

the SUNDAY TIMES

EMPLOYMENT TIMES

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Demands of a job and perception of workload

When work and family conflict, men are more likely than women to leave their jobs

Male and female employees are confronted with conflicts between work and family but men who believe they have a heavy workload are more likely to leave their jobs than their female counterparts. This is the conclusion of a Texas A&M University study, conducted by Ann Huffman, a doctoral student in psychology; Dr. Stephanie Payne, a Texas A&M professor of psychology; and Carl Castro of Walter Reed Army Research Institute. Their study examined whether the time demands of a job and perception of workload affected male workers more than women - and if the differences were enough to make male, more than female employees, want to leave their jobs.

"The short answer is 'yes,' gender does make a difference," Huffman says.

Their finding was presented at the recent Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's annual conference in Orlando.

"I think a lot of the time when people think about work-family



conflict, they immediately think of female employees - that they would be the ones to experience the conflict more so than men, but that was not what we found," Payne says.

According to the researchers, men have significantly higher levels of 'work-family angst' than women. And men, more than women, believe that long working hours are detrimental to their personal time, are too time consuming and greater numbers would consider leaving their jobs, in comparison to women.

A partial explanation is that the two sexes have traditionally played different roles. Stephanie Payne says that women are traditionally committed to roles that support the family and although they may be expending a lot of time at

work, they can still find the energy for family responsibilities.

Men, on the other hand, are more accustomed to the role of breadwinner and can find it difficult to adapt to increased demands of taking care of family and home, Payne explains.

Nevertheless, more men are being called upon to handle more family responsibilities, whether they are married with a working spouse and have children or they are single dads with child-care concerns, she notes.

"In terms of the way we think of men and women, and the roles they play, we're really not as far along as we would like to think we are when it comes to attitudes about gender," Huffman says.

"I think when women first started entering the workplace, they probably experienced work-family conflict during this transition, but now with things changing, men are going through this transition and experiencing the same type of conflict," she says.

Huffman notes that the work-

place is changing in increasing magnitude, with men assuming more family responsibilities while women are taking a more active role in the workplace.

The potential impact of this one trend alone, she says, is something that more and more organizations are paying attention to. Forward-thinking organizations know employees facing serious work-family conflicts are likely to leave their jobs if the demands interfere too much with their family responsibilities.

Therefore, organizations are working to provide a healthy balance between work and personal life. In fact, one national study found 70 percent of workers are not satisfied with their work-family balance, and half of those people are considering looking for new jobs because of problems of coping with both personal life and work.

"It seems that organizations will have to take this changing demographic into consideration if they are going to keep their employees productive and happy," Huffman says.

"In this day and age, the boundaries between work and home are less defined," Payne says. "With beepers, cell phones and email people are expected to respond to work demands even when they are physically some place else. The boundaries of 'when am I at home and when am I at work' are less clear."

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Concern for family issues may boost performance

Employee support programs are vulnerable to elimination in times of economic downturn due to bottom-line-only decisions according to Susan Lambert, Associate Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.

In a new book, *Work and Life Integration: Organizational, Cultural and Individual Perspectives*, co-edited by Susan Lambert and Ellen Ernst Kossek, Lambert argues that the business case for providing workers with supports for their personal lives is currently outdated and needs to be changed. "The field's quest to make a business case may have come at a cost," Lambert said. "Many early, formal employee supports largely operate as employer supports. They were designed to help workers keep their personal responsibilities from interfering with their job involvement and performance. The more time you spend with your children, the less time you're likely to have for your work."

Lambert considers that this attitude is slowly changing. In particular, a group of not-for-profit organizations concerned with work and family issues has begun to argue that the business case should be addressed at the bigger picture and move from "a narrow focus on short-term profitability to a longer-term strategy of investing in employee and community well-being."

For example, programs such as on-site day care have been offered and promoted by some businesses as a means to improve profitability by reducing employee absenteeism and turnover, said Lambert, who, along with doctoral student Elaine Waxman, also reports on research conducted in Chicago-area corporations in the

book.

Still, a business case needs to be made for accommodating family interests when dealing with employees. Employers must group work-life policies with other human resource strategies that invest in workers, Lambert said.

Contributors to the book contend that firms should be reminded that they gain a competitive



advantage when they pursue their profits through quality enhancement, rather than cost containment. In doing that, they need to discuss ways employees add value to service and production.

"Part of making the case for the importance of workers' contributions to firm success would be to highlight how lower-level workers are on the front lines of customer service and technological innovation," Lambert said. That position would show that firms gain competitive advantages when they design jobs that allow employees to add value to firms through their work.

Those changes provide the basis of broader policy improvements discussed in the book. Current research also shows that laws to improve situations for workers seeking to deal with family responsibilities have been ineffective. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows workers unpaid leave to care for newborn children or other family members with serious health problems, is available to workers at about 11 percent of the nation's work places and covers 55 percent of the work force.

Lambert and Waxman found that workers in lower-level jobs often do not receive sick or vacation time or employer-sponsored health insurance. "Thus, an important step in a new business case would be to focus on barriers to distributing supports that are available in many work places today, at least on the books," she said.

Lambert said employers who implement work-life policies and researchers should work together to develop a new understanding of the role of work-life issues. "It has been our experience that few employers systematically collect data to quantitatively or qualitatively evaluate the effectiveness of their work-life policies."

Longitudinal studies would help employers define the links between work and family life, and multi-method studies also could contribute to understanding the causes and outcomes of frictions between workers and the workplace, Lambert said.

Lambert added that in general, research in the work-life field needs to become more rigorous, so, for example, definitions of various terms have more consistent meanings, and so researchers look beyond two-income, married couples and their problems to examine the issues that affect low-income, single heads-of-households. Researchers also have focused a great deal on individuals and their family needs and not enough on the nature of work itself, she said. *Work and Life Integration: Organizational, Cultural and Individual Perspectives* is intended to overcome that problem.

"The book chapters help direct attention to the ways in which conditions of employment are critical to worker and family well-being, revealing multifaceted and reciprocal relationships," she said.

Lambert examined hospitality, transportation, retail and financial service jobs, and found a high degree of turnover and very limited opportunities for workers to organize their work life around family needs. She also found that in some workplaces, temporary workers fill lower-level jobs with low wages and few benefits. These temporary workers share the workload with regular employees who have job-related benefits. In general, employers often distinguish jobs by status rather than tasks, which is leading to increased stratification in the workplace, she said.

"Given the widening gap in well-being between citizens lodged at the top and the bottom of America's income distribution, it seems important to develop insights into how workplaces might play a role in diminishing inequality in those opportunities essential to balancing work and family life, and ultimately, to improving the well-being of workers, their families and communities," she said.

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