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Family-Supportive Supervisors Can Lead to Healthier Workers

Portland State University Center part of NIH \$30 M initiative to improve worker health and business work-family practices

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October 1, 2008 (Portland, Oregon) – Researchers at the Center for Work-Family Stress, Safety and Health (CWFSSH), housed at Portland State University, were just awarded \$4.1M grant to take part in a 5-year study evaluating innovative workplace change initiatives designed to improve employee health. Drs. Leslie Hammer of Portland State University and Ellen Ernst Kossek at Michigan State University are collaborating with other research centers to refine and expand the research they recently completed training supervisors to be more supportive of their employees' work and family demands. In that study, Hammer and Kossek identified behaviors consistent with being a "family-supportive supervisor" and developed a training program around those behaviors. Follow-up research showed that employees with family-supportive supervisors reported better overall health, lower blood pressure, lower turnover intentions, improved safety, and greater productivity, when compared with employees whose supervisors who weren't as supportive.

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CWFSSH's research is part of a larger collaborative, The Work, Family and Health Network (WFHN) funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control, which is examining how company policies supportive of working families affect the health and well-being of employees and their families. In addition to Portland State University and Michigan State University, the network is comprised of interdisciplinary research teams from the University of Minnesota, Penn State University, Harvard University, Kaiser Permanente's Center for Health Research, and RTI International. In addition, consultants at Oregon Health Sciences University, Northwest Education, Training and Assessment, and Culture Rx, are contributing their expertise.

The centers, who worked individually in Phase I, are now combining their efforts to create an overall workplace change initiative, which includes the aforementioned supervisory training, increasing employee control over time, and organizational culture shift from being time- to results-oriented. "This is a huge collaborative effort that combines the best methodological and intervention aspects of the individual center projects," Hammer stated.

Kossek sees the study as timely, given our current economic crisis. "Businesses are searching for new ways to manage in a tough economy. Our study shows that just teaching managers to be more supportive can have cost savings for turnover, lower stress, which all affect the bottom line." These cost savings could translate to lower health care costs as well.

The findings of the project should be of great interest to a wide variety of audiences, from work-family researchers to supervisors, looking to improve the immediate work-family environment. The methods used in the work-place intervention will be made available at the completion of the project, along with an analysis of its affects on employee health and well-being.

To read more and keep informed about the ongoing PSU-MSU project, please visit the CWFSSH website at www.wfsupport.psy.pdx.edu. For information about the larger Network, please link to www.workfamilyhealthnetwork.org. In addition, some of the initial findings are being reported in forthcoming articles in the Journal of Management and Harvard Business Review.

About the researchers:

Dr. Leslie Hammer is a professor of psychology at Portland State University and the Director of the Center for Work-Family Stress, Safety and Health at Portland State. Dr. Hammer is also the founding president of the Society for Occupational Health Psychology, and a co-author of *Working Families Caring for Children and Aging Parents; Effects on Work and Well-Being*. (hammerl@pdx.edu)

Dr. Ellen Ernst Kossek is a professor of human resources in the School of Labor and Industrial Relations at Michigan State University and the Co-Director of the Center for Work-Family Stress, Safety and Health. She is also a co-author of *CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age*.and is the 2008 Sage Scholarship Award Recipient. (kossek@msu.edu)