

Single vs. married: Creating an inclusive workplace

by Megan Fitzgerald
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Work/life balance has been a workplace catch phrase for some time now, but one aspect we don't often hear about is the different ways people attain that balance.

Married workers don't have the same needs as single employees, and it gets even more complex when children are in the mix. What does this mean in the workplace?

Single employees often feel they are getting the short end of the stick when it comes to assignments, overtime, benefits and support. Married workers feel they may be getting passed over for promotions. How do businesses provide a fair and happy work environment for everyone?

How do employers make everyone feel valued? And how do employees talk about their issues without resentment?

Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of the American Association for Single People (AASP), says there are three steps to solving the problem. "First, employers and employees need to acknowledge that both single and married people are constituencies."

By finding out the exact percentage of married and unmarried workers, employers will be able to understand the impact on their work force. If a company is mainly composed of unmarried employees, maybe a standard plan for all workers is the key, whereas if a company has mostly married people, maybe a plan can be crafted for them but modified for single workers.

"Employers need to look at the needs and concerns of all workers," says Coleman. Only by asking employees what they want or need will businesses be able to adjust their policies. If people are not comfortable about publicly airing their grievances, anonymous statements should be accepted. One of the problems single employees face should they speak out is coming off looking anti-family. Therefore, confidentiality will not only help them participate, but also open the lines of communication for all concerned parties.

The third step employers should take is to look at the issues and needs of their workers. "Although many companies offer domestic-partner benefits, they typically are limited to same-sex partners. In effect, the employers are saying that if you can legally get married,

you have to do so," Coleman says. Not to mention, domestic-partner benefits don't help single employees with an elderly mother or a sick sibling. Adjustments need to be made to programs and policies so that everyone reaps the benefits.

Tips for Creating a Balanced Workplace

Need-Blind. Offer workers a set amount of time off to use as they wish. This time does not have to be used strictly for family responsibilities, which makes it more equitable for singles.

Time-Bank. Under this plan, an employee can "buy" or "sell" time off. Employees can buy 40, 80 or 120 hours a year from the employer, or simply sell back to the company any unused time off at the end of the year.

Sabbaticals. These give all employees the chance to recharge, usually unpaid.

Flexible Schedule. Many Generation Xers have expressed the desire to work where they want, when they want, feeling they can easily use a computer from home to complete their assigned tasks.

Life-Cycle Benefits. Often referred to as cafeteria benefits, they allow employees to choose what benefits they want, at what time in their lives. This allows employers to contain costs while meeting individual needs.

On-Site Services. It is becoming more common for companies to offer such services as dry cleaning, take-home meals, health clubs or car maintenance so that workers can devote more personal time to enjoyable pursuits.

Even though we as a country have come a long way, traditional ways of thinking are still pervasive in the business community. Often, unmarried workers are relocated or asked to work overtime. They may be asked to relocate because employers feel they don't have ties to the area. Never mind if an employee's whole family lives there and he is a volunteer at a local church. If a project needs to be done and a single person doesn't have the "excuse" of a spouse at home, he will probably be the one who works the overtime.

Employers can give single employees the option of adding another adult member of their family to the benefit plan, or even allow

singles the options of contributing more to their retirement funds or obtaining pet insurance with the benefit money earmarked for spouses. By giving workers choices, businesses are telling them they are important, and in turn employees feel a sense of loyalty and pride in their careers.

Coleman says that before companies decide to overhaul their programs, "they should allow and encourage a support group for single people." This simple step lets employees know their employers recognize their existence. Businesses have no problem recognizing women or minorities as constituencies, but single or married workers are rarely identified as separate groups.

Many organizations are trying hard to accommodate all workers; it makes good business sense. With the tight labor market, alienating potential hires is not a good idea. According to Kristin Bowl, spokeswoman for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Alexandria, Va., employers are doing many things to ensure everyone in the workplace feels equal. "Family-friendly benefits are essentially work/life benefits. Employees want the ability to have a life after work. Only a few of the many benefits companies offer - childcare subsidy, on-site childcare - are only aimed at parents. Most benefits are for the use of all employees," says Bowl.

Flex-time, compressed work weeks and telecommuting are all options that any employee can take advantage of, whether they are working from home because of children or simply to avoid a long commute.

In a recent benefits survey conducted by SHRM, approximately 25% of 754 HR professionals say that their companies offer a Cafeteria Plan - a menu of benefits where one can choose everything from life insurance to flexible spending accounts. By providing these choices, unmarried workers feel included in the corporate culture, and not just a side note to the family benefits offered.

Recognizing that workers can be in a serious relationship without a marriage certificate is another step that organizations have taken for the good. "In 1997, only 6% of companies offered domestic-partner benefits," Bowl states. "This year, 25% of respondents say they offer opposite-sex domestic-partner benefits and 16% offer the benefit to partners of the same sex." This allows workers to share their benefits without the legal definition of marriage being the prerequisite.

Since the 1970s, more and more people

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