

"Historic White House Forum on Flexibility"

The White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility – The Obama Administration Highlights the Need for Increased Access to Flexibility in the American Workplace

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Last week, the day-to-day challenges that go along with balancing work and family went from being the subject of so many kitchen table conversations to being front and center in the national spotlight.

Significance

President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility. The Forum sent a clear signal that expanding access to workplace flexibility is now a national policy priority, rather than an individual struggle that each employee and family must face alone. It highlighted the fact that workplace flexibility is essential to both supporting working families and strengthening our nation's economy. For us at Workplace Flexibility 2010, this was a turning point in the field of work and family in the United States.

A new conversation

The Forum brought together key leaders from business, labor, family and employee organizations, and academia to explore workplace flexibility strategies that are innovating workplaces in a range of industries and regions across the country. Participants heard about some of the best practices from around the nation, and worked to define new strategies for expanding access to flexibility for all employees, regardless of income level or profession.

During the Forum, Administration officials – including the President and the First Lady –highlighted the significant difference flexibility can make in the lives of working families. At the same time, the Administration put equal emphasis on the significant and positive impact flexibility can have in increasing business' competitive advantage. In fact, the event coincided with the release of a new report by the Council of Economic Advisers – “Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility” – underscoring the economic benefits of flexibility and the need to explore those benefits further.

It's personal: The Obamas' views

In the Forum's opening session, First Lady Michelle Obama shared that, *“Flexible policies actually make employees more – not less – productive. Instead of spending time worrying about what's happening at home, employees have the support and the peace of mind they need to concentrate at work which is good for their families – and the bottom line”*.

President Obama stressed that flexibility is, *“an issue that affects the well-being of our families and the success of our businesses. It affects the strength of our economy – whether we'll create the workplaces and jobs of the future that we need to compete in today's global economy”*.

Next steps

The White House is now developing plans to hold similar conversations on workplace flexibility in local communities around the United States. We at Workplace Flexibility 2010 are committed to supporting their efforts in order to keep the drumbeat around flexibility going – until it becomes the “new normal” in all our workplaces.

As a country we took a big leap forward last week in creating that “new normal.” As John Berry – Director of Personnel Management for the federal government – said, *“Flexibility is the new email. There are those employers that have it, and there are those that will.”* We are thrilled that flexibility is now being recognized for what it is – a key strategy for modernizing the American workplace, and for supporting the workers and families that make up today's workforce.