

Russell Forum

for Civic Life in Georgia
A Crossroads for Ideas



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Issue Guide: Work-Life Balance: How Do We Get Some?

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Location: Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, Athens, GA

Moderator: Monica Pereira, Pat Priest

Work/Life Balance: A Matter of Policy and Philosophy

Report by: Jill Severn

Policy and attitudes related to balancing work with quality of life were the focus of the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia's December informal Forum on Friday afternoon. Led by new moderators Monica Pereira and Pat Priest, the group of 12 participants used the Lattice Group's deliberative issue guide to consider three approaches to achieving a work/life balance.

Before the group tackled each approach they talked generally about the issue and their relationship to it. There was a wide range of ages in the forum group, and this diversity was reflected in participants' attitudes about the challenges of balancing work and life. Younger twenty-somethings who were either single or in relationships that didn't include children felt that often definitions of life balance were too narrowly defined around childcare and family issues in American society. For them time off to handle personal issues such as a sick pet were as valuable and important as time off to deal with sick children and other family matters.

Some of the older forum participants reflected on experiences and expectations from their earlier working lives when it was more typical for workers to achieve acclaim in their jobs by working long hours and always putting work before family. One forum participant remarked, "We used to say, you earn your paycheck from 9-5; you earn your promotion from 5-9!" Another focus of reflection was the impact of women in the workforce on the balance between work and home. When it was more typical for women to stay home and raise children, it was more feasible for men to work longer hours and still handle basic necessities of family life by making women responsible for family matters almost exclusively, but it often proscribed men's roles as engaged parents and partners. Another frame of reference raised by the group was an international perspective. Several people with knowledge of work

policies in other countries in Europe commented that the long vacation periods that are typical in these countries promote relationships among immediate and extended family that are complex and strong.

Finally, one forum participant commented that she felt that discussion of this topic in the midst of all the economic turmoil the country faces feels almost like a luxury since so many people aren't balancing work with life, but are struggling to balance their personal relationships and family connections with the time and energy and emotionally draining challenge of unemployment and economic hardship.

Informed by this historical and geographic overview of the issue, and chastened by the harsh reality of the economic times, the group moved to consider the three approaches:

- 1) **Balance is unrealistic:** this approach argues that to maintain the United States' competitive edge, worker productivity must remain the most important goal, and as such, people should develop realistic priorities even if it means difficult choices between work and family.

Most of the participants agreed with this idea that work and productivity in general are still a strong ethos in American society and that even though there are examples of more flexible work environments, there remains a strong belief among most Americans that hard work is still a core measure of one's value as a person. In the practical realm of what companies can afford and are willing to do for employees, several in the forum group commented that balance is particularly challenging and perhaps even unrealistic for hourly workers and those in service and health care sector jobs. As one participant explained, "We all want our 24-hour latte or coffee, but someone then has to serve that coffee/latte." The group agreed that health care and service workers, particularly those who are employed on an hourly basis, are probably under the most stress and in need of the most relief to achieve some measure of balance. The group mulled whether there was a way to provide greater flexibility for these types of employees despite the pressures on them to put work first for their own economic survival and their employer's bottom line.

A younger man in the forum commented that he understood and accepted that he will have to focus most of his time and energy on his new job when he graduates from college this fall, but that as he gets older and has a family he will want this balance to shift, enabling him to give attention to his non-work life. A woman in the forum felt strongly that mothers should be rearing their own children rather than place kids in day care; she argued that it wasn't necessarily wise to put career ahead of family for both parents, and one parent might have to work a lot so the other could be at home. Others in the group agreed that quality childcare was important, and that there were still greater burdens placed on women by American society to be both dedicated workers and dedicated parents/home keepers, but didn't see giving up work as the solution to the problem. This split in envisioning the role for workers, particularly women workers, was a tension that was not resolved in the course of the forum. This line of discussion led into discussion of the second approach.

- 2) **Balance is good for business:** this approach argues that implementing policies that help workers achieve better work/life balance is actually a good business strategy. Proponents of this

approach site studies that show that flexible work life policies improve productivity, increase the pool of competent workers, and retain good workers over time.

Many in the group saw this approach as an ideal model, citing the examples of progressive companies such as Google that have invested time and resources in making the work experience engaging and flexible for its employees. Workplace amenities such as an on-site day care center or gym are examples of offerings companies are using to attract and keep good employees. Although the group marveled at some of the more elaborate incentives, many felt that basic flexibility of scheduling, provisions for childcare, and generous leave policies were likely sufficient to achieve the aims of this approach and might cost less. Other again felt that these “great place to work” companies were only a small part of the U.S. economy and that more traditional production or service-oriented businesses where workers did not have to be highly skilled to do their jobs rarely offered these types of basic or more glamorous perks. Several in the group commented that to make basic flexibility available more broadly to American workers, a case would have to be constructed that would convince companies that flexibility for workers would benefit their bottom line—hard to do in the economic times in which we find ourselves. Alternately, the government would have to intervene in behalf of workers. This line of discussion segued perfectly into consideration of the third approach...

- 3) **Balance is a social responsibility:** Proponents of this approach argue that the current work/life model is bad for American families and perpetuates gender-based inequalities. The government plays a role in this approach by providing, mandating, and enforcing paid maternity and paternity leave, paid sick leave, and public childcare.

Initially, the group spent some time revisiting what constitutes the life side of the work/life balance, and several participants reiterated that life should not be defined as synonymous with family. The macro focus of this approach also spurred the group to discuss that more needs to be made of the positive impact that happy balanced workers have on society as whole in terms of stability, productivity, and general well-being. One participant used the example of Sweden’s work policies to demonstrate that there were declines in problems such as juvenile delinquency and crime in general.

The group then also discussed the tradeoffs of a greater role for government in mandating and enforcing workplace policies. Several people raised concerns about giving the government wider latitude to control workplace policy including higher taxes, loss of revenue streams to charitable organizations that provide support for workers and their families, and fears of mismanagement by the government. The group also threshed the validity of people’s concerns that too much government involvement would usher in socialism in the United States. The group agreed that most of the rhetoric around socialism as evil was overstated and designed to whip people into a frenzy and blind them to some of the more reasonable possibilities of government participation in solving problems. That said, most in the group saw government’s ideal role in helping people to achieve work/life balance was as a coordinator or facilitator of ideas and innovation that would provide incentives for the private sector to move to a more flexible and happy workplace. Some also saw a role for the government to be an enforcer of laws and regulations as well, but there was no consensus on this.

After considering the three approaches, the group took time to reflect on the meaning of the forum to themselves as individuals, as members of groups or organizations where these issues originate, and as Americans concerned about the overall development of the nation. Several participants said they planned to talk about work/life balance with their families and among their friends and colleagues. Some supervisors also promised to model a more balanced approach to work and life for those they supervise and to think about ways that they might examine their own workplaces for improvements.

The group spent the last moments of the forum pondering the question posed by the recorder, who summarized the comments of the group as being those driven by philosophy and those driven by practical, economic matters. The question was, would it be easier to achieve better work/life balance for Americans by engaging their beliefs and values related to work in K-12 and higher education settings, or by following a more pragmatic approach to changing the workplace by convincing and demonstrating to employers that there is economic value in having happy balanced workers, or, perhaps by encouraging workers to consider their options for greater agency through collective bargaining or other less formal associations?

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit

<http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg>, call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com