

the sisterhood

where jewish women converse

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Making Paid Parental Leave, Formalized Flex Time the Norm

By Gabrielle Birkner

Last year, the non-profit organization [Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community](#) set out to improve work-life polices, such as paid parental leave, job-sharing and formalized flex time, at 100 Jewish organizations. AWP's founding president, Shifra Bronznick, recently spoke with The Sisterhood about the progress made as the result of AWP's Better Work Life Campaign, and what remains to be done.

More than a year into the campaign, how close are you to meeting your goal?

We are 40% of the way there. A number of organizations are working on major improvements to their policies — even reaching to our “gold standards.” Others are “works in progress” and are grappling with work-life issues, but are not yet ready to ratify new policies. We think that this is all fairly amazing given the challenging economic environment. Even if it takes us an additional year to reach our goal of 100, that is a relatively short time to have moved organizational support for life-work issues from the margins to the mainstream.

How do you measure “improvement” on the work-life front?

Our gold standard [is] paid parental leave of up to three months and formal flexibility. But if an organization had no paid parental leave and now they have four weeks — that's an improvement. If an organization [establishes] a high-level job-share that allows professionals to sculpt their responsibilities around two people's complementary talents and schedules — that's an improvement. Providing coaching and support for professionals in navigating life and work — that is also an improvement.

How did you tailor improvement plans to meet such a wide range of needs at organizations of various sizes and with various resources?

We created very elastic categories that allowed organizations to place themselves along a continuum of change. That allowed some organizations to take small steps, if that was all they could contemplate, while it allowed others to make major leaps forward. Our work on these issues did not begin (and it won't end) with the campaign. Some organizations are more receptive to parental leave because they recognize that a “gold standard” parental leave policy allows them to attract, retain and motivate the best and the brightest. For others, formalizing flexibility became a

priority because so many of their professionals were utilizing flex but without a formal program in place, the organization did not reap the benefits of enhanced effectiveness, and the employees were not well managed and supported.

What are some of the challenges the Jewish organizations you've worked with have faced en route to change?

When we advocate for formal flexibility, one challenge we face is that so many employers prefer ad hoc arrangements, because it allows their senior managers to feel and act benevolently. Another challenge is that organizations fear that they will be taken advantage of by employees when they institute these policies, rather than focusing on the excellent employees who will be attracted to them because of their forward-thinking professional practices.

What challenges did your team face throughout this process?

The most unexpected challenge was the conflict we felt about advocating for paid parental leave versus maternity leave. On the one hand we want both men and women to be able to benefit from paid leave. On the other hand, in many situations, when organizations choose to offer paid parental leave to men and women they offer less generous amounts of time than when they prioritize maternity leave. There are exceptions of course, organizations like New York UJA-Federation and the Joint Distribution Committee that are now offering gold standard leave to men and women — up to three months linked to organizational tenure. These policies evolved over time, but we hope eventually this becomes the norm.

Can you discuss some of the campaign successes of which you are especially proud?

We are thrilled that [UJA-Federation of New York](#) institutionalized flexibility and now has 70 people working on flexible schedules. We are delighted that startup organizations such as [Joshua Venture](#), [Repair the World](#) and [Jumpstart](#) decided — because of the campaign — to adopt great policies from the outset, and we hope it sets an example for the entire startup sector. We are equally proud of the organizations that had set these policies when they were founded, on their own initiative, like the [Jewish Women's Archive](#) and [Bikkurim](#). Finally, we are encouraged when mission-driven organizations like the [Joint Distribution Committee](#) adopt our gold standard parental leave policies, and we know this will influence many others in the field.

Can you share any stories of women and/or their organizations reaping tangible benefits as a result of adopting of more family-friendly policies?

[Hillel](#) is a great example. The coaching that AWP's life-work expert offered to eight campus professionals helped each one of them to learn how to make better decisions about their priorities and to find ways to build in personal space in the context of demanding jobs. There are range of techniques that professionals can use to build their schedules to reflect their personal and professional commitments, as well as strategies for setting appropriate boundaries with colleagues, boards and students. These are now available in a customized guide for Hillel professionals.

What's ahead for the campaign?

We plan to host a series of roundtables to allow work-life experts and human resources professionals who have made the shift to instituting policies to mentor organizations that are eager to explore how to move forward. We have developed a set of “framing principles,” based on our conversations with hundreds of professionals, that will help people within organizations articulate why these changes are fundamental to our values and powerful levers for success. By championing work-life policies and creating healthy workplaces, the Jewish community can live out its stated values of the importance of family, education, community and spirituality. The statement of principles helps explain why shifting work from a focus on hours and activities to outcomes and impact, will help strengthen Jewish institutions, and be a lever for change in our community and in the world.