

RELEASE IN FULL

THE BIGGER POINT

Recently, my former State Department colleague, Anne Marie Slaughter, ignited a firestorm of controversy with her piece in The Atlantic "Why Women Can't Have it All". The debate has raged across the blogosphere and editorial pages with responses to her article revealing just how sensitive a topic this remains. Some commentators nodded in vigorous agreement, others violently disagreed and still others questioned the whole concept of "having it all". Marissa Mayer's appointment as CEO of Yahoo, coupled with the simultaneous announcement of her pregnancy, added yet more fuel to the fire. I wonder, however, if by looking at this issue solely from a women's perspective, we are not missing the bigger point. I believe the more consequential issue is the social and economic price we, as a nation, continue to pay by failing to provide women *and* men, at every stage of their lives and careers, and at every level of employment, with the resources, support and flexibility they need to succeed in all aspects of their lives.

For decades now, the concept of work-life balance has been talked about, argued over and largely relegated to the pages of human resource journals and women's magazines. At best, programs that are implemented are perceived as "feel good" initiatives that rarely survive in difficult economic times. Programs not viewed as directly contributing to the bottom line are often the first cut. Yet, I would argue that the direct opposite may in fact be true and that such programs can and do have a positive impact on corporate and organizational performance.

Numerous reports and studies have demonstrated that enterprises that invest in their people consistently out-perform the market. In fact, one report indicated that over a 5 year period, companies included in Fortune's "Best Companies" list that invested in their employees outperformed their counterparts in terms of total stock market return. As CEO of Discovery, I worked hard to implement a variety of work-life programs to help all our employees ---men and women ---- deal with the challenges they faced as parents and caregivers. We had programs covering everything from paid maternity *and* paternity leave, to flex time, telecommuting and job-sharing. Supporting our employees with these programs and resources helped make Discovery into the great company it is today.

Simply put, employees who are more satisfied with their lives are, by and large, healthier and more productive and that productivity translates into a stronger bottom line. So what is stopping us from moving forward in this critical area? Some argue that in the throes of an economic crisis, with many companies and other institutions fighting to survive, it is neither feasible nor appropriate to roll-out programs and initiatives perceived to be costly add-ons. Others argue that government should take the lead and implement policies requiring corporations to provide these programs. Yet the solution to this problem may be far less complicated. We can do a lot right here, right now, without a big policy debate, government intervention or increases in operating expense. All it takes is common sense and the will to change.

A few small steps in the right direction can make a big difference. Business owners, CEOs, enterprise leaders and managers at every level and in every organization working with their employees can find solutions to these seemingly intractable problems. Quite simply, it is a matter of conveying trust, respect and a willingness to do things differently. Starting with a sharp-eyed analysis of goals and objectives and focused on end results, employees and managers working together can find ways to accommodate both the needs of business and the demands of daily life. Flexibility and accountability are the keys to success. Managers must be flexible and trust their employees to do what needs to be done and employees must be held accountable for results.

Undoubtedly there will be hard choices and difficult decisions on both sides. Not every need can or should be accommodated nor every challenge addressed. The unexpected crisis or event will inevitably arise and not every solution works for every job. Employees whose jobs are tied to a specific location can't telecommute, more technology is not the answer to every problem and larger enterprises are more able to deal with these matters than small businesses or not for profit organizations. That is just the reality we live with. But for those institutions determined to find solutions, there is a wide array of proven approaches that can be deployed without disrupting organizational performance.

Building even a little flexibility into an otherwise rigid schedule can help enormously. For example, some businesses have transitioned vacation and sick leave programs into "paid time off". This gives employees more control over their own time. They can use their leave to do what they want, when they want. In other cases, employees can take time off and make up the lost time later. From an employer's perspective what matters is the end result. Not how and when things get done.

By shifting our focus to being sure we meet or beat our goals we can significantly advance all our interests. The world will not end or a business collapse if an employee takes time for a school visit or simply to relax. And if bigger institutions take the lead, they will help shape a work culture that, across the spectrum, places greater value on the importance of supporting men and women in the workplace. This is not just a women's issue or a family issue, it affects every person at every stage in their lives. We can and should do better. Our country and our citizens deserve no less.