

FAST FACTS SPOTLIGHT SITE PEOPLE ARE TALKING LINKS MEETINGS
 HC RECRUITER NEWSFEED CAREER CENTER TOP MSA_s ASSOCIATIONS



HR Plaza PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT...

Day After Day

The Childless Backlash: Myth or Fact?

by Dorrit T. Walsh

Family. Work. Those are two words that never used to mix when it came to your job. But that was in the old days, when the men drove off to work in shiny, gas-guzzling cars while the women in aprons stayed home and did housework wearing June Cleaver dresses. It was even like that in the not-so-old days of the high-flying 80s, when many workers, both men and women, only cared about making as much money as possible and clawing their way to "the top," families and personal lives be damned.

But, as times change so do attitudes, and now the world of work is, thankfully, a more forward-thinking place. Employers realize that a woman might be the chief breadwinner of a household, even if she's married. Or that a man might turn down a promotion if it involves relocation. Most businesses recognize the importance of and need for a diverse workforce. And the word "family," once forbidden in the workplace, is now embraced wholeheartedly. There's the Family and Medical Leave Act, and a whole new emphasis on work/family benefits. There's just one little problem--many employers seem to have forgotten that the word family doesn't always equal children.

Feeling Shortchanged, Taken Advantage of, and Ignored

In today's family friendly workplace, people without children often feel shortchanged when it comes to benefits, access to options such as telecommuting and flextime, and leeway with time off for personal matters. A company offers daycare, but what about the employees without children? What are they getting that's the equivalent of the daycare benefit?

Or how about this example: At a department meeting, a boss announces that she wants a few people to start working 7 am. But she nods to the women with young children and says something like, "Oh, but I know you're busy then," and then starts scanning the rest of the group for candidates. The childless workers are angry but burn inwardly and try to look invisible to avoid being picked for the new early shift. Unfortunately, this isn't a fabricated example of preferential treatment often awarded to employees with children. It's a true story, reported anonymously to a writer of the *Kansas City Star* by a childless worker who was at the meeting.

Other complaints? Many childless workers are particularly annoyed at having to pick up the slack for coworkers who leave early because of a child-oriented reason, whether it's a softball game, school play or PTA meeting. They feel discouraged because they're working more, but the workers they're covering for end up advancing at the same pace.

Also, childless workers often feel that things that matter in their personal lives aren't taken as seriously as a child is. A childless employee with a federal government agency in Baltimore was appalled when he was criticized for

taking a vacation day to take care of his cat after it was hit by a car. He was particularly angry because when coworkers stay home with a children who are sick, no one thinks anything of it. Maybe the policy isn't actually written down, but actions and attitudes like this imply that children are an acceptable excuse for taking time off, but nothing else is, hence, a double standard.

Some childless employees have even felt the need to band together and start organizations. One of the most well-known of these is "Childfree Network," founded by business owner Leslie Lafayette. Ms. Lafayette believes that it's hard to speak up on this issue, because in many organizations employees with children are in the majority. The goal of Childfree Network isn't to take away from one group, but to ensure that *all* employees, whether they have children or not, receive the same benefits, treatment, and attention.

The Survey Says. . .

Many people, particularly employers, think the term "backlash" is too strong to describe the feelings of childless workers, and maybe it is. But the facts show that at the very least, childless workers do have concerns about their treatment.

The Work-Family Research and Advisory Panel of the Conference Board (a nonpartisan business research organization) released a report in May of 1997, on "The Childless Employee." The report found that almost 75 percent of the employer representatives polled believe that concerns about backlash from childless employees are overblown. However, less than half of them, 44 percent, were willing to go on record as saying that childless employees "harbor no resentment against employees with children."

Forty-two percent of those questioned said that childless employees feel they're subsidizing healthcare and other benefits for employees with children, and only 57 percent felt that their companies are "adequately addressing childless employees' needs." And although companies said that childless employees have access to the same services that employees with children have, childless employees said that their use of programs like flextime and telecommuting is limited.

Another survey, taken in April of 1996 by *Personnel Journal*, found that 80 percent of employers and employees polled felt that single workers without children carried more of the load at work, but their needs received less attention than their colleagues with children.

Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

If this is in fact a golden age for employees with young children, it appears to be slowly fading to black. Although every workplace is different, overall, workers with children are no longer the norm. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, currently over 60 percent of the workforce don't have children under the age of 18. Taking that a step further, the Census Bureau predicts that after 2005, the most common type of households will be single people and married couples without children. Eventually employers will have no choice but to address the needs of childless employees, because those employees will be in the majority.

Where Do We Go From Here?

First, attitudes need to change and companies need to see the big picture. In the zealotry to be politically correct, many companies went overboard with an emphasis on family, specifically translated to mean employees with children. They bent over backwards to offer things like adoption assistance, daycare and even lactation support services, while never having a clue that childless employees might feel left out and even resent the emphasis on parents. Or perhaps it was a simple case of "PLU," or "people like us." Meaning that the powers that be and/or policy makers are parents raising children, and assume most other employees are too.

Looking at the problem logically, the solution seems incredibly simple: treat all employees the same. This includes:

- Evaluating your company's benefits program to find any inequities;
- Referring to certain benefits as "work/life" rather than "work/family;"
- Applying the same rules to all employees, i.e. if it's okay for one employee to leave early to attend her child's soccer game, than it's okay for another employee to leave early for a reason that doesn't involve children. If telecommuting is an option, it should be offered on the basis of practicality, not according to who

has children.

In other words, put yourself in your employees' shoes. Realize that family doesn't just mean kids. It could be an employee's spouse, partner, parents, a group of friends, or even a much-loved pet. So it doesn't matter if someone is a parent, or married, or single, everyone has a life outside of the office and wants the opportunity to live that life to the fullest. It's up to employers to provide egalitarian benefits programs and policies, and ensure that their corporate cultures foster unbiased and non-preferential attitudes.

[People Are Talking About](#) | [Day After Day](#)
[HR Plaza](#)

Copyright 2000 For more information about this site, please e-mail HR Plaza's [producer](#).