



The [MIT Workplace Center](#) last summer celebrated the completion of its first year — a year of challenges and accomplishments.

Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Workplace Center was created to promote effective work-family integration through research, collaborative problem-solving, and on-site work redesign. In the current economic climate, that is no small task.

"These days, a company may see a work-family policy as a frill it can't afford," observes Ann Bookman, the Center's executive director. "But these policies are absolutely essential, given that most people today have responsibilities at home as well as at work."

According to [Lotte Bailyn](#), co-director of the Center and T Wilson Professor of Management, many modern work practices are based on assumptions that date back to the end of the industrial revolution, when work life and home life began to be seen as two separate spheres.

"We should challenge these assumptions," she says. "The concept of the ideal worker as someone who puts work above all else, and sacrifices other aspects of life, still guides most work practices. Maybe this made some sense for white middle-class families, when women were staying at home. But the working population has changed significantly. Most men and women no longer fit this pattern."

Unique focus

Other Sloan Foundation research centers have studied working families, but the Workplace Center is the first to focus specifically on the workplace.

Researchers at the Center are gathering data about the economy, innovations in work processes, and work-family policies. In particular, they are looking at the problems that arise when work-family issues are addressed piecemeal by the various stakeholders, including employers, employees, unions, community groups, and policymakers.

The results of this research form the basis of the Center's other work, which includes organizing dialogues among stakeholders, educating the general public through seminars and publications, and working collaboratively with companies on experimental work process redesign to help the work sites become more effective and to ensure that their employees can better integrate their work with their family lives. Currently, the Center's activity in Boston focuses on three industries: health care, law, and high technology.

"We see a lot of promise in the health-care sector," says [Thomas A. Kochan](#), co-director of the Center and George M. Bunker Professor of Management. "People in health-care settings have already spent a lot of time finding non-traditional ways to organize work, and they know the benefits of working with flexible schedules."

Stakeholder responses

One of the Workplace Center's challenges lies in the coordination of stakeholder responses to work-family issues. This part of the work is spearheaded by Mona Harrington, program director of the Center.

The need for such coordination is addressed in "Integrating Work and Family Life: A Holistic Approach," a report released last year that was based on a Work-Family Policy Network study to which Bookman and Harrington contributed and which was led by Kochan and Bailyn, along with Robert Drago of Pennsylvania State University.

The report calls for employers, unions, government, and communities to work together to develop strategies for addressing work-family friction. Its recommendations include:

1. A national universal paid-leave policy for employees
2. More options to work flexible hours or reduced hours
3. An effort to give employees a stronger voice in the formation of corporate work-family policies
4. The establishment of regional or state Work-

Family Councils to evaluate current work-family practices, propose new policies, and keep these issues visible in the political arena on both a local and a national level.

A sustainable work redesign

These recommendations lie at the heart of the Workplace Center's mission.

"What's new and innovative about the Center's approach is that we analyze family-friendly policies, while also looking at the way work is designed and organized," says Bookman. "We also emphasize the need for community-based organizations to work together with private firms and public institutions in order to change the long-standing structures that are making work-family integration so difficult."

Both Bailyn and Kochan have spent years thinking about these problems. Bailyn has focused on work redesign — changing the way people work to improve the quality of life for employees while also improving organizational effectiveness. Kochan's work has addressed the need for updated public policies that reflect the changing nature of work and the changing workforce in our country today.

"One problem we still need to explore is the question of how to sustain a work redesign over a long period of time," Bailyn says. "Similarly, we need to look for effective ways to diffuse a redesign throughout a large organization."

The Workplace Center is already involved with two different work sites in the health care industry, where the initial stages of documentation have begun. The Center also ran a spring seminar series on work redesign with an emphasis on the health care industry.

"We are a research center," says Bookman, "but the components of intervention and stakeholder dialogue make us unique. We are experimenting in a collaborative way with organizations, and we hope to get people from different sectors with potentially conflicting interests to come together. By creating new public and private policies, they could begin to find ways to integrate work and family life."

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