extension Service, June 8, 1978).
5. Kanter, *Work and Family*, pp. 51, 81.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 43.
7. Dennis Orthner, "Leisure, Work and the Family: Life Cycle Changes and Patterns," in *Leisure, Work and the Family* (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University, The Family Study Center, March 23-24, 1978).
8. Kanter, *Work and Family*, p. 37.
9. Elise Boulding, "Familia Faber: Family as the Maker of the Future" (Taped presentation at the National Council on Family Relations, Milwaukee, October 15, 1981).
10. Kanter, *Work and Family*, pp. 56-57.
11. Dudrow and Fowler, "A Report to the Management Policy Committee."