



Success on Our Own Terms

SWE General Position Statement on the Need for Work & Life Integration Policies to Retain Women in STEM

Workplace flexibility isn't just a women's issue. It's 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.

-President Barack Obama March 31, 2010

The Current Situation in the United States

Women need to be able to integrate the various aspects of their lives to be successful on their own terms, for both career and family. In this context, “integrate” means “to form, coordinate or blend into a functioning or unified whole.” In SWE, “Work & Life Integration” is our defining term for women in engineering and technology seeking to achieve the blend of having a satisfying career and supporting family commitments. Work & life integration has always been a priority for our organization. SWE has also published white papers addressing the retention of women in engineering, which support the findings that women leave their places of employment largely due to a lack of flexibility.ⁱ To further support work & life integration, SWE recognizes the accomplishments of women in STEM through our Awards program and offers webinars to members to help them deal with this initiative. In 2012, the SWE Mega Issue Committee conducted interviews and a survey of membership to provide additional insights into work & life integration challenges. Interviews with working mothers who have an engineering background in a technical field from eight different employers revealed the following key insights:

- Support outside of work came from extended family and friends.
- Activities outside of work were primarily family oriented.
- Work & Life Integration resources influenced the enhancement of their work performance.
- Projects at work that demanded extra hours are the biggest challenge to achieving Work & Life Integration.
- Women obtained the majority of their professional development at SWE's Annual Conference.
- Offering flexible schedules is the most effective mechanism for promoting work & life integration.
- Providing part-time positions with no cultural or career-negative consequences is another helpful mechanism for promoting work & life integration.
- Participants would like to see more job sharing and flexible work schedules offered by employers.

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SWE Data



The survey conducted by the SWE Mega Issue Committee in 2012 was completed by over 400 participants from across the United States. Demographics of participants were equally split between women with and without children. Of the participants, 70 percent were married, while 30 percent were single. The following insights were gleaned from this survey:

- 72 percent believe that work & life policies have not contributed to fulfilling career dreams.
- 40 percent do not have a supervisor who takes an active approach to ensuring their career path progresses during periods of increased need for work & life integration. Note: one in three leave an employer due to climate, boss or culture. ⁱⁱ
- 20 percent work for companies that do not provide telecommuting or flextime.
- 16 percent work for companies that provide part-time options, but they are afraid to use these options because they fear negative consequences to their career. 3 percent have used part-time and have had negative career consequences.
- 32 percent work for companies that do not offer part-time options.
- 50 percent of participants have thought about leaving, declined offers or left companies due to lack of work & life integration policies.
- 76 percent of respondents believe the demands of their work schedule are their top struggle in the pursuit of their ideal work & life integration.
- 47 percent of respondents believe that flexible work schedules are the most important enabler to achieving work & life integration.

The Global Landscape for Work & Life Integration

Work & life integration is a challenge that has been addressed effectively in other countries in the modern world. More than 10 countries now leverage national programs to manage parental assistance, offering six months or more of paid maternity leave. Furthermore, global standards exist. The International Labour Organization has published comprehensive standards for working parents, and these standards have been widely adopted throughout the world. At this time, the U.S.'s only national policy is the 1993 Family Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA provides job protection and up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave. In the US, paid parental leave varies from state-to-state and employer-to-employer, and is often handled as short-term disability. There is a gap between the U.S. and our peers in the modern world in terms of paid parental policies and programs.

The National Landscape for Work & Life Integration

In 2012, SWE delegates attended a White House briefing given by First Lady Michelle Obama. Mrs. Obama spoke to the importance of supporting girls and women to enter and continue in STEM careers. This event also recognized the launch of the National Science Foundation's "Career-Life Balance Initiative," which provides greater work-related flexibility to its grantees. The Project on Women Engineers Retention also published "Stemming the Tide," funded by the National Science Foundationⁱⁱⁱ. This groundbreaking research specifically focused on why women leave engineering. This research had many key findings relevant to work & life integration for parents:

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- Women engineers who are confident about managing multiple work/non-work roles experience low levels of work/non-work conflict.
- Women engineers who handled excessive, conflicting work-role demands and worked in environments where women were treated in a condescending manner experienced considerable work/non-work conflict.
- Women engineers experienced low levels of work/non-work conflict when they worked for organizations supportive of, and accommodating toward, their employees' concerns for work-life balance.
- Women engineers experienced high levels of work/non-work conflict when they reported working for organizations with family-friendly cultures and used some of the work-life benefits provided to them.

SWE is a leading partner for many global and national corporations, large and small. SWE's Corporate Partnership Council (CPC) has been actively engaged in the conversation of the work & life integration needs of our members. Although work & life integration programs and policies are leveraged and can benefit employers to recruit and retain women engineers, these accommodations are not a standard required by all employers. States such as California and New Jersey are raising the bar by passing family friendly policies.

It is time for this gap in our national policy and programs to be addressed. In 2013, we marked a significant milestone: the 20th anniversary of the Federal Medical Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA has proven to be the last resort of protection for many, but it is underutilized due to the significant impact it has on family economics. Despite recent work in Washington to enhance FMLA, no progress has been made. New bills have been pending, such as the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act ([FAMILY Act](#)) (S. 786) and the [Healthy Families Act](#) (H.R. 932), which address the gap in the FMLA. The FAMILY Act would create a self-sustaining national family and medical leave insurance program that would strengthen the workforce, families, businesses and our economy. It is modeled on successful and effective state-paid leave insurance laws, and would help working women and men meet their care-giving demands while reducing economic inequality and improving economic opportunities for all. The Healthy Families Act would allow workers to earn up to seven paid sick days from their employer annually to be used to recover from illness, access preventive care, care for a sick family member, or to allow victims of domestic violence to seek services. If we fail to include globally accepted work & life integration standards in the U.S. conversation, we risk disappointing and discouraging the thousands of young engineers we are actively supporting to aspire to STEM careers.

Call to Action

We are now experiencing tremendous momentum for SWE to promote women engineers' needs for work & life integration. SWE is positioned, connected and knowledgeable on the needs, risks and existing standards for work & life integration policy and programs. SWE supports and defends Title IX to provide women and girls the opportunity to pursue an engineering education, and Equal Opportunity, for women to have every right to engineering opportunities. It is the right time for SWE to formally advocate for improvements in work & life integration for all engineers, especially women with family obligations, to achieve success on their own terms.

In May 2014, SWE released the [***Work & Life Integration Playbook***](#). This playbook gives insight into five key areas for improving work and life integration:

- Flexibility in the workplace
- Programs for parents
- Health and wellness
- Care for dependents and other loved ones
- Financial support

Within each of these areas, the authors of the Playbook describe the issue, explain why it is relevant to work and life integration, and offer practical, concrete examples of how employers are addressing the issue. Case studies highlight successful programs that can be replicated.

We ask all employers of women in STEM to turn this Playbook into a reality to ensure a flexible work environment where women can experience success on their own terms.

ⁱ Corporate Retention of Women Engineers; Mega Issue Focus Interest Group

ⁱⁱ POWER Study

ⁱⁱⁱ "Stemming the Tide", funded by the National Science Foundation

