

A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a bright green button-down shirt, looking down and to the right at a baby. The baby is wearing a pink and green striped shirt and is looking back at the man. They are positioned in front of a light-colored wall. The man's expression is gentle and attentive. The baby appears to be sitting on the man's lap or a surface next to him. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

# The *New* Challenges of Being a *Working* Father

By Scott Hensley, CPA  
NCACPA Work/Life Committee



**A** relatively *new* issue confronting businesses in the workplace is how to handle *working* fathers. If you noticed, I have put emphasis on *new* and *working father*. The concept of a working parent isn't really a new issue facing the workplace. Mothers have dealt with this issue a lot longer than many of us have been alive. Women have long struggled to balance being a mother and working, and with the issues that arise as a result of both responsibilities.

The traditional role of a father was that of the "breadwinner" of the family. This role often required the father to work more than an eight-hour workday in order to advance within the company and provide for his family. The traditional mother stayed home with the children and was the main source of family care and nurturing. Over time, this division of responsibilities has dramatically changed, evolving as our society has.

Today, we are starting to recognize that fathers also deal with the issue of working and balancing their private lives. Families are different now and operate in many different ways. We have families where both parents work; we have same-sex parents; we have mothers working and fathers staying home; and we have many more divorced parents. In a recent US Census report, **2.3 million fathers are raising children without a mother**. These changes to family dynamics require us to change our approach to working fathers. We can no longer define their role as the "breadwinner," but rather as a partner in raising their children and providing financial support.

Many Generation X males have experienced another influence on their perceived role as a working father. Many of us watched our fathers devote their time and energy to moving up in their company, at the sacrifice of their relationship with their children. Our fathers may have missed many of the sports events we were in or other extracurricular activities important to us. They would not get home until late many nights of the week and were sometimes missing part of the weekends. Even though our fathers put in this extra work to provide for us, many lost their jobs as companies downsized. The concept that a business would be loyal to you if you put in the time was lost to this generation. Instead, we learned that we missed having our fathers around with no guarantee of a payoff in the end for missing them.

With these changes in the corporate world and growing up with such real life experiences, today's working fathers no longer define themselves primarily in their role as an employee. Contemporary

fathers want to be there for their children while still meeting the demands of their job and advancing at work. In a survey from Boston College, two-thirds of the fathers interviewed said that work was just one part of their lives. In fact, 70% of them stated their role was both caring for their children and earning money to meet financial needs. In that same survey, 65% of the fathers believed both spouses should provide equal amounts of giving to their children. When given choices to define a good father, most fathers stated it was to provide love and emotional support as well as being involved and present in their child's life as a teacher, guide, or coach. This is a far cry from the traditional role of a father a few decades ago.

I'm betting many of you reading this article deal with these same issues in your lives—I know I sure do. I am a father of three and a husband to a wonderful wife. Both of us work and struggle with juggling the duties of a parent, spouse, and employee. We are both in managerial positions with our businesses. Fortunately, we both work for understanding employers who recognize the struggles we face, which creates loyalty on our part to our employers. Our days consist of coordinating our schedules so we both can be there for our children and our employers.

We try to remain active in our children's extracurricular activities as well as in their school. I coach my boys in baseball and try to attend each of their practices in other sports. Sometimes, this requires that I leave work early to pick them up and get them to the practice. Once a month, we try to take time to have lunch with our children at school. If someone is sick, we must decide who will stay home that day. Fortunately, both of us can work remotely, which allows us some flexibility.

The advance in technology has made it easier to be a working parent. When we were growing up, our parents did not have the luxury to work remotely. If you were going to work, you had to be in the office because most jobs could not be done at home. Since everyone had to be in the office to work, employers could do the "eye" test. If they saw you, then you must be working hard. If you were not there, then you were labeled a slacker.

Today's fathers who take time with their children still face this same issue to some degree. From a survey by Workplace Options, 70% of fathers said their employer understood about the need to be there for their family. However, 68% of these same fathers stated they have suffered some negativity from their employer because of conflicting responsibilities. Moreover, it is not always the employer who does the judging. Working fathers have to deal with negative reactions from fellow employees as well.

Too often, employees will provide the "eye" test when comparing themselves to other employees. If one employee is in the office working late but the other employee has left to do something with their family, then the first employee too often gets upset under the perception that they are working harder. What most of these employees do not notice are other factors. Is the employee that left early working outside of the



office to complete his/her assignments? Is he/she able to get their work done more efficiently than the one working later?

With the advancement in technology, we no longer live in a society bound by physical limits and no longer need to work in traditional 9–5 workdays. We are able to employ people around the world to do different jobs at different times of the day. The new technology allows working parents the ability to perform work at different hours of the day besides 9–5. If a parent needs to leave work for a family matter, the parent should be allowed to complete their assignment later that evening. Step one, of course, is discussing your family obligations and needs with your manager and negotiating an agreed upon procedure for securing this flexibility.

Those times you need to be working outside of the normal office hours, you should communicate this to your manager and then to the other employees you work with. Before leaving, I would let my manager know that I would be working later that evening or first thing in the morning. To prove you are working those hours, I suggest you send an email from home to your manager reporting the work you have done. Your emails in the middle of the night or crack of dawn will keep them updated. It is one thing to say you will be working outside the office; it is another to actually show you are working during the time you said you would.

Your manager is not the only person to whom you need to communicate your work schedule. You should let your peers know you are working outside of the normal office hours as well. Sometimes, this can be through talking to them directly to let them know your schedule. In my years at my firm, I have made it publicly known that I work either late at night or early in the morning to get work done when I have to leave during the office work day.

You also should show your peers what you have done. You will have to make sure you communicate to them not just that you were working at those hours, but also what you have gotten done. You don't want your peers thinking that they are carrying the load. When you are working in conjunction with them, you need to make sure you email them as well about the project that you worked on after hours so they know you have been contributing to the project.

I often need to use this schedule for my work. I like to say I get work done when “people are sleeping.” During tax season, my day normally starts around 5:00 a.m. I log on to work and get in a couple of hours of work before the kids wake up. My wife and I get breakfast and lunches ready for our children. Then I work a normal workday of 8:30 to 5:30. If there is an event involving my children that day, I can leave work earlier than usual, but I can also work that night after the kids have gone to bed.

I came up with the getting work done while “people are sleeping” motto because I want to make sure I am fully available for my children after work, right up until they go to bed. If I work until

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5:30 and get home at 6:00, that leaves me about two hours in the evening to be with my children. That is 10 hours in a work week, which is not a lot. If I'm going to be involved in their lives, I need to make sure those two hours are meaningful each day. If something important occurs for them outside those two hours, I need to be there so they know I do care about them.

As companies go forward, they need to recognize that most of their employees are working fathers and mothers. These parents desire to be with their children and to be involved in their children's lives. These parents also want to feel accomplished in their professional lives. Companies will need to find different ways to obtain productivity outside of the normal 9–5 workday model. Greater flexibility in the workday will attract more talented personnel and, more importantly, increase retention.

Companies will also have to find a different way to evaluate these employees outside of the normal “eye” test. An employee's desire to be involved in their child's life doesn't mean they are not loyal and won't go the extra mile. As witnessed from my own personal situation, if a company recognizes what is important to the employee, the employee will find a way to put in the extra effort outside of the normal 9–5 time frame to not only get the job done, but also go beyond what is expected.

Part of the responsibility for these needed changes falls on our shoulders as well. We will have to be the initiators of our own needs. Change will not occur in a vacuum. We need to step up and trust our employers and managers to understand and appreciate our requests for flexibility—and we must be willing to make the request, or it will not happen. We can do that. 