



Report of the Hillel Task Force on Balancing Professional and Personal Lives

November 2002

Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community

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Introduction

Advancing Women Professionals (AWP), the first initiative of the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy, was created as a catalyst for changing the conditions linked to gender inequity within the Jewish communal world. Jewish professional women are dramatically under-represented in senior management and executive positions in Jewish organizations. The initial program strategy has been the formation of Pilot Groups, a group of leading Jewish institutions that are working with AWP to design and implement various intervention strategies. Over time, these organizations will serve as “demonstration projects,” testing bold new models and practices, monitoring their progress, and sharing their experiences with the community at large.

From the outset, Hillel emerged as an important candidate for the Pilot Group. First, Hillel had demonstrated its readiness for change initiatives, particularly as linked to organizational excellence. Second, Hillel recognized that its institutional vitality and success depended on the quality of professional staff at the local level. Thus, any interventions that would enlarge the applicant pool and increase staff retention would position Hillel as a magnet for young Jews seeking careers in the Jewish community. The result was that Hillel, and its President and International Director, Richard Joel, recognized that the Pilot Group project offered an opportunity to help Hillel evolve as an institution where initiatives to promote gender equity could be linked with programs that enhance organizational capacity.

Methodology

Interviews and Discussion: AWP conducted approximately 45 interviews with current and former Hillel directors, associate directors and Schusterman International Center (SIC) staff members. In addition, at the Staff Conference last winter, Shifra Bronznick, AWP's Founding President, and Riva Silverman, AWP's Project Manager, facilitated a discussion that addressed the specific satisfactions and challenges of working at Hillel. AWP's team also convened a first-time meeting of women Hillel Directors, to discuss their particular experiences.

A number of significant issues were identified during these discussions, and AWP, together with the professional leadership of Hillel, developed three possible intervention strategies. First, Hillel may explore opportunities for showcasing women as organizational leaders. Second, Hillel may launch a professional development initiative to supplement its existing coaching program for campus directors. In doing so, Hillel would take a proactive role in identifying and supporting high-potential women within its institutional ranks, by providing the particular skills and professional experiences that these women need in order to advance at Hillel. The coaching initiative would be linked to the leadership showcasing effort, so that the women included in these initiatives would be given appropriate venues to practice and demonstrate their skills. These proposals are still in the development phase.

Finally, the difficulty of managing conflicting professional and personal demands emerged as the most urgent and troubling issue. Hillel professionals, both women and men, are seeking to integrate their professional and personal lives. However, the breadth of Hillel's mission, and the passion with which staff pursue their work, combined with the constraints of small staff size, make it especially difficult to achieve work-life balance. The result is a culture of overworked professionals who, given the complex challenges of their positions, are struggling to avoid burnout and to overcome pervasive feelings of inadequacy.

Task Force Formation: AWP, in collaboration with Hillel's senior management team, created a task force to stimulate new thinking about work-life balance and to develop a set of recommendations. The formation of this task force, comprised of 14 Hillel professionals who represent a cross section of the institution's "marketplace," sent a strong message to the entire Hillel community, validating the importance of this issue and identifying it as a key element to Hillel's future success.

The task force's first meeting via conference call in September was devoted to an examination of the problem of personal-professional balance at Hillel, by identifying the root causes and the cultural norms that sustain the problem and suggesting possible solutions. The task force then met for two days in October to deepen their understanding of the problem and to envision what "success" might look like, depending on various interventions and strategies.

Findings

Background Issues: There was consensus among task force members that managing conflicting professional and personal demands is enormously difficult at Hillel. Many professionals believe they function in a profound "double bind"; that is, their work suffers when they engage deeply in their personal lives, while their personal lives suffer when they devote maximum time to their professional responsibilities. This conflict has resulted in notable consequences, for both the individuals and the institution. Some professionals, both women and men, report that they have considered whether or not to attend graduate school, get married, or even to have a child because of their commitment to Hillel. Others, including JCSC fellows and professionals, have left Hillel to pursue other options because they were convinced they could not lead well-integrated lives while continuing to work at Hillel.

Root Causes: The task force identified the following root causes of the problem:

- **Hillel as a calling:** Working at Hillel is more than a job; for many, it is a calling. People feel passionately about working at Hillel. This level of motivation offers great rewards, but also brings unintended consequences. The line between personal and professional life frequently becomes blurred as people take on more than they can reasonably handle. Since the nature of Hillel work is “maximizing the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews,” many staff members often feel compelled to consistently increase their hours and schedule of commitments.
- **Organizational culture:** Individual expectations of commitment to Hillel are compounded by an organizational culture where performance is often measured by “face time,” with “badges of honor” awarded for overwork.
- **Stakeholder expectations:** Hillel professionals answer to many constituencies -- students, board members, the local Jewish community federations, and SIC staff. There are at least two consequences of this structure. First, Hillel professionals often answer to more than one boss (e.g., their local board, their immediate supervisor, the SIC, etc.). Second, each stakeholder brings specific expectations to the staff, and these demands frequently fall outside the boundaries of the normal workday, particularly where students are concerned.
- **Lifestyle assumptions:** While many assumptions are often made about individuals with young children, this issue also impacts single people who may be asked to work on nights or weekends since they do not “present” family commitments.
- **Director’s role:** The role of the Hillel director has changed dramatically over the last decade. What used to be a quasi-professorship – rabbis teaching and counseling students – has evolved into a complex CEO position. Hillel directors now supervise staff, create new programs, raise money, manage facilities, and interact with university professionals. This increased professional scope and degree of responsibility, despite the best intentions, has yet to be matched, with appropriate levels of infrastructure and support staff.

- **Organizational skills:** Directors need training and professional development opportunities, specifically to build management and supervisory skills. The lack of such skills inhibits directors from effectively managing their limited staff and efficiently managing a full spectrum of organizational initiatives and tasks.
- **Personnel Policies:** There are few formal structures or policies in place to help people balance professional and personal life (e.g., flex time, comp time, etc.). Special arrangements occasionally are made on an individual basis (e.g., working at home one morning a week, etc.); however, because these adjustments have not been integrated into formal personnel policies, access remains limited. Furthermore, the ad hoc nature of these arrangements makes it difficult to identify and share best practices; that is, which adjustments and schedules have worked well while maintaining high professional standards.
- **Annual calendar:** Formerly, the work of Hillel adhered to the academic schedule, with staff working long hours while students were on campus and using academic breaks to take vacations and engage in personal pursuits and family life. While some Hillel professionals still enjoy restful vacations, especially in the summer, many professionals find that they do not benefit as fully from school breaks, since these periods may include other organizational tasks, such as fundraising, birthright israel, etc.
- **Scheduling:** While there are serious efforts to juggle the diverse schedules and time zones of Hillel professionals across the country, some staff members feel that meetings and phone calls intended for the national organization more often accommodate East Coast staff. This imbalance tends to exacerbate the “total time on the job” problem for professionals in the Midwest, and especially those on the West Coast.
- **Local environment:** Hillel staff finds it particularly challenging to balance professional and personal life in a small town. The difficulty of developing a personal life and a religious community is intensified by the lack of privacy. As one Hillel director noted, “Everywhere I go, I am Hillel.”

- ***Public relations vs. organizational practice:*** Many people describe the difficulty in balancing professional and personal demands at Hillel as, “They talk the talk but they don’t walk the walk.” Throughout the organization – both at the SIC and in the field, from senior managers to JSCS fellows – there is a constant refrain about the importance of spending time away from work, to be with family and friends. However, there is consensus that this model is rarely practiced. This raised the question about what role models are being presented to students considering work in the Jewish community.

Recommendations

Developing strategies that reflect the nuances of the diverse settings, roles, and responsibilities of Hillel professionals will require ingenuity, honesty and accountability from everyone in the Hillel community. New initiatives, policies and programs need to be designed carefully to take into account the ways in which they affect the individuals involved, the work itself, and the cultural norms of Hillel. The recommendations from the task force suggest a comprehensive program that fosters both creative thinking and concrete initiatives.

1) Create an environment that encourages discussion about balancing professional and personal demands.

There is a need for widespread, systemic support for integrating life and work, both among those who feel they are successful “navigators” and those who are experiencing difficulty. The value of balancing professional and personal lives needs to be inculcated into the Hillel culture with the same commitment and enthusiasm as the concepts of “renaissance,” “empowerment,” and “excellence.” And, just as other core values are framed in the context of Jewish values, the concept of personal-professional balance must also be articulated as a core Jewish value.

Once an atmosphere of “discussable” has been established, concrete steps should be taken to ensure open, honest exchange:

- **Leadership model:** The senior management team should take responsibility for this issue; first, by educating themselves, and then by promoting these values. This does not necessarily mean that individual members of the senior staff have to serve as role models; rather, that they legitimize diverse work models that exemplify the meaning of personal-professional balance.
- **Organizational culture:** The value of personal-professional balance should inform ongoing learning opportunities in multiple venues, (e.g., student, staff and lay conferences, etc.) and should be reinforced in publications, communication vehicles, and teaching materials. Successful initiatives in other fields – from academia to the professions, from the private sector to the public arena – should be mined as a source of wisdom and inspiration for Hillel.
- **Smart strategies:** Formal and informal opportunities should be created for sharing effective practices, both locally and nationally.
- **Policy development:** Personnel policies with clear expectations regarding personal-professional balance need to be developed and integrated, with mechanisms in place to discuss, monitor and evaluate such policies.
- **Hiring guidelines:** SIC staff who participate in search committees should engage lay leaders in conversations about this issue, to raise awareness and build support.
- **Performance standards:** Revised policies should be integrated into job descriptions and included in annual performance reviews, with an “inventory” for self-evaluation respective to personal-professional balance. Such policies will increase accountability for senior-level staff to create an environment that values and promotes personal-professional balance.
- **Retention and attrition:** Human Resources professionals should regularly conduct exit interviews to learn why people leave Hillel – and address those concerns.

- **Professional development:** Coaches for the PCI initiative should participate in an educational program to integrate the value of personal-professional balance into their work.
- **National standards:** Accreditation standards should include balancing indicators (e.g., “staff reports that...,” etc.).

2) Develop a more thorough professional development process.

A professional development program should improve the overall quality of supervision and coaching in general. Members of the task force identified two primary interventions for professional development that are expected to increase effectiveness of Hillel staff, increase retention, and ultimately give staff more time for their personal lives.

- **Supervision:** A supervision component should provide management training, with an emphasis on priority setting and accountability throughout the staff hierarchy. If professionals are supervised, and can more effectively supervise their staffs, this will undoubtedly lead to more effective work environments and lower turnover rates. This, in turn, will free directors from the time-consuming proposition of interviewing, hiring, and training new staff. The supervision program should reflect previous supervisory initiatives (e.g., various management workshops at staff conferences, etc.) and be integrated into current training modules (e.g., PCI, etc.). The PCI supervisory cadre should also be expanded to include more professionals.
- **Job and skills analysis:** Professional development should focus specifically on the spectrum of skills that field staff needs to perform existing jobs (e.g., time management, budgeting, prioritizing, development, human resources, etc.). An analysis of numbers of professionals and administrative support required to staff any given program will also help Hillel develop a more efficient allocation of skills and staff. For example, the establishment of the birthright israel program as a major campus initiative did not result in a commensurate increase in staffing.

Stretching an expanded workload over limited staff threatens the quality of all programming.

3) Involve lay leaders in the process of addressing this challenge.

Hillel lay leaders have already demonstrated their receptivity to the issue of personal-professional balance, as evidenced by their responses to the AWP initiative during their Board of Directors meeting on October 28. To create sustained cultural change, Hillel's international and local lay leaders must be brought directly into the change process. They must be educated about the critical issues, in order to build commitment and motivate the development of appropriate policies. The rationale for such policies is clear: greater work-life balance will lead to more effective performance. The broader implication is that, because such balance will result in higher retention rates, the institution will generate conditions for sustained excellence.

4) Develop formal personnel policies that promote balance and flexibility.

The Human Resources department must take a leading role in the development, implementation and oversight of policies related to balance. While it would be inappropriate to make specific policy recommendations, the task force identified several areas for investigation. These include comp time; flex time, maternity leave, flexible benefits, sick leave (specifically, transferring leave between foundations), and childcare policies (from childcare at conferences to reimbursed childcare costs for evening hours).

As new policies are crafted, Hillel professionals should be encouraged to share best practices with their colleagues in the field. In addition, multiple stakeholders from the field, as well as the SIC, should be involved in reviewing and revising these policies. Finally, the Human Resources Department should regularly scan the external environment to ensure that Hillel learns from the best practices of other organizations.

5) Recognize that initiatives that promote excellence can be linked to promoting balance.

Hillel now has the opportunity to help its professionals to “work smarter, not harder,” by revising a concept of productivity that has heretofore depended on the number of hours spent at work, rather than specific accomplishments and program excellence. A more balanced work environment is likely to launch a positive cycle in which more time for personal life reduces employee stress, which in turn leads to better work performance, which generates greater personal satisfaction, and so forth.

- ***Performance standards:*** Success should be explicitly assessed in the context of professional accomplishments, rather than the informal system many believe to be pervasive, which tallies the number of hours worked. This will require supervisors and staff to adhere to the program that already exists, by developing performance expectations that reflect the reality and constraints of budget, staff size, and the prevailing environment at each local foundation.
- ***Creative Programming:*** Hillel should also explore and publicize other creative ways to increase productivity while decreasing the number of hours worked by any one individual. Local Hillel foundations should take advantage of other local Jewish resources to assist with programs; for example, by inviting a local Jewish Studies professor or assistant rabbi to lead services occasionally.

Conclusion

The issue of integrating professional and personal lives is critical to the work force at large, and particularly so in the Jewish community. Hillel is taking an important step forward in addressing the challenge of work-life balance.

Some of the recommendations in this report will require a change in mind-set and cultural norms. While this will necessitate sustained educational efforts and systemic change,

these recommendations will have very little or no financial costs. Other recommendations, such as those related to supervision and staff development, are already being addressed as part of Hillel's overall institutional development. It is the hope of this task force that, as Hillel develops these initiatives, the lens of professional-personal life balance will also be applied. Finally, there are some recommendations that will indeed require an investment of resources at the local and/or international center level. Hopefully, the benefits of allocating resources to programs and policies that enhance the ability of professionals to find an appropriate balance between competing professional and personal demands will be clear to the leadership of local foundations as well as the SIC.

The task force has concluded its work thus far with a lofty goal: that Hillel, through its discussions, activities, and policies, will address the work-life balance issue so effectively that it will become an employer of choice and a beacon in the Jewish community.