

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

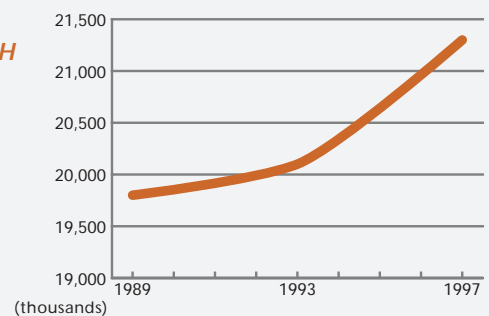
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Three curves...each a soaring trajectory. Each has different labels on its axes. Each tells a very different kind of story.

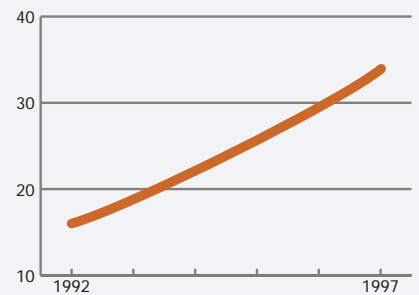
The first shows a steep rise in the number of employed parents in the workforce who have young children. The second graph reflects increased work-life conflict experienced by these parents. The third curve shows the surging activity of a young child's brain in the early years of life. These three curves sketch, in broad strokes, the changing world of families and work. They suggest new responsibilities for parents with young children and new realities for employers. They point to opportunities that organizations of all kinds can seize in order to stay both competitive and compassionate in the new century. At the same time, these graphs foretell the demise of "as if" organizations—those that operate as if their employees had no lives outside of work.

Ahead of the Curve tells the stories behind these trajectories and discusses the lessons one can learn from them. It draws on a wide range of research, including data from two major studies recently issued by the Families and Work Institute, the National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW), a nationally representative study of employees, and the Business Work-Life Study (BWLS), a nationally representative study of

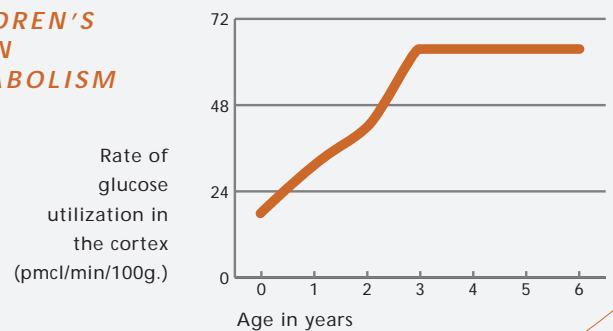
EMPLOYED PARENTS WITH CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF SIX



EMPLOYED PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN REPORTING SIGNIFICANT WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT



CHILDREN'S BRAIN METABOLISM



employers with 100 or more employees. These two studies document the new realities faced by employed mothers and fathers and how the business community has responded. Finally, this report incorporates numerous case studies. It describes in considerable detail what some of America's leading companies—businesses of every size—are doing to stay ahead of the curve in the arena of families and work.

1. TRENDLINES: THE NEW REALITIES OF FAMILIES AND WORK

Today's Families

New parenthood often brings joy and contentment. A 1997 representative survey of young parents by Zero to Three suggests that the vast majority of parents fall in love with their newborn, feel deeply attached to the child, and experience wonder and amazement at their baby's growth and development. Some new mothers and fathers are taken by surprise at the power of the bond and their reluctance to separate from their infant, even for a short time.

Research shows that for most new parents, happiness and awe are tempered by stress and uncertainty. Of course, parenting has always been demanding, and each era brings new challenges. Today's parents are coping with new realities. Polls show that the overwhelming majority of Americans—more than 80 percent—believe that being a parent is more difficult today than it used to be. For many parents, their children's safety, surroundings, education, and exposure to the mass media are constant sources of anxiety. Moreover, most parents have to cope with shortages of key resources. In this report, we describe five challenges:

1. *Most new parents experience a severe shortage of time.* Well before the baby has settled into a predictable routine, it is time for one, if not both, parents to go back to work. Dual-earner families—which accounted for less than 10 percent of the workforce in the years before World

War II—are now the predominant type of family in the American workforce. Most mothers with children under the age of six, 62 percent, are now in the workforce. Most of these mothers—nearly seven million of them—hold full-time jobs. Welfare reform is expected to lift this number even higher. More parents are not only going to work, but also spend more time working. In short, time pressures are severe for most parents with young children, especially those with infants and toddlers. A survey by Zero to Three shows that half of all parents with infants and toddlers end most days feeling that they have spent less time with their young child than they had wanted.

2. *Research shows that today's jobs consume not only more time, but also more physical and emotional energy.* The 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce confirms that over the past five years, jobs have become more demanding and hectic. A total of 68 percent of employees with children under the age of six report that their job requires them to work very hard and very fast—up from 55 percent in 1977.

3. *Financial worries weigh heavily on many new parents.* Most new parents take on significant financial responsibilities early in their work lives, when their earnings are relatively low. Single parents, whether unmarried or divorced, experience the most strain, but two-parent families with young children are also having difficulty making ends meet due to declining wages for young males. According to the 1997 NSCW, income for families adjusted for inflation has not increased over the past 20 years, despite a rapid influx of women into the workforce. Half of young children are in families with incomes under \$40,000, and one-quarter are in families with incomes under \$20,000.

4. *Many new parents have to cope with a lack of security and predictability.* Unpredictable or erratic work schedules make it particularly difficult to arrange stable child care. The 1997 NSCW found that 32 percent of employees with young children work evenings, nights, rotating, split, and variable shifts.

5. Many new parents experience an information deficit. They often lack the information and skills they need for their new responsibilities. Many new parents say that they find it hard to understand their child's feelings and needs or don't know how to handle difficult situations with their child.

In short, the conditions under which new parents work and raise children are more challenging than ever before. Despite the difficulties they face, most new mothers and fathers say that they want to do a better job. Many are motivated not only by love for their children, but also by new research showing that the kinds of experiences children have in the early years, and the kinds of attachments they form with their parents and caregivers, have an immense impact on the trajectories of their lives.

Today's Employers

Demographic data continue to motivate employers' activity in the work-family arena. But increasingly their efforts are critical components of their companies' competitive strategies. A number of current business trends strengthen the business case for family-responsive policies and practices. Today's employers have to meet some very tough challenges. We discuss five of the most important.

1. To stay competitive companies have to create cultures that support customer retention and corporate profitability. More and more companies are recognizing that creating an environment where employees feel valued and supported, and where they can focus on meeting customers' needs, and thus is a key to market leadership.

2. Companies have to work harder to attract (and retain) the talent they need to succeed in a very competitive marketplace. Business leaders know that the key to customer satisfaction—and thus to corporate profitability—is a qualified, highly motivated workforce. But these leaders can no longer count on a ready supply of qualified

workers. The 1998 BWLS found that two-thirds of employers with 100 or more employees find it difficult to fill vacancies for highly skilled jobs, and two-fifths have difficulty filling entry-level positions. Retention is employers' most important reason for instituting work-life programs.

3. Many companies have morale problems—especially those that have gone through significant downsizing. Employers are asking employees to work harder and smarter and to adapt to continual change; they are making these demands without guarantees of lifetime employment, steady career advancement, or higher salaries. Data from the 1992 NSCW reveal that employees who work for companies that have downsized in the past year are less satisfied with their jobs, less loyal to their employers, more likely to want to find a new job with another company, more stressed, and more burned out by their jobs.

4. Companies have to function in a 24-hour global economy. Globalization has led to an American economy that is not only a round-the-world but also a round-the-clock operation. More and more businesses keep their doors and their phone lines open during early mornings, evenings, nights, and weekends. As a result, more and more jobs require nontraditional work schedules.

5. Publicly held companies have to address the concerns of investors, particularly the institutional investors who in recent years have played a more active role in influencing corporate policy. Some of these investors represent large employee groups and are paying close attention to employment policies.

Today's Jobs

The trends that drive today's business world are likely to intensify in the next century. Leadership in the marketplace will continue to hinge on a company's ability to attract and retain top talent, satisfy customers, and meet the challenges of globalization. As a result, America's leading companies are shifting their focus from just creating jobs to creating *high-quality jobs*.

High-quality jobs provide a framework in which employees can bring all of their energy, competence, and creativity to bear on tasks at hand; work productively alone and in groups; and learn on a continuous basis. Research from the 1997 NSCW shows that the quality of jobs and the work environment are significant predictors of employee well-being and effectiveness at work. Workers with more supportive workplaces and reasonable job demands experience less negative spillover from home, less job burnout, less stress, and more effective coping, which in turn promote better performance on the job.

High-quality jobs have many traditional benefits, but those benefits are not add-ons. Rather, they are part of the organization's investment in its human capital. Companies that create high-quality jobs understand that benefits work best when everyone benefits—employers and employees.

The quality of jobs has improved somewhat over the last 20 years. The 1997 NSCW reflects some movement in the direction of more family-responsive work environments. The majority (about two-thirds) of employed parents with children under six “strongly agree” that their supervisors accommodate them and are understanding when work-family issues arise. However, a significant proportion (between one-fourth and one-third) of workers with young children perceive their workplace cultures as not supportive of their personal and family concerns.

Today's Children

The stressful conditions experienced by many new and expectant parents affect many aspects of their lives—including their physical and mental health, the stability of their relationships, and their capacity to contribute to their communities. These conditions affect their productivity on the job. Even more important, they affect their young children.

The effects may be indirect. There is growing evidence that maternal stress and prolonged depression during pregnancy or following birth

can impede or delay early childhood development. Many children experience directly the effects of stress, especially economic deprivation. Of children under the age of six, one in four lives at or below the federal poverty line.

Many researchers believe that there has been an overall decline in the well-being of young children. While some measures show improvement in recent decades, such as the infant mortality and child mortality rates, many other indicators cause concern. Millions of young children are spending their days in child care arrangements that have been rated poor to mediocre by professional research observers—and those are only the programs that opened their doors to researchers. Many children—by some estimates one in three—enter kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed in school. This is particularly alarming in light of research showing that by age seven, children are set in achievement pathways that tend to last throughout their academic careers.

2. MAKING WAVES: NEW BRAIN RESEARCH RAISES THE STAKES

In Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children, the Carnegie Corporation documents the quiet crisis that is facing America's young children and their families. The report cites the nation's high child poverty rate, the number of children who do not have the benefits of prenatal care or regular health care, the poor quality of most early care and education programs, and the number of children who enter school without solid readiness skills. Yet even these facts do not fully convey how high the stakes have become. It has now been established, based on research conducted over the last two decades, that children's early experiences have a decisive and lasting effect on the physical architecture of their brains.

Parents' and other caregivers' capacity to provide warm, responsive care to their young children

has an even greater impact on their children's development than we previously thought. In recent years, neuroscientists have established that early brain development hinges to a significant extent on the kinds of experiences children have in the first years of life and the kinds of attachments they form with their parents (and other caregivers). Researchers have shown that early experience does not merely provide a context for a child's development; it directly affects the way the brain's circuitry is wired.

The research is complex, its terminology and sheer volume at times daunting. But the message is clear: Early experience and early learning actually change the physical structure of the brain.

A newborn's brain has virtually all of the brain cells it will need for a lifetime. For the most part, however, those cells are not yet connected into the complex networks required for all of the functions that make us human, such as reasoning, communicating, cooperating, and modulating impulses and emotions. By the time children are three, their brains have formed 1,000 trillion connections. This requires considerable energy, which is why young brains function at more than twice the metabolic rate of adult brains. They form neural networks that are remarkably dense. Fortunately, most of us do not peak at age three. Something has to happen to make brains work more effectively.

Like many organizations striving for efficiency and productivity, the brain downsizes, eliminating excess connections. This process begins in earnest in the second decade of life. Like many downsizing companies, though, the brain must have some basis for deciding which connections to shed and which to keep. This is where early experience comes into play. Those connections that have been reinforced by virtue of frequent activation tend to be kept; those that have not been used at all, or often enough, tend to be eliminated. In this way, early experiences can have a profound, lifelong impact not only on children's intellectual development, but also on their emotional well-being and social adjustment.

Because young brains are so active and so flexible, the early years are filled with opportunities to expand children's capacities and enrich their lives. For the same reason, the early years are more fraught with risk than we ever knew. Negative experiences, or the absence of appropriate stimulation, can have an especially powerful impact on children's development.

Today, thanks in part to wide media coverage of new brain research, the once-wide gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding is beginning to shrink. As they shape policy, decision-makers in many fields, including business, are beginning to take into account the crucial importance of the first years of life and to reach out to mothers, fathers, and other caregivers.

3. LEANING FORWARD: LEADERSHIP IN THE WORK- FAMILY ARENA

Family-friendly employment policies are increasingly viewed as an aspect of good customer service—not as the exclusive province of bleeding hearts. The growth of the service sector and corporate attention to customer satisfaction have spurred more business leaders to place greater weight on issues of morale and to acknowledge the importance of empowering employees to work with full concentration and peace of mind. Employers are recognizing, moreover, that as the demands of the workplace become more rigorous, their ability to hire and hold onto well-qualified workers is a matter of business survival.

Strengthening Organizations

According to the 1997 NSCW, workers who perceive that the organizational culture is supportive of their family and personal needs are less stressed, feel more successful in meshing work and family life, are more loyal to the company, are more committed to their employers, are more satisfied with their jobs, and are more likely to want to remain

with their employers. But piecemeal programs and short-term solutions do not work. To bring about change, organizations must realize that work-family issues are reflected in corporate cultures and require systematic, corporation-wide solutions. And that requires leadership. It requires a willingness to create a more responsive work environment that takes employees' needs as well as business needs into account and yields a more significant bottom line.

Strengthening Communities

In little more than a decade, the range and prevalence of employer work-life initiatives have grown exponentially. However, even companies with the most foresight have found it difficult singlehandedly to meet the diverse needs of families, especially those with young children. Moreover, many have concluded that it makes little sense to duplicate the efforts of community-based organizations and agencies. There is greater recognition that family-responsive organizations must move beyond their front doors, forging stronger connections with their communities.

Today, more companies are expanding their notions of family friendliness to include community friendliness. Some are concluding that it is not enough to refer employees to care in the community, because there may not be enough care, or the quality of care may not be good enough. These companies have begun making investments in the long-term process of building the supply and increasing the quality of local services. In the realm of child care, for example, some companies are investing in their communities' capacity to provide parents with affordable, high-quality early education and care.

Strengthening the Nation

Business leaders have always had a powerful impact on American society in general and, in particular, on the ways we think about social relations. In the early years of this century, Taylorism and the factory model, which took a modular approach to work and social organization, affect-

ed institutions and ideas well beyond corporate walls. In recent decades, the corporate world's emphasis on quality and service, reflected in quality circles and Total Quality Management, has influenced many aspects of our culture, including efforts to reform government, education, and the human services.

Many observers believe that in coming decades, business thinkers will most forcefully influence American life in the realm of "people issues." These observers point out that at the heart of modern companies lie covenants between employers and employees. These covenants constitute a social contract that is confined neither to the workplace nor the workday. Work has always been a crucial institution in American society. Today, work continues to be woven tightly into the woof and warp of our nation's life, but the strands crisscross in new ways.

The world of work is assuming a more important place in the lives of many Americans. For many employees, the workplace *is* their community. As a place, a social context, and a culture, the workplace affects employees' moods, energies, and values, the way they raise and socialize children, the values they form and pass on. As a ritual of American life, the company picnic now rivals the church picnic. Volunteerism, always a strong suit of Americans, now tends to be organized through the workplace. The workplace is one of the key settings in American society where building social capital (the social "glue" that holds organizations, communities, and societies together) is an explicit, daily concern. A rapidly expanding service sector means that more and more jobs are relationship-based and involve customer contact. Moreover, in the information age, knowledge has become companies' most vital asset, and that knowledge is embedded in social networks.

Because work threads so many strands through the fabric of American life, the nation's well-being may be measured not only by the number of jobs our economy creates, but also by the quality of those jobs. Leaders in the work-family

arena have long held that corporate policy-makers have to take family and personal life more fully into account. Today, it is not only employers who need to take a broader, more realistic view of peoples' lives. Decision-makers in many fields—including education, health care, and a wide spectrum of other human services—must factor into their thinking the importance of the workplace. As they rethink policy and practice, they must take into consideration the changing role of work in American life.

4. SOLUTIONS: MEETING THE NEEDS OF WORKING PARENTS AND THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN

Helping Employees Prepare for Parenthood

Strategies for supporting and empowering new and expectant parents cannot wait until children arrive. They must begin much sooner, as prospective mothers and fathers contemplate parenthood.

Planning for parenthood. Deciding whether and when to have children is a private matter rooted in personal history, cultural convictions, and religious beliefs. For many Americans, questions of vocation and economics also play a role. As is so often the case, private decisions have public consequences. Research shows that children thrive when they are wanted. Voluntary family planning helps families space and time births so that they can meet the needs of each child and ensure that mothers are in good health for the next pregnancy. When accompanied by quality health care, planned childbearing has been shown to reduce the likelihood of infant mortality and low birthweight, increase the likelihood of breastfeeding, and reduce delinquency and drug abuse later in the child's life.

Planning for adoptive or foster parenthood. For parents seeking to adopt children or to become foster parents, the planning process can be just as important. Like all parents, they need to prepare themselves, their families, and their homes for the arrival of new children; they need to

think ahead about their schedules, sources of support, child care options, health care providers, and other practical matters. In addition, they may want help addressing issues specific to adoptive or foster parenthood: the range of options open to them, the legal and emotional challenges of non-biological parenthood, and the financial and other resources required for their new roles. Many companies now extend to adoptive and foster parents most or all of the benefits they provide to other parents. At the same time, some employers also provide them with information, counseling, and referral services; some help to defray the considerable costs of adoption.

Preconception health care and counseling

There is proven value in a medical visit and evaluation specifically timed with parents' decision to consider having a child. Preconception care can also help prevent specific birth defects. Preconception care is still a relatively new concept and is not routinely made available to many employees. However, as more companies perceive the benefits of this service, it may become more prevalent.

Treatment for substance abuse. Health care and other human-service providers may be able to help expectant and new parents break habits that threaten their babies' healthy development. Recent research sheds light on how exposure to alcohol, nicotine, and narcotics affects babies before and after birth. It shows that the risks to young children may be even higher than many parents realize.

Prenatal care. Too many women in this country do not get adequate prenatal care because they lack insurance, resources, motivation, or knowledge. About one in five pregnant women receives no care during the crucial first trimester; for African American, Latina, and American Indian women, the figure is one in three. Mothers who receive adequate health care and advice during pregnancy are less likely to have low-birthweight children. This is extremely important, since there has been an increase in the number of low-birthweight babies in recent years. These babies are at greater risk for developmental delays and impairments.

Family Health Insurance Coverage

Family health insurance coverage is one of the most important work-family benefits offered by employers. The 1997 NSCW found that the vast majority (84 percent) of working parents with children under the age of six have access to family health-insurance coverage from their employers. However, 5 percent of employees have no health insurance from any source; this figure rises to 11 percent for single parents and 12 percent for workers in low-income households.

Helping New Parents Survive and Thrive

Health care. Prenatal care helps to ensure babies' healthy development, but it alone is not sufficient. Infants and toddlers need well-baby care on a regular basis. They need regular checkups and a full complement of immunizations. In addition, their growth and development need to be monitored at regular intervals. Research shows that young children who visit the doctor on a regular basis get sick less often than children who do not.

Parent education. No company would consider thrusting an inexperienced worker into a complex, high-responsibility job—particularly a job that included life-and-death decision-making—without intensive training. Yet that is exactly what happens when most Americans take on the responsibilities of parenthood. Virtually all parents can benefit from the kinds of information and guidance that help them understand and respond to their children's physical, intellectual, and emotional growth, particularly in the early years when development proceeds at such a dizzying pace. According to the 1998 BWLS, a quarter of today's companies are responding to this need by providing workshops or seminars on parenting, child development, care of the elderly, or work-family problems.

Home visitation. Home visiting is a very powerful way to help parents adjust to the demands of a newborn, seek answers to pressing questions, link up with community services, and gain specif-

ic parenting skills. When home visitation programs begin before a child's birth, they can help expectant mothers cut down or stop smoking and improve their nutrition; they have been shown to result in fewer preterm infants and fewer low-birthweight babies. In the early months of life, these programs have been shown to improve the quality of care children receive, child development, and the mother's ability to seek and hold a job and plan future pregnancies.

Breastfeeding. Researchers have found that breastfeeding is associated with small but detectable increases in cognitive ability and educational achievement. Without planning and support by employers, however, nursing can be very difficult. Only 10 percent of working mothers continue nursing for six months following birth, compared to 24 percent of at-home mothers. Today, more companies are helping mothers return to work without denying their infants the benefits of nursing. The 1998 BWLS shows that more than one-third of employers (37 percent) provide opportunities for women who are nursing to continue to do so by expressing and storing breastmilk at work. Lactation assistance programs have been shown to decrease health care costs for mothers and infants while cutting down on absenteeism.

Coping with high-risk babies. Child development experts are beginning to suspect that intervention at kindergarten provides much less benefit than in the prenatal period and the first weeks of life. Research shows that early intervention for high-risk children is a sound investment. Early intervention boosts children's developmental and educational gains, improves family functioning, and reaps long-term benefits for society. When early intervention is well-timed and high in quality, it can shrink education costs by reducing the need for special education or remedial services and cutting the retention rate.

Connecting with community services and resources. Many communities have organizations and services that can help parents negotiate the difficult first months, such as parenting hot lines,

health care and social-service agencies, drop-in centers, and voluntary home visiting programs. However, parents cannot take advantage of these resources if they do not know about them or cannot get to them. It can be difficult for parents to maneuver through the system. In the absence of concerted outreach efforts, parents may have no idea that help is available.

Time for Parenting

An expanding body of research shows that children thrive when they have the opportunity to form a strong attachment to at least one loving adult—a mother, father, or other caregiver. A secure attachment fosters healthy growth across the developmental spectrum. It also promotes good health. Researchers have found that young children who are anxiously attached to their primary caregiver use acute care services (walk-in and emergency room) significantly earlier and more often than those with a secure attachment.

Parental leave. Americans place a high value on parental leave—especially for mothers. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 has given many more parents the opportunity to care for their children full-time during the crucial first months of life. FMLA provides 12 weeks of unpaid, job-guaranteed leave for childbirth or adoption for employees who have worked at least 1,250 hours over the preceding year for an employer with 50 or more employees within a 75 mile radius of their worksites. While FMLA does not cover all workers, it extends parental leave to a significant percentage of parents: An estimated 41 percent of employed mothers and 49 percent of employed fathers qualify.

Of the employers surveyed in the 1998 BWLS, 33 percent provide more than the 12 weeks required by FMLA for maternity leave, with 1 percent clearly out of compliance with federal law. Sixteen percent of companies offer more than 12 weeks of paternity leave; 13 percent offer from 13 to 26 weeks; and 3 percent offer more than 26 weeks. Ten percent provide fewer than 12 weeks, with 2 percent being clearly out of compliance with federal law.

Flexible scheduling. In recent years, more companies have recognized that flexible scheduling does not cut productivity; in many cases, it allows working parents to be more focused and efficient on the job. A report by the Conference Board concludes that, “[F]lexible work schedules increase employee responsibility, independence and growth potential, thus motivating the employee....” Today, according to the 1997 NSCW, 44 percent of employed parents with young children have access to traditional flextime: They are allowed to select their starting and quitting times within a specified range of hours. Fewer working parents (26 percent) can change their starting and quitting times on a daily basis. Lower-wage workers are less likely to have this option.

Working at home. While flextime has been part of the business scene for some time, flexplace policies are relatively new. These policies allow employees to work off-site—at home or elsewhere—some or all of the time. As electronic communications become more common and more affordable, working at home becomes feasible for more workers. Some companies, especially those in high-tech industries, actively encourage telecommuting. The 1997 NSCW found that about one-quarter of wage and salaried employees either are, or could choose to be part of the telecommuting workforce. Overall, 19 percent of employees with young children work at least part of their regularly scheduled hours at home, and an additional 7 percent say that they would be allowed to do so.

Solving the Child Care Puzzle

More than half of employed women with children under the age of six say that child care is a serious problem. Most children move in and out of different arrangements and spend their time in multiple settings over the course of their early childhood years—and often within a single day. Transporting children from one setting to another, and

helping them manage the transitions, are among the challenges that parents and child care providers face. It is little wonder that stress ranks as working women's number one problem; the problem is even more acute for single mothers. When child care problems are chronic, parents don't just miss work; they may leave their jobs altogether. The Child Care and Employment Turnover study found that mothers who do not have access to a center-based child care program within 10 minutes from home were almost twice as likely to leave their jobs as those who did.

On-site child care. When people think about employer assistance with child care, they tend to picture a child care center at or near the worksite. In fact, relatively few employees want child care at work, and relatively few employers want to provide it. Workers at small companies are less likely to have access to on-site child care. Where it is feasible and desired, child care at the workplace is highly appreciated. It can alleviate worry about children's well-being and result in greater satisfaction with the quality of care children are receiving. Today, 12 percent of employees with children under the age of six report that they have access to a child care center operated or sponsored by their employers at or near their workplaces.

Financial assistance for child care. In contrast with many other industrialized countries, our nation begins investing public funds in education only when children reach elementary school at age five or six. Parents pay 75 cents out of every dollar spent on child care in the United States. (As things now stand, business pays only a penny.) According to the 1997 NSCW, 12 percent of working parents with young children receive direct financial assistance with child care fees from their employers in the form of vouchers, cash, or scholarships. Part-time employees and those who work for smaller employers are the least likely to get financial aid. Thirty percent have access to Dependent Care Assistance Plans (DCAPs): Employees deposit part of their pretax wages into an account that can be used to reimburse child care costs.

Emergency backup. Child care is a realm where even the best-laid plans usually do go astray. One-third of working parents with children under the age of six surveyed in the 1997 NSCW said that they had needed to make special child care arrangements at least once during the previous three months because their usual arrangements were not available. The results can be devastating for parents and employers alike. Indeed, the great majority of employers are affected by unstable child care arrangements: In a survey conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 80 percent of employers reported that child care problems force employees to lose work time. Employed mothers with children under the age of six miss an average of 8.5 days per year because of family-related issues such as sick children. Employed fathers with children under the age of six miss an average of 5 days. For these reasons, more and more companies are offering emergency backup care.

Care for sick children. While the Family Medical Leave Act requires companies to give parents time off to care for very sick children, employers have discretion about giving employees time when their children come down with less serious illnesses—the colds, flus, and upset stomachs that keep children out of school for a few days. According to the 1998 BWLS, the average number of days per year that employers allow for children's illnesses is 11. Twenty-five percent of employers say that the number of days they allow depends on the situation; 9 percent say they give parents as many days as they need. Five percent of companies provide child care for the mildly ill children of employees. According to the 1997 NSCW, about half (49 percent) of working parents with small children say that they can take a few days off to care for a sick child without losing pay, without using vacation days, and without having to invent a reason for the absence. But only 36 percent of lower-income parents and 37 percent of single parents can take time off to care for sick children without losing pay.

Child care during nontraditional work hours.

Finding child care is especially difficult for employees who work evening or weekend hours or for those who have rotating shifts. More and more U.S. workers find themselves working nontraditional hours as the trend toward a global, service-based economy intensifies. Most child care providers offer day care during the traditional working hours of nine to five. A recent General Accounting Office (GAO) survey of child care providers found that only a minority (from 12 to 35 percent) offer care during nontraditional hours; most of these providers work out of their homes and have room for relatively few children. Weekend work is also problematic. Data from the 1989 National Child Care Survey show that one-third of working poor mothers (incomes below poverty) and more than one-fourth of working-class mothers (annual incomes above poverty but below \$25,000) work weekends. Yet only 10 percent of centers and 6 percent of family day care homes report providing care on weekends.

5. LEARNING CURVES: NEW INSIGHTS INTO FAMILIES AND WORK

Today, 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. In the process, they are beginning to take an ecological view of their workplaces and workforces, looking more closely at how the various contexts and circumstances in which employees function day-to-day affect their motivation, productivity, and loyalty.

Take-Home Lessons from America's Leading Employers

Many lessons can be distilled from the volumes of data and dozens of case studies that went into *Ahead of the Curve*.

- Work-life initiatives can be integral components of corporate efforts to improve profitability and customer service.

- Efforts to address the needs of employed parents must also address the needs of other employees.
- Programs and policies to address the needs of employed parents are necessary but not sufficient.
- Programs and policies are more effective when they are part of a coherent web of services.
- As they plan work-life initiatives, companies must take into account not only their own policies and practices, but also the availability and quality of resources in employees' communities.
- Management outlook and workplace culture are key to meeting the needs of new and expectant parents.
- Efforts to train managers in problem-solving to address the needs of both the employee and employer have been found to increase supervisor and workplace support.
- The quality of the job as well as the supportiveness of the workplace must be seen as integral to work-life assistance.
- Diversity at the top is a predictor of innovation and effectiveness in the work-family arena.

Unequal Opportunity

Benefits that are distributed inequitably or perceived to be unfair cannot advance employers' goals. Too often, work-family initiatives are inaccessible to the employees who may need them most. A major finding of the Family and Work Institute's research is that the working parents who have the greatest need for services and flexibility are often the least likely to receive them. While

family-friendly policies and practices have grown dramatically over the past two decades, they tend to serve more advantaged workers.

- Workers with higher wages are more likely than their lower-wage counterparts to have access to a wide range of benefits.
- Fathers have more access than mothers to most forms of work-family assistance.
- Employed parents who work for larger employers have greater access to work-family programs and policies that require expenditures by employers.

Major Challenges

To be sure, there has been progress in recent years in the realm of families and work. More companies are waking up to the competitive advantages that can be gained by family-friendly policies. But a great deal remains to be done, especially in relation to new and expectant parents. Four challenges are especially urgent.

- First, make corporate culture more responsive to working parents.
- Second, expand family health insurance coverage.
- Third, ensure that parents have adequate time for parenting.
- Fourth, support efforts to ensure that all working parents have access to affordable, high-quality child care.

All of the trajectories described in this report point to one conclusion: To a greater extent than ever before, marketplace leadership requires leadership in the work-family arena. As Walter Bennis has written, “Managers do things right; leaders do the right things.” Today’s leaders are recognizing that the “right things” are policies and practices that protect and enhance a company’s human resources. In the coming century, the organization that responds to the realities of employees’ day-to-day lives will be ahead of the curve. The “as if” organization—the company that continues to operate as if its employees had no outside lives—will be history.