

Commission Work/Life Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We found that the implementation of the Commission Work/Life Program by the Office of Human Resources and Administrative Services' (OHRAS) was generally effective, efficient, and in compliance with applicable guidance. Our recommended enhancements include: reviewing the results of our employee survey, and conducting similar surveys in the future; adding E-learning to the authorized permissible uses of telework; adding a sample of courses typically approved for reimbursement to the tuition assistance guidelines; and assigning Work/Life coordinator duties to an employee in each field office.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

Our objectives were to determine if OHRAS managed the Work/Life program effectively and efficiently. We also sought to determine whether it was meeting its intended goals and objectives, was consistent with Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidance, and compared favorably with work life programs at other agencies.

During the audit, we surveyed 219 employees, including 36 supervisors, from three district offices, two regional offices and four Headquarters offices (111 responded to our questionnaire), interviewed the program manager, and reviewed program documentation. We also reviewed documentation and websites for Work/Life programs at other agencies, including the Office of Personnel Management, the National Science Foundation, and the Departments of Agriculture, Justice, and Health and Human Services.

The audit was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards between November 2003 and February 2004.

Background

OPM's Work/Life Programs Center provides leadership and technical assistance to help develop effective Work/Life programs in the federal government. Several programs encouraged by OPM include family leave, part-time employment, flexible work schedules, telework, education, fitness, health, and employee assistance.

OHRAS's Branch of Policy, Recruitment, Disability and Work/Life Programs administer the Commission's program (known as the Work/Life Plus program). A Work/Life Program Officer, assisted by members of the Branch, manages the program. The Branch maintains an on-line work-life resource center that includes descriptions of the Work/Life flexibilities offered, program newsletters, and links to resources and referral services for a wide range of Work/Life challenges. OHRAS has implemented many of OPM's suggested policies and procedures to help employees balance the demands of work and life, including family leave, part-time employment, alternative work schedules, and telework.

Family Leave Under the Family and Medical Leave Act eligible Federal employees are entitled to 12 administrative workweeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period for certain family and medical needs. Employees may also use paid or unpaid leave of up to 24 hours per year to participate in a child's school activities, and to accompany a child or an elderly family member to routine medical appointments.

Part-time Employment Part-time employees may work from between 32 and 64 hours a pay period on a prearranged schedule. Job sharing is a form of part-time employment in which a supervisor can arrange the schedules of two part-time employees to cover the duties of a single full-time position.

Alternative Work Schedules Under a Flexitour schedule, employees may modify traditional work schedules by requesting set arrival and departure times within established flexible bands. Employees may also work a compressed schedule by fulfilling their 80-hour basic work requirement in a bi-weekly period over nine workdays. Employees who work a Flexitour or traditional schedule may work extra time, and earn up to two credit hours a workday and eight credit hours on a non-workday to accommodate their personal needs. Employees may carry over up to 24 credit hours from one pay period to the next.

Telework Commission employees may telework with advance approval on an occasional basis (ad hoc) to work on a specific assignment for one to three days. Bargaining unit employees are eligible to apply for recurring telework arrangements for a maximum of two days per week. In addition, under limited situations, employees may request a work-at-home arrangement as a temporary medical accommodation for up to 160 hours.

OHRAS has also implemented initiatives on employee assistance, childcare, education, and health and fitness.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP) The Employee Assistance Program is an education and referral service that provides employees one-on-one support in resolving a wide-range of personal issues. The EAP also provides health and wellness information, self-help tools, and other resources on-line.

Childcare The childcare initiatives include a referral service, back-up childcare service, and a childcare subsidy for employees with family incomes of \$50,000 or less.

Education OHRAS has implemented student loan repayment and tuition assistance programs. These programs pay certain employee educational expenses, including tuition costs for work related courses and repayment of student loans.

Health Units Employees have access to Commission health units staffed by licensed nurses. The units offer a wide range of professional services, including emergency and walk-in care, immunization and allergy shots, access to a physician for physicals and consultations, and health awareness and screening programs.

Fitness Centers Employees can participate in one of three on-site fitness centers in the Washington, DC area (Headquarters, the Operations Center and the 901 E Street building). Employees in the Regions and Districts are also encouraged to participate in centers located near their offices. The centers offer strength and aerobic conditioning equipment, fitness assessments and recommendations, educational materials and lectures, exercise classes, and health screenings. All employees can access an on-line monthly fitness newsletter issued by the headquarters center.

AUDIT RESULTS

We found that OHRAS has generally implemented the Commission's Work Life program efficiently and effectively. The program is meeting its goals and objectives, is consistent with OPM guidance, and compares favorably with programs managed by other agencies. The 111 employees responding to our questionnaire indicated that they were generally satisfied with the program. They also indicated that the most popular Work/Life programs were the transit subsidy, credit hours, and alternative work schedules.

We asked employees if they agreed, disagreed or were neutral about several aspects of the program's implementation. Most of the questionnaire respondents were satisfied with these items, as shown below.

- | | Agreed |
|---|--------|
| • Program helped them balance their work and life | 69% |
| • Web site was user friendly | 74% |
| • Program information was readily available | 81% |

We are recommending several improvements to the program, as discussed below.

EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

During our review of the Work/Life programs at other agencies, we found that several programs used periodic employee surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. Employee surveys provide an opportunity for participants to share their ideas and concerns.

For example, numerous employees responding to our survey suggested adding an option of a four day work week, providing onsite childcare, expanding telework opportunities, improving the fitness center at the 901 E Street building, and reducing the cost of fitness center memberships.

Other respondents suggested weight watchers programs, transportation for disabled employees, financial hardship services, and additional program information for new employees. Our survey also identified a need for enhanced tuition assistance guidance, as discussed below.

Recommendation A

OHRAS should consider whether to adopt any of the enhancements suggested by our survey respondents. It should also periodically conduct voluntary employee surveys concerning the Work/Life program.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING VIA TELEWORK

The Commission's E-Learning Policy allows each employee a maximum of ten hours per month for on-line training during the regular tour of duty (although this is not intended to be used all at once). E-learning coursework can be completed wherever an employee has Internet access. Many employees now have such access at home. Most employees are authorized to work at home through a telework arrangement. These employees could participate in on-line training through a telework arrangement thereby enhancing both the Commission's training and telework programs.

Recommendation B

OHRAS should establish guidelines on combining work and E-Training while teleworking.

TUITION ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

As stated in the Background, OHRAS has implemented programs to assist employees with educational expenses. Employees can obtain reimbursement for up to four approved mission-related classes a year, at an accredited institution of their choice.

Some employees in our survey expressed confusion over the approval process for tuition assistance. Apparently, employees need more detailed guidance. For example, the guidance did not include examples of the types of classes normally approved and did not state whether graduate classes were eligible.

Recommendation C

OHRAS should include in their revised policy a sample of courses normally approved for reimbursement in the tuition assistance guidance. The guidance should also state whether graduate classes are eligible for reimbursement.

PROGRAM COORDINATORS

The Work/Life Program Officer has to provide guidance and information to all Commission employees. Reaching this many people requires many methods of communication.

OHRAS could train coordinators in each office on the provisions of the Work/Life program (especially the field offices). As a collateral duty, these coordinators would then provide information and answer questions about the program. They could also assist the Program Officer with data collection and feedback. Alternatively, OHRAS could assign additional staff to assist the manager.

Recommendation D

OHRAS should solicit volunteers from each office to serve as Work/Life Coordinators, and provide appropriate training.