Are things really getting any better?

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Women ousted upon return from maternity leave. Really? In this day and age?

I should start this article by stating that I had a pretty good experience when returning from maternity leave. My boss at the time told me I could pretty much set my own hours and make up my own job. He had also been pretty good about keeping in touch with me whilst I was away. And there are a number of other cases I know where an employer has absolutely gone out of their way to do the "right" thing; sometimes even in cases when they were not legally required to do so.

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But sadly, this is not the case for a large number of women.

The law as it relates to return from maternity leave is pretty clear. The Act requires that employers consult about decisions that might affect their position; and allow employees to resume their previous position of another mutually agreed position on return from maternity leave.

So, it's the law.

But it also makes good financial and organisational sense. It is now well accepted that talent is the source of competitive advantage. So it doesn't make much sense to preclude a significant proportion of that talent because they choose to have a family.

Recent research from Deloittes predicts that workforce flexibility will continue to be one of *the* trends that organisations need to come to terms with to be successful in the next era.

So far so good.

Which is why I was somewhat surprised when I came across a recent article published by People Management which cited a survey with the following statistics:

- 11% of women surveyed had been replaced by their maternity leave cover when they returned;
- 4% had been made redundant from their role;
- 40% felt the role they returned to had altered; and 45% of those felt it had changed for the worse;
- 25% of requests for flexible working were refused; and
- 40% had a move to part time hours blocked.

Well that's the UK you could argue.. It wouldn't happen here in Australia. We have legislation (like the UK!) to protect against such things.

Not so, it turns out.

Now, my poll is **not** scientific. It's aneedotal. But when I asked the question of friends and friends of friends – the stories started to pour in. And in general, the stories were not good. Here's just a small selection of the stories*:

- There was the very senior employee of a financial institution who had been on the "fast track" and "superstar" status prior to taking maternity leave; who was told upon her return from maternity leave that there was no "meaningful role" that could be found for her to do in four days a week.

- There was the example of a Mothers' Group in Sydney who had 50% of their group made redundant (in various circumstances) upon their attempted return to work. That is 4 out of 8 women. All senior, professional, well regarded women.

- There was the example of the specialist in country Victoria who asked to go part time upon return from maternity leave, and was subsequently advised by text and email that her role was redundant.

- The employee in a not for profit in WA who found herself on the end of a "restructure" upon her return, and was subsequently made redundant.

- The government employee in WA who was on a contract that was due to be renewed; and then was not because of her pregnancy.

- One HR Director I spoke to said that 50% of women returning from maternity leave had roles that were "made redundant" or downgraded significantly upon asking for a part time role; citing one example of a Senior Head of Projects who was offered the role of "receptionist" upon returning from maternity leave.

Now of course, economic conditions are such that there will always be restructures. There will be always be redundancies.

But there do appear to be two disturbing trends or biases..

1. That if you're on maternity leave you are **actively** considered for a redundancy **irrespective** of your performance, potential and aptitude **prior** to going on leave;

2. And watch out if you're considering going part time; a red flag to a bull; as some employers view it as a "lack of organizational commitment".

Now redundancy, of course, works in favour of some women who view it as an opportunity to spend more time at home with their family; or start their own business. And of course, there are some jobs where it *is* genuinely very difficult to perform in a part time capacity. And there is the odd occasion where it *provides* the opportunity to deal with a difficult performance management situation in a more gentle way.

But it seems that despite all that we know about how employees in part time roles often work significantly more effectively & efficiently **and** the significant costs associated with both redundancy and recruitment of new roles; the trends identified above continue.

Is it that employees returning from maternity leave are seen as slightly less committed than they were before? Is it that employers view seeking to reduce one's hours as a sign of lack of commitment?

Research from the EU suggests that:

"..Although primarily intended to promote the conciliation of professional and family life, the spread of part-time work has also given rise to new forms of gender discrimination and become detrimental for the attainment of employment quality and job stability, especially for the female collective. As a result, this form of employment may have become less attractive for women with child care responsibilities.

This would explain why in some countries full-time employment continues to be the preferred option for women who want to remain in the labour market..."

Touche!

The research from Deloittes though, makes for frightening reading. Consider the following statistics:

- Women without children would rather have more free time that make more money (68%);
- One of every five employees cares for elderly parents, a number that could increase to almost half of the workforce over the next several years;
- By 2025, Gen Y employees, now in their 20s, will grow to represent 75% of the workforce. For this emerging generation, work-life fit is valued more than compensation, growth or skill development.

So, it's not just about women going off to have babies. It's the way of the world more generally. And it looks like it is only going to increase..

Gary Hamel has this to say:

"..As the pace of change accelerates, so must the pace of strategic renewal. Indeed, one of the most important questions for any enterprise today is this: Are we changing as fast as the world around us? All to (sic) often, the answer is no...

Given the primary role HR plays in many of an organization's core processes (e.g., performance review, talent deployment, organizational development, change management, compensation), HR has the chance to be a true catalyst for strategic adaptability.."

So, I guess my question is not so much about the trends (which I do find disturbing); but rather what the trends imply.

When will employers get a bit smarter; and stop viewing everyone through the "working full time = working hard = organisation commitment" lens?

Will they realise that talent comes in all shapes, sizes, ages and family circumstances? Will they realise the enormous financial and organisational benefits to be gained by tapping into individuals' motivations and circumstances; and making these work for the business rather than require that everyone conform to the same mold?

And if not now; with all that we know. Then when?

*Some details changed

About the author

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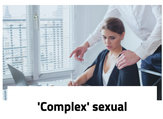

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