Facilitating Balance Between Career and Family: A Crucial Challenge

Recentley, the issue of women seeking to meet career and family responsibilities by arranging flexible and part-time work schedules was discussed in this column. The position taken was that choosing to work a nontraditional schedule may "result in a step backward for women in the workplace," secondary to losing their power base relative to full-time (male) employees (Bailey, 1990a, p. 375). I would like to challenge this opinion, which I feel is limiting to both male and female practitioners and dependents.

Research on issues relating to labor and business is beginning to focus attention on the increasing numbers of families and employers who are affected by tensions created when traditional work expectations are at odds with family needs. The large proportion of working mothers (70% of all women with children between the ages of 6 and 17 years and more than 50% of women with children under 1 year of age) is resulting in a workforce whose needs differ greatly from those that were present when the 40-hr standard workweek was established (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989). Additionally, as the workforce ages, increasing numbers of employees are responsible for the care of elderly parents (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989). Thus, we can expect that over the next decade the proportion of occupational therapists who are responsible for the daily care of dependent relatives will increase.

Concurrently, occupational therapy is facing a serious personnel shortage. There is much concern that the supply of therapists will continue to lag behind market demand, ultimately jeopardizing our position as integral members of the health care team (Bailey, 1990b). The number of occupational therapy faculty positions currently unfilled has also been cause for alarm (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1990). In a recent survey analysis, Bailey (1990b) found that 63% of a sample of 696 respondents planned to take time away from their careers to have and raise children. Of 217 respondents who had not worked in another field, 14% reported that they had left occupational therapy to seek work that would accommodate family scheduling needs. It would seem that our profession should be extremely motivated to be at the forefront of the movement to increase compatibility between family- and career-related needs, so as to increase the pool of available workers.

Unmet needs are a problem not only for organizations but also for individuals who are unsuccessfully struggling to balance family and career goals. It is time to recognize that many occupational therapists are active family members and that commitment to family does not preclude commitment to career success and advancement. Outmoded standards for productivity and work schedules will produce a workforce that is exhausted and not able to function optimally at home or at work. Several authors have suggested that the tradition of measuring productivity and commitment to the job by counting hours spent at work is overly simplistic and inaccurate (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989; Stone, 1989). One literature review concluded that "the productivity of part-time workers is, in certain cases, better than their full-time counterparts, and in no cases worse" (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989, p. 127).

The other group who suffers as a result of unresolved conflict between career and family interests is our dependents. Children have lost an average of 11 hr of parental time per week relative to what children had in 1960 (Stone, 1989). Our society is troubled by alarming increases in childhood drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and sexual precociousness. A logical connection can be made between reduced parental supervision and availability and some of these problems. The resultant long-term limitations prove costly in terms of quality of life and health care dollars.

As members of a predominantly female profession and one that is in the midst of a workforce crisis, a large proportion of us will directly experience the effects of burnout or goodness of fit between family and career demands. We have an opportunity and an obligation to our families and ourselves to help update attitudes and operations in the workplace. Options such as job sharing, flexible scheduling, and working at home may be proposed, along with a detailed plan outlining how the needs and goals of the organization and supervisor can be met. The establishment of a plan by which unexpected employer needs or problems can be worked out (e.g., an agreement that the worker would be willing to change his or her schedule for special meetings or workshops) will also help in negotiating job flexibility.

As members of a profession de-
voted to teaching people to balance work, play, and rest, we are philosophically prepared to help with developing creative solutions to these evolving needs. It is time to focus our attention and skills on negotiating with employers and colleagues to facilitate the changes that will bring career and family goals into alignment.

References


Note From Bailey

The point of my paper was that occupational therapists opting for part-time employment should be aware of the likelihood that this will set them back in their careers. It will probably take longer for them to reach a power position, if at all, and in academia it may jeopardize tenure opportunities.

Davidson makes an excellent case as to why employers should be flexible in their hiring practices. We need to educate employers of occupational therapists, who often are not occupational therapists themselves, so that they will be willing to offer part-time jobs, jobs with flexible schedules, job-sharing opportunities, and opportunities for working at home. I applaud Davidson's excellent suggestions for negotiating—and, I hope, winning—job flexibility.

Diana M. Bailey, EdD, OTR, FAOTA