



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Flexible Work Arrangements

by Anonymous

For an analysis and communications course in my first year of business school, I wrote a paper on flexible work arrangements. In it, I argued that:

“Because of the broad organizational and cultural implications of flexibility, the greatest gains in retention and productivity will be realized by corporations that also rewrite job descriptions, rethink career paths, promote positive institutional and individual attitudes towards balancing work and family demands and provide open eligibility for flexible arrangements.”

For a career development course in my second year of business school, I assessed my strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes and past work history and discovered a profession that made more sense for me—the actuarial profession. I also wrote a description of what I wanted in an employer. Part of the description was:

“The company should allow me to work part time, take time off or create a flexible schedule. As much as I desire a professional career with the opportunity to take on responsibility and respond to challenges, my family will always come first.”

After I graduated, I went to work for an insurance company, began taking exams and in an effort to make it through the exams quickly and to make up for my somewhat advanced age compared to my entry-level peers, I forgot about work-family policies and balance.

That was nearly 11 years ago. Today, work-family balance is much more on my mind.

For one thing, I am pleased that some of the points I made in my flexible work arrangements paper have come to pass in my corner of corporate America. When I began working part-time five years ago, it was an arrange-

ment between myself and my manager; there was no official company policy other than flex-time (the ability to change starting and ending times) and the need to work 20 hours per week to earn benefits. I knew of perhaps one or two other female actuaries who worked part-time. Today, the company has a full-fledged flexible work arrangement’s policy which is prominently advertised on our intranet, and managers are required to track the number and nature of such arrangements—the better to document the company’s family-friendliness. I know many female actuaries with flexible arrangements, including part-time work and telecommuting. I have maintained my own reduced schedule despite having changed managers twice. Very recently, I heard management describe (1) the hiring of a part-time manager as a perfect antidote for getting work done in an expense-reduction environment and (2) part-timers as the most productive workers. These developments at my company have been extremely helpful and satisfying to me personally, and I applaud them wholeheartedly.

However, what I never thought about in business school was whether having a flexible work arrangement actually equates to a fulfilling work-family balance. With my part-time work, I find it to be a half-empty, half-full conundrum.

Half-Empty:

The “half-empty” view is shaped by the circumstances surrounding my decision to work part-time. It was not the scenario that I had envi-

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sioned in business school. Instead, my older son had been diagnosed as autistic, and I had to be there for him—to shepherd/coax/coerce him through the thousands of hours of therapy and other activities that were and still are required for him to improve his skills and ultimately, his potential for independence. The diagnosis occurred before I had finished my exams, and after making one last (unsuccessful) attempt to get within striking distance of Fellowship, I have not taken an exam since, due to lack of time, energy and I'll admit, self-confidence. Thus, the loss of professional development and income has been considerable. On a daily basis, with my roughly 25-hour workweek, I still miss meetings, calls and lunches with colleagues and have generally not been eligible for positions or projects with greater responsibility.

There are drawbacks on the home front as well. As is often the case with a child with a serious disability, there are no appropriate schools in my area, so my son attends a special education school that is out-of-state. To see him in school, do an in-person parent-teacher conference or have a playdate with a school friend, I have to take a vacation day and rent a car. Thus, these things do not happen very often, and I yearn for the community that comes from daily contact with teachers, other parents and other children.

The “half-empty” view often leads me to believe that it would have been better to pick either full-time work or full-time stay-at-home motherhood rather than attempt a balance that makes me feel as if I am underachieving in both areas.

Half-Full:

In the “half-full” view, the rewards are substantial. I still have the satisfaction of contributing and working as a professional with many bright, impressive people. I still contribute to my family's financial well-being. I am there for my sons' after-school activities

and am on top of the progress of both. I have lost count of the number of people who have told me how lucky I am to have such a great schedule.

Most of all, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I made and still make an enormous difference—that despite strong indications to the contrary when he was first diagnosed, my older son can talk, drink from a cup, dress himself, write, read, ride a bus without a tantrum and maybe, just maybe, become an independent adult one day—because of my choice to be mother-teacher-therapist and part-time actuary.

The “half-full” view also focuses on work-family balance as an achievement made over time, not necessarily required at some or all points in one's working life. So, on “half-full” days, I hold on to the possibility that at some point in the future, I can turn my attention more fully to my career.

To me, work-family balance is a complicated issue that raises difficult choices and consequences for those individuals who choose to grapple with it. In my case, I don't know whether “half-empty” or “half-full” is the more accurate assessment, but I do know that the opportunity to choose a “half-empty,” “half-full” situation has been priceless. To all those who made my choice possible, thank you. □

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