Five work/life policies companies can implement anywhere

A new book explains the common strategies — and challenges — that organizations must consider when introducing sustainable work/life policies.

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When flexible, family-friendly work policies are introduced, absenteeism drops by an average 30 percent. Although many would acknowledge facts like this, putting work/life policies into practice is no easy feat, especially for multinational organizations, which must take into account the political, cultural and social complexities of each country or region in which they operate. This demands a much more tailored and personalized approach.

This is the premise of a new book titled *Balancing Work and Family: No Matter Where You are*, edited by IESE's Nuria Chinchilla together with Mireia Las Heras and Aline D. Masuda of EADE, with the participation of renowned professors from the U.S., Australia, China, the Philippines, Argentina and Nigeria, who write specific chapters talking about their regions.

The authors outline five key policy areas for transforming businesses into responsible enterprises. As the book title suggests, these policies can be implemented in all business cultures and societies throughout the world; it is simply a matter of choosing the right approach.

1. Flexible workplaces ("flexplace") and flexible working hours ("flextime").
2. Professional support and advice.
3. Care for wider family members in the form of day care for children or care for elders.
4. Services, such as on-site dry cleaning or delivery, to maximize free time.
5. Fringe benefits such as health care, insurance plans and travel packages.

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U.S.: A leader in flex practices

According to a 2003 study, 55 percent of U.S. companies allowed employees to work at home occasionally and over 30 percent on a regular basis. An estimated 23 million American workers currently "telecommute" either full- or part-time.

Telecommuting reduces real-estate costs for the company and commuting costs for employees. It also helps companies to retain talent and maintain a healthy gender balance in the workplace.

This was the experience of IBM, which implemented a telecommuting strategy in its marketing, support and service departments to reduce overhead when it hit tough financial times in 1995. As a result of its "flexplace" program, IBM reduced its real-estate costs by $56 million; 87 percent of telecommuters considered themselves more productive, and employee productivity went up by 10-20 percent during the same period.

Europe: A mixed bag

Europe is harder to generalize. One the one hand, Scandinavian countries are pioneers in terms of setting work/life policies at government level, such as both parents having the right to take up to 18 months maternity/paternity leave, with employees recording high satisfaction as a result.

Portugal and Spain, on the other hand, score poorly due to long work hours of over 45 hours per week, compared with 35 for France and 36 for Holland, coupled with awkward timetables created by prolonged lunch breaks that extend the afternoon until 8 p.m.

The U.K., meanwhile, shifts responsibility largely onto private businesses instead of relying on government initiatives.

Because of the diversity of approaches involved, E.U. companies implement country-specific programs that consider the different statutory regulations and cultural norms of each context.

Australia: Expanding the debate

In Australia, a work/life culture is instilled across many sectors such as mining, education and finance. However, the authors highlight the need to focus on the rights of "carers" irrespective of gender, and not just framing the issue as women's rights, which can leave out

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men from the equation.

Australian companies have implemented a range of creative solutions, including St. George, one of Australia's largest banks, offering flexible work options to allow experienced staff to care for their grandchildren. The bank introduced "Grandparents Leave" for a period of up to two weeks at a time, job-sharing and part-time arrangements. Employee satisfaction doubled as a result, with raised levels of customer satisfaction registered the same year.

Africa and Latin America: Room for improvement

In Africa and Latin America, the family remains the cornerstone of the social structure. While this has merits that distinguish these regions from individualistic cultures like the U.S., it also means that official work/life policies are less well developed. Where care for children and elderly parents is largely seen as the woman's domain, and maternity is considered a career killer, organizations have been slower to get to grips with the greater number of women now entering the workforce.

Some companies are trying. In Argentina, Unilever established "flexible Fridays," allowing all employees to finish at 1 p.m., and IBM launched a series of leadership development programs to encourage young female talent. But these are rare examples. In one recent poll, around 80 percent of Argentine women felt that they lived in a male chauvinistic society.

In Africa, the authors cited issues of trust and poor infrastructure, and urged organizations to draw upon local cultural traditions — such as the "harambee spirit" of helping one another within a community — when introducing responsible work policies there.

Asia: Some shining examples

In Asia, work forms a fundamental part of the culture, as does the importance of the family network. One success story is Sun Valley Thailand, which introduced free transport to and from work, tuition assistance for children, flexibility for family leave and loyalty bonuses. As a result, the rate of employee turnover went from 100 percent in 1995 to 20 percent by 2000.

Another example is Sinopec, one of the major petroleum companies in China, which offers a flexible timetable and the possibility of flying families out to visit employees during short-term overseas assignments.

As one general manager summed up: "Our most productive people are aged 30 and over, and most likely married with family responsibilities. Work and family relationships should not

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be viewed as a conflict, but as an integral whole."

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