

Reader Views

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Interview with Angelina B. Laycock Author of “Strategies for Reshaping the Workplace”

Angelina Laycock’s book is about developing a worker-friendly culture that supports business competitiveness. Welcome to Reader Views Angelina.

Irene: You recently published a book called “Strategies for Reshaping the Workplace.” Would you please tell our reading audience the gist of your book.

Angelina: There are many work/life books on the market today. Many are the results of great research in the field and others deal with success of work/life programs of major organizations. My publication is unique in that it takes an applied approach and offers a roadmap for developing policies and programs that are simple to implement, and are feasible for even small and mid-size companies.

Irene: In your book, you use the term “work/life movement. Would you explain what that means?”

Angelina: The work/life movement started in the 1970’s. It is an attempt to make the workplace more family-friendly. It encompasses all policies and programs that employers may offer to their employees that help them better balance the demands of work and the needs of their personal lives. Wellness programs, help with dependent care issues and workplace flexibility are some of the key options within family-friendly programs.

Irene: Is child-care one of the key options that is gaining ground?

Angelina: It is a key option because it is only the availability of good childcare that enables people to go to work. More and more large corporations are recognizing this. However, small companies cannot offer on-site or near-site care but they can do other things that support the childcare needs of their employees. This includes offering pre-tax dependent care accounts and offering flexibility in their work schedules. I would like to add that the next big need is going to be care of elderly dependents. Businesses are only beginning to consider this need.

Irene: Why are organizations offering work/life options to their employees and what are the business advantages of doing so?

Angelina: Businesses that offer work/life programs are becoming aware of the predicted population demographics for the near future. It is estimated that by 2010 64% of the workforce will be at retirement age. While all of them may not choose to retire, there

clearly will be less people available to work. There simply will be fewer new (younger) workers available to fill the needs of business and industry. Also, the new generation of workers is determined to have some balance in their lives and is more willing to move on if their employer will not support their needs. It is evident in much of the recent research that being a family-friendly employer means that your workers are more loyal, more productive and tend to stay with the organization. Retention of employees is important because turnover is very costly. Being able to recruit and retain workers is a key business advantage of being family-friendly.

Irene: What are the most important things related to work/life balance that employers can offer their employees and why?

Angelina: There are two options that employers can offer that are critical. One is helping with the dependent needs of workers and the other is offering flexibility. Employees with children and increasingly more often, those with elderly dependents need help in meeting the needs of those dependent on them. Offering workplace flexibility by allowing such options as modifying work schedules, telecommuting, working less than full time and job sharing are truly needed by people today.

Irene: It seems that family-friendly programs more prevalent in larger companies and organizations. What advice do you have for the smaller, sole-proprietorship companies, that feel they can't offer family-friendly programs.

Angelina: This is a major point that I make in my book. Every company, regardless of size, can be family-friendly. There are many options that really do not cost much if anything. For example, to allow an employee some work scheduling flexibility doesn't cost anything. It just rearranges the time when work gets done. Providing healthy food choices in company vending machines doesn't cost the employer. In fact, anything an employer does t encourage health can save on medical insurance costs. In most communities there are public programs that can provide wellness programs free. County health departments often will do smoking cessation or nutritional and weight control programs as part of their primary mission.

Irene: You believe that there needs to be a change in how managers lead. Please explain your concept.

Angelina: Managers know that their job is to get work done through their people. To do this today, they must also help their team members with individual issues. Workers who are distracted with family problems are not productive, are absent from work more and often leave if the conflict between work and family become too great. Managers are not counselors but they can help their people with issues that interfere with work. Performing more like a coach rather than a director involves skills that many first-time managers don't have but are needed in today's workplace. The successful manager acts as a guide in helping individuals while also getting the work done.

Irene: How do you convince management of the importance of being worker-friendly when there bottom-line is profit?

Angelina: When they are shown that employees are more productive when they are not concerned by personal issues, when the cost of turnover is calculated) many companies in the past never kept track of these costs) and when they recognize that family-friendly policies attract the best workers, they begin to realize that a worker-friendly corporate culture is highly related to their profit picture.

Irene: If you recall, the normal workweek was 40 hours. It seems that very few employees, especially those that have major responsibilities within a company, adhere to the 40 hour a week concept. Most say they can't get their work done within that time and often put in 2 to 4 hours extra per day. Isn't this a road to burn out? And why do people continue to work those extra hours?

Angelina: In some organizations, with downsizing and restructuring, fewer workers are doing more work. Also, technology encourages us to work more since we are tethered to work by laptops and cell phones, etc. Workplace stress is a major concern today and it takes its toll. Individuals need to find ways to better balance their work and their family needs and employers need to consider how work is done. Sometimes, by eliminating some tasks or changing the way work is done can ease worker stress. Work redesign is currently a hot topic and I believe those organizations that look seriously at finding new ways to work will be the leaders in creating great places to work.

Irene: Yes, work redesign is a hot topic. What are your perspectives on the first step to resigning?

Angelina: Obviously, it depends on the kind of work that needs to be done. The first step is to ask workers how things might be done differently to achieve more efficiency in the process. Those who do the work are closest to the problem and often come up with the most innovative suggestions. Management needs to approach this technique carefully because change or the suggestion of change can be threatening.

Irene: You seem to target your book for human resources personnel. Do you believe they are the first line of change? If so, why?

Angelina: Most human resource professionals know change is needed. They are confronted every day with the issues that employees face. They also are responsible for the hiring of staff and realize it is getting more difficult to fill positions. But HR people generally don't make policy. I see them as the messengers who remain passionate about the issues, gather the available evidence and continually make the business case for why change is an imperative for success.

Irene: It's a slow process to have a company change to include the work/life options for their employees. Do you have reference as to how long it would take to implement a basic program?

Angelina: You never finish. Becoming a family-friendly employer is an ongoing process. Things change, people's needs change and the needs of the organization can change. My suggestion is to take one small step at a time and monitor the effects and outcomes. Is this what our employees need, want, and does it make a difference in meeting our business objectives? These are the questions to ask.

Irene: What option do you suggest companies start with?

Angelina: To determine where to start, first ask your employees what would it take to help them best balance the demands of work and of their families lives? Usually their requests are modest. One small manufacturer who put his shop on a four-day (compressed) workweek, found that it saved on electricity, helped shorten commuting time for employees, allowed workers more time for family and allowed for emergency customer needs by leaving Fridays open for these occasional occurrences. It cost him nothing to implement, made work more efficient, increased worker satisfaction and increased profits by meeting customer needs.

Irene: Thank you so much for your time to talk with us. Is there anything else that you would like our reading audience to know about your, your concepts, and your book?

Angelina: I believe that work/life balance issues are just beginning to have its impact on the workplace. Those organizations who want to be successful in our changing economy must create work environments that allow everyone, from top executive to each worker, to experience a balance in both their work and their personal life. It is good for people and it is good for business.

My book is available at Amazon.com and at WorldatWork.org. I will be presenting at the national WorldatWork conference in May in California on this topic. Perhaps some of your readers connected to this field might consider attending. You may also contact me directly at: 734 663-6041.