



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

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Home Management Education
in the Workplace

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Introduction

Our homes have a unique and essential influence on the overall sense of well-being, happiness and effectiveness in our personal and family lives. Business consultants provide education to improve management practices within all types of organizations. Organizations are consistently concerned with enhancing job performance and employee satisfaction. One factor that influences employee satisfaction is the effort to balance the many demands of life. This paper describes how more effective home management can have a positive influence on work-family balance.

Work-family conflict was formally defined over twenty years ago as a form of interrole conflict where the demands of work and family are incompatible such that the activity of one role is made more difficult due to participation in the other role (Greenhaus & Bueutell, 1985). At the heart of the work-life issue is the question of how individuals make work and nonwork demands compatible in their personal lives, with their families and, within organizations (Kossek and Lambert, 2005). While care for children or aging parents is easily seen as having a direct impact on work-family strain, the daily challenges of managing home life are often overlooked in the work-life balance equation.

Attention to work-family conflict paralleled the rise of women in the workplace in all industries. Women are now equally immersed in the workforce with men. In some countries there are limited social support systems for household and child care and so it typically falls on these working women. Several years ago we recognized the lack of skills and confidence that many women have when it comes to managing their homes. Otherwise well-educated professional women often feel incompetent or overwhelmed when it comes to caring for their own homes. This growing skill gap among younger women seems to come from the fact that in more recent decades mothers have not been able to pass on basic homemaking knowledge and skills to their children. While this may be the result of a lack of time, it also may be a consequence of the fractured, fast-paced nature of our technological societies. Regardless of the reasons for the slackening of homemaking skills, we now see a resurgence of interest in the irreplaceable value of the home.

HomeAdvantage launched an effort to bring education in home management skills to the workplace to address these current issues. This paper describes some perspectives on the importance of the home for workplace productivity and the impact of stress on our ability to integrate the demands of work and home. Finally we share an approach that some businesses have adopted to help their employees transfer management skills used in the workplace to their homes.

Brief overview of corporate work/life balance practices

The evolution of "work/life" or "work/family" balance has its roots in the full entrance of women into the traditionally male dominated business workforce in the early 1970's. By the mid-

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1980's the influx of women into the workforce was such that while in most ways they adapted to a business structure developed by men, it was inevitable that they would have a feminine influence on the workplace that was based on their specific needs, challenges and priorities.

Over these past 20 years we have seen a clear movement of working families towards a positive focus on home life that fosters the essential dignity of the person and the family. Following the economic growth of the 1980's, the last decade witnessed an increased concern among individuals to reassess their personal priorities. Several social factors contributed to this trend, yet one key influence is the realization among many workers that family life has suffered from an unbalanced commitment to the organization that consumes their time and energies. As they realize that the peaks and valleys of the marketplace have little concern for individual well being, more and more employees now look for practical ways to give priority to their family life alongside their commitment to the corporation.

We see this in:

- An increased desire among women to discover ways that allow them to focus on raising their family and creating a home;
- A greater willingness among men to set limits to their working hours in order to spend more time with their family or to enable their wives to take on outside employment;
- The rapid emergence of flexible work arrangements and teleworking opportunities that reduce the amount of time that workers spend away from home.

Yet this shift has also been a daily struggle and at times a source of confusion for conscientious workers within this demanding economic culture.

Despite efforts to leave "personal concerns" at the door when going to work, employees are individuals who cannot fully compartmentalize their lives. All of the aspects of life are integrated into one mind and one heart so it is inevitable that concerns from one part of life will spillover into another. We all acknowledge that we are often distracted at home with a current work problem and similar spillover from home to work is also inevitable. Consider the common mid-afternoon concern—for a working parent a typical thought in the middle of the afternoon or perhaps in the midst of a meeting with a colleague or client is the daily question of "What's for dinner?"

Common work-life benefits include employee assistance programs, parental leave, wellness programs and elder care services. With technological changes in the 1990's we saw the mainstreaming of telecommuting and off-site work arrangements. Traditional work/life benefits have focused on child care and flexible work hours. Some businesses have added concierge services to assist workers in accomplishing basic daily errands but until recently these work/life benefits have overlooked the practical need for day-to-day home management skills.

In developed economies we have also created a misplaced expectation that one should be able to "have it all"-successful, advanced career options and a thriving family life. In recent years more professional workers, particularly women, have recognized that given the limited amount of time and the nature of family life we may not be able to "have it all" all at once. Many other employees, perhaps in non-professional roles, have fewer options-they must work and raise their families "all at once"-and they need to find workplace cultures that support this need while still

reaching business objectives. Each of these notions has practical consequences and they represent challenges we still face in creating workplaces that fundamentally support work/life balance or integration. In order to make work and family life compatible, individuals need the practical skills and knowledge both on-the-job and at home.

Home Management: A Key Element for Work/Life Balance

Two generations ago the majority of women worked full-time in the home. Their primary professional work was the care of their home and family. Today over 70% of married couples in the U.S. have both spouses working outside the home. Women in their 20s and 30s are the second generation of this trend. Their mothers were already working outside the home and had little time to pass on basic homemaking skills. As a result we see that today highly successful women feel less than competent in caring for their homes with a sense of professionalism and ease.

Regular outside assistance with homemaking is not as common as it may have been in some Western societies in past generations. Workers commute longer hours and therefore have less time at home. Above all people are managing multiple roles and responsibilities—just when the home has become even more important for personal and family life, we now have less time and knowledge needed to care for the home.

All around us we see the signs of interest in everything related to the home—television programs, magazines, and furniture and accessory stores all point to the rising interest in creating a comfortable, attractive haven in our homes. And so we face a real paradox—there is less time, attention and accountability for the work of the home yet there is more focus on improving and enjoying the home to bring greater balance to life.

The HomeAdvantage educational design offers practical education in home management with the goal of helping people gain professionalism in their approach to the work of the home that will result in greater blending of work and home responsibilities.

Home Management Solutions to Reduce Work-Life Stress

Despite the well-accepted fact that most of us feel we don't have enough time, in fact a recent Federal Reserve Board working paper asserts that we now enjoy an average of 5.1 more hours of leisure today than in 1965. Economists categorize our use of time away from work as either consumption (enjoying friends, reading, watching TV) or production (household work, cooking dinner, doing laundry). Improved technology (microwave ovens) and the growth in restaurant and takeout meals are indicative of areas where we save production time at home. The widespread number of women working outside the home has spurred demand for these types of conveniences but not all work at home can nor should it be outsourced. There remain a certain number of daily responsibilities that must be cared for. The better one is equipped with the skills to manage these daily tasks, the more effective one's ability to balance work and home.

Stress is always a factor near at hand when evaluating work-life interaction. Time plays a key role in an attempt to understand work-life stress. The more time-sensitive or urgent the task, the greater is the stress involved. Consider the nature of paid work tasks—typically our paid work is

linear, project oriented or based on discretely identified goals. These tasks nearly always have an end in sight and with that end comes approval and a satisfying sense of completion. Contrast this with many household tasks—the stuff of daily living is cyclical, not linear. Eating, sleeping, clothing—many things related to household work are repeated day after day. This is human nature. Along with the repeated nature of these tasks comes the time sensitive need to get the task done—meal preparation must be done daily, children need to be picked up at school at a certain time day after day, eventually the laundry must be done so that we have clean clothing to wear. The time-sensitive nature of this kind of work brings with it an increased level of stress. Unfortunately the cyclical nature of household work also does not lend itself to accolades and the same sense of project accomplishment. The many responsibilities that fill our day are significant and yet often go unacknowledged and certainly seem less glamorous than the accomplishment of a project on the job.

Meal planning or meal preparation could be considered one of the most stressful of household tasks precisely because it is absolutely necessary. The need for nourishment does not wait. We each need to eat at regular intervals each day; while we do have the option of going to a restaurant or getting take-out and prepared foods, there always comes a point when the desire for healthier, home-cooked family meals means that we must face the challenge. With better skills and knowledge we can alleviate some of the stress of meal preparation thereby enhancing our home lives and improving the quality of life. And so, businesses are now recognizing the value of providing employees with the education needed to alleviate the stress of home management.

Transferring Skills from Work to Home

So how does this education take place? It was asserted earlier that many well-educated, successful workers today feel incompetent when it comes to homemaking. Part of this sense of incompetence comes from the view they have of the work involved in caring for a home. It is seen as something completely distinct from the other aspects of life; something that either comes naturally or does not.

In fact, caring for home is a management responsibility that requires the use of many of the management skills that equip professionals in their working lives. The most fundamental management skills—planning, organizing, leading, and controlling—are all necessary for effective home management. When put in these terms businesses have realized the value of offering education to their employees that helps to transfer their management skills from work to home.

HomeAdvantage takes these basic management skills and applies them to the home, encouraging people to recognize the professional nature of the work that is done at home and thereby raising the quality of that work.

By way of example, consider the daily challenge of meals. If we apply management skills to this challenge it becomes much less daunting. Begin with planning and consider the time management involved in planning for the week ahead, thinking of the schedule of the household, making a list, choosing realistic menus that fit the needs of the family without being overly time consuming. Planning leads to accomplishing the shopping in a more organized fashion and consequently saving time with reduced trips to the market. Organization ensures that meal

preparation is more streamlined. When one knows the inventory in the pantry, what is on-hand in the refrigerator—when the dishes are done and the cabinets are well-organized, the process of putting meals on the table becomes much less of a concern.

Delegation at home is also essential. All good leaders delegate—at home it is very important to engage others—we see how it teaches them skills and virtues that are invaluable for life. And so HomeAdvantage advises finding ways to delegate meal preparation; encouraging children to set the table, help with the dishes or prepare a salad or dessert. We encourage people to look at their skill strengths in the workplace and apply these same professional qualities to their approach to the work of the home.

When one looks at the home with a professional outlook and applies the management skills that work so well in other areas of life the result is an ability to manage the multiple priorities of the home with greater ease and confidence. The need to retain productive workers in the business world has caused employers to look at ways to improve work/life balance and has led some to adopt the creative approach of offering home management education in the workplace. We see this as a progressive trend pointing to a healthier future that recognizes the value of the home not only to the person and the family but to business world as well.