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Work-Life at URI: A newsletter from the URI Work-Life Committee for Winter 2013

URI Work-Life Committee

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most likely to lose their jobs for taking time off to care for sick family members, or to not have as much access to break time for things such as doctor appointments. They are also more likely to work more than one job, and fair and equitable policies for part-time workers are needed. Women are also more likely than men to work part-time, helping to define work-life as a gender issue. Though nearly as many women as men are in the workplace now, women still are the primary caregivers, though men’s participation is increasing. Both are seeking jobs that have some flexibility in how, when, and where their work gets done. Women’s career trajectories can be significantly challenged by competing work and caregiving responsibilities, and need work schedules and leave policies to enable them to do both well. Research shows that women caregivers drop out of demanding jobs, such as tenure-track science and engineering faculty jobs, for example, at a much higher rate than do men. Both men and women faculty are increasingly looking for positions for partners, and more effective dual career hiring solutions are also needed. Work-life is also an issue of race/ethnicity. White people are less likely (19% in one ARAP survey) to care for an elderly relative than are Asians (42%), Latinos (34%), and African Americans (28%). Cultural and socioeconomic differences play a role in how much family and friends participate in caregiving. Work-life is an age issue. As our workforce ages, valuable older workers need and/or want to remain in the workforce and will benefit from part-time and creative phased retirement options, job sharing, and other flexible work arrangements. Flexible work arrangements also benefit those who are differently abled, making work-life a disability issue. Finally, work-life is a sexual orientation issue as we seek to include same-sex couples in our leave and benefits policies.

In order to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, and promote an equitable workplace, work-life policies and practices must be a top priority. These practices include mechanisms for diverse employees, many of whom may experience isolation or lack of support, to find that support through networking and mentoring opportunities. As Joan Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law, and UC Hastings Director of the Center for Work and Family Law, says, “A diversity program without a work-life component just won’t work.”

**MYTH:** Work-life and diversity are two separate topics. **FACT:** Work-life is a class issue. Lower income workers are much more likely to work in structured, inflexible jobs with fewer leave benefits - they are the ones most likely to lose their jobs for taking time off to care for sick family members, or to not have as much access to break time for things such as doctor appointments. They are also more likely to work more than one job, and fair and equitable policies for part-time workers are needed. Women are also more likely than men to work part-time, helping to define work-life as a gender issue. Though nearly as many women as men are in the workplace now, women still are the primary caregivers, though men’s participation is increasing. Both are seeking jobs that have some flexibility in how, when, and where their work gets done. Women’s career trajectories can be significantly challenged by competing work and caregiving responsibilities, and need work schedules and leave policies to enable them to do both well. Research shows that women caregivers drop out of demanding jobs, such as tenure-track science and engineering faculty jobs, for example, at a much higher rate than do men. Both men and women faculty are increasingly looking for positions for partners, and more effective dual career hiring solutions are also needed. Work-life is also an issue of race/ethnicity. White people are less likely (19% in one ARAP survey) to care for an elderly relative than are Asians (42%), Latinos (34%), and African Americans (28%). Cultural and socioeconomic differences play a role in how much family and friends participate in caregiving. Work-life is an age issue. As our workforce ages, valuable older workers need and/or want to remain in the workforce and will benefit from part-time and creative phased retirement options, job sharing, and other flexible work arrangements. Flexible work arrangements also benefit those who are differently abled, making work-life a disability issue. Finally, work-life is a sexual orientation issue as we seek to include same-sex couples in our leave and benefits policies.
Implementing new policies and practices to help employees better balance competing life, family, and work responsibilities can be complicated in an institution comprised of nine labor unions with nine separate collective bargaining agreements. But the flexibility model developed in the URI Controller’s Office is testa-ment to the impact that creative determination can have, and offers an excellent example of how one URI office took the initiative to formally offer creative flexi-bility solutions to its approximately 62 employees across 5 depart-ments and 3 labor unions.

Because of the nature of the work, the Controller’s Office is one place where flex hours and compressed work weeks are feasible options. At least as long as nine years ago, the office made flexible starting times informally available. In 2007, Sharon Bell, Controller, and Trish Casey, Associate Controller, with input from Human Resources, implemented a comprehensive Vol-untary Flexible Schedule program. This thoughtfully developed program offers basic flex options, while emphasizing the need to ensure business continues to be conducted efficiently. As stated in the program de-scription, it “offers[s] the staff the option to work a flexi-ble schedule based on [the] department’s needs as well as ensuring supervisory flexibility in customer service, overall department responsibilities and dead-lines, etc., are covered.”

The goals of the program were to offer flex options to staff and man-agers alike. Both are available for 6-month terms, and approval for either is granted depending on seniority, with input from Human Resources, for both at work and at home, and some employees say they are more productive during their flex weeks than their non-flex weeks, she added. Bell agrees. “Things are going very well. There is no diminishment in pro-ductivity or workload. Employees opting for the flexible ‘day-off’ schedule get on a roll, they put in the extra time during a day, and don’t have to stop what they are doing. They know they have to get what they need to get done and have things in order for the day they are going to be out.”

At first, Bell and Casey shared concerns echoed by others hesitant to implement flexibilty options. “We were worried about abuse. In the past, when flexibility was more informal, some people did take ad-vantage of it. But this newer plan is more structured – we looked at everything that could go wrong – holidays, sick days, coming in late, etc.” said Bell. The administrative assistant added that for back and forth travel, the office has a 7-minute rule – if an employee is less than 7 minutes late, they make up those few minutes at the end of the day. If it is anything more than 7 minutes, they work with the employee to perhaps shift their hours by 15 minutes. But for the flex people, there is no 7-minute rule, and those who come in late must dis-charge time. “If they want it, they have to be re-sponsible,” says Bell. “People have been very appreci-ative. From a manager’s perspective, it is not as disruptive as one might think.”

Sharon Bell

Another oft-cited barrier to implementing flex options is the fear by supervisors that they will be inundated with requests and that managing schedules will become too time-consuming and burdensome. But not so, say both Bell and Casey. “It takes a little thought in the beginning, but it is not hard to manage, once you get it down.” And not as many people opted for a flexible schedule as they expected. In the beginning, as many as half the staff requested formal flex schedules, but that has dwindled to about a third. “People want it until they try it, then they find out it may not be so great. They find out that it is not really a ‘day off’ – they still have to put in their 35 hours!” In one case, an employee opted out of a plan because it actually added stress at home. For another, a mother deter-mined that a day off meant an older child spent some time unsupervised, and so she switched to a non-standard hours schedule that better matched her child’s school schedule.

Yet another perceived barrier, placing undue burdens on other employees and causing employee resent-ment, was touched on by Casey. She noted that this plan sometimes can place burdens on managers who are covering for those off on flex days. “One of my managers takes every other Friday off as her flex day and the burden of her not being here falls on me.” However she noted that the antidote to these

Lactation Sites - Narragansett Bay campus
Ocean Science & Exploration Center, Room 017
Lactation Sites - Providence campus
Faculty Restroom Lounge, Room 218

share their experiences

shifts in duties is careful planning, and promoting a “culture of cov-erage,” or a work environment where employees support one an-other, recognizing that everyone will have a time when they need co-worker support. Another tactic is to cross-train employees, so that each employee can assume other duties if need be. Cross-training can be a powerful flexibility tool in creating a nimble and efficient workplace, as it can not only service the organization’s needs, but can provide professional development and skill broadening for em-ployees. The Controller’s Office has a “buddy system” in which a designated back-up is available to fill in when needed if their buddy is out. (continued on our website)

To read the end of this article about how 3 employees in the Controller’s Office (Helene Bucka, Judy Moore, and Kathy LaCroix) have benefited from a flex schedule, go to our website Handbook and click on “3 Controller’s Office Flex Employees Share their Experiences.”

URI LACTATION PROGRAM UPDATE

Many new moms need or want to return to work soon after the birth of their baby, and are intent on continuing to breastfeed, knowing the positive health benefits to both mother and baby. The University of Rhode Island (URI) is an excellent example of a flexible workplace initiative at URI is the Lactation Program. URI policy encourages employers to make work and study opportunities available for employees or students who are nursing to be used as a lactation room. Supervisors will work with these employees to schedule reasonable and flexible break time each day for this activity. Procedures for employees and supervisors in the effective use of this policy, and details about each lactation room, can be found on the URI Work-life website on the Lactation Resources page under the Fam-ily Care section.

Lactation Sites - Kingston campus
Memorial Union, 1st floor
Pharmacy Building, Rm. 284
University Library, 1st floor
Mackel Field House, 1st floor (new!)
Women’s Center, 22 Upper College Rd. (new!)

Lactation Sites - Narragansett Bay campus
Ocean Science & Exploration Center, Room 017
Lactation Sites - Providence campus
Faculty Restroom Lounge, Room 218

This Year
Prioritize What Matters

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This Week
Research A Mentorship

Additional
Opportunities

Sharon Bell