

## **Hybrid work models and work/ family balance: UP human resources lecturers on what it means to be a family-supportive supervisor**

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The COVID-19 pandemic made remote working necessary, and forced organisations to be agile. Three years after the first lockdowns, 'normal' work routines have resumed – but organisations have now also adopted a hybrid work model to maintain, motivate, and boost employee performance without losing flexibility and autonomy.

Although employees are trying to return to their old ways of work with an added element of flexibility, limited support from organisations presents some challenges as they try to achieve that elusive work/ life balance. The hybrid work model creates ambiguity and incoordination, resulting in unclear boundaries between work and home life. The idea of work/ family negotiations and boundary setting in the workplace has become increasingly more complex. With the hybrid working model emerging as a preferred work model, old anxieties are resurfacing for both employees and supervisors regarding the management and influence of the family domain on employees' work.

Although we can all agree that the pandemic made clear that employees' needs and definitions of the workplace and the salience of family have changed, many organisations and managers are blinded by this realisation. As we celebrate Workers' Month, employers need to strengthen the support provided to enable employees to manage their work/ family needs within this 'new normal, post-COVID' workplace. To understand the dynamics and benefits of a supportive work/ family culture, the role of managers or supervisors in companies must be re-emphasised.

While some companies are progressive in their work culture and models in an effort to provide a supportive work/ family culture, many employees do not enjoy these benefits when managers don't know how to support employees. Often, managers or supervisors think providing general technical or content-related support on the job is enough and constitutes a 'supportive' work environment. However, more is needed to develop norms where employees' personal and family values are respected and encouraged. A more proactive approach to addressing employees' work/ family requests and needs is what is needed. Numerous studies have shown that having a family-

supportive supervisor can aid in reducing and managing work/ family conflict and stress, and boost employee morale.

A family-supportive supervisor will typically provide support in four ways: through emotional support; through role-model behaviour that exhibits work/ family principles; by providing instrumental support; and by creatively managing employees' work-family needs and responsibilities. This way, family-supportive supervisors are seen as the resource that creates a sustainable work/ family organisational culture. They play a significant role in work/ family dynamics.

Furthermore, managers' or supervisors' leadership in work/ family interventions is crucial, as they work close to their subordinates and are in frequent contact and interaction. As such, they are regarded as a significant influencer in employees' utilisation of work/ family programmes. So, how can managers or supervisors support employees' work/ family needs?

The first and most common need is *emotional support*, which refers to how supervisors let their employees feel they are cared for and valued. Such emotional support generally involves communicating with employees and being mindful of their personal and family responsibilities. When managers provide emotional support, the following are essential pointers to consider:

- Create a space where employees feel comfortable discussing conflicting interests between family and work, through formal or informal discussions in a safe space. It is crucial that employees feel comfortable talking about challenges they may experience when juggling work and family. This means managers should take time to listen, even if they cannot change anything in the individual's personal or family situation.

Secondly, supervisors don't always realise that observation plays a significant role in learning. They need to support employees in achieving desirable work/ life outcomes by providing and practising relevant work/ life examples, strategies, and behaviours. For example, the literature has shown that effective role-modelling behaviour refers to the extent in which a supervisor demonstrates how to balance work and family lives by displaying such behaviour in the workplace. This means supervisors and organisational leaders must embrace and reinforce work/ life values by adopting and displaying the desired behaviour themselves.

While it is ideal for supervisors to take a proactive approach to supporting employees with their work/ family needs, there is also the notion of instrumental support, which is more reactive by nature – where supervisors react to employees' work/ family needs as they arise through daily management interactions. This entails reacting and adjusting to flexible scheduling requests to accommodate an employee's needs in such a way that allows them to address family needs while still being productive and efficient at work. This flexibility requires supervisors to learn to listen to and accommodate employees where needed regarding unanticipated non-work or family demands.

Lastly, instead of only providing support in response to the needs of employees, supervisors or managers should exemplify *creative work/ family management* – a system that is calculated, innovative and proactive, one that requires managers to take the initiative in restructuring work to promote employee effectiveness. Creative work/ family management refers to changing how work is done, and ensuring the time and place of work are incorporated into workplace scheduling and design to balance employees' work/ life needs with company needs. For example, think about how the work in the department can be reallocated or organised in such a way that it jointly benefits the organisation and its employees. This approach is important, as such initiatives may include flexi-work and remote working (synonymous with the hybrid work model).

Helping employees balance their personal and work duties more effectively will provide them with the necessary resources and time to focus on career development and management. In this sense, supportive relationships between employees and supervisors create networks and maximise career success. For example, when employees have more time to devote to career management due to a family-supportive work environment, they are more likely to attain greater career competencies and add more value to their organisations.

As we celebrate Workers' Month, organisations need to make resources available or educate supervisors to aid employees with work/ family balance. This improves their efficiency and success in the organisation, which ultimately delivers great benefits for these organisations.