

Fairness in the Workplace is a Major Issue for Unmarried Employees

Family-friendly benefits snub singles, they say

by Carol Kleiman, Chicago Tribune

She's a mature woman, single, a physical therapist at a suburban Chicago hospital. She stopped me to tell me her difficulties in achieving work/life balance.

The biggest problem isn't her age or profession. It's that she's single.

Her company, she says, "leans over backward" to accommodate employees with children. She has nothing against that; in fact, she feels it's the right thing to do.

But the wrong thing, she says, is that she and other single people are always asked to work holidays or overtime. And when she occasionally asks to leave early or to take unscheduled time off, permission is denied.

"They come down really hard on us," she said. "It's not fair."

I listened to her carefully because she does not minimize the needs of working parents. Many single people do: They feel left out of company-sponsored family-friendly programs and put upon by absent colleagues.

I understand their complaints, but their anger is misdirected: It shouldn't be at colleagues with children and other family responsibilities but at insensitive managers who are too cheap to hire additional help, even during periods of unpaid leave.

"This issue doesn't surprise me, and what's going to happen, as more and more companies downsize and staffing gets tighter, there may be even less equity," said Mary Young, senior research consultant at the Center for Organizational Research, a division of Linkage Inc., a training and organizational consulting firm in Lexington, Mass.

In 1997, Young studied 714 single and married professionals with and without children in order to ascertain if those with children worked fewer hours.

"Contrary to popular opinion, there was no difference in the number of hours parents worked compared to non-parents," said Young, who is single.

"But parents were more likely to have flexible hours, even though they worked a full week."

See *Singles Snubbed*, pg. 12



Due to the slowdown in the economy, unmarried employees are watching their budgets like everyone else. These workers want equal pay for equal work. If they perform the same as married employees, they should receive the same pay.

But when benefits compensation is taken into account, employees who live alone, those with domestic partners, and single parents with an adult child at home are being paid considerably less than married workers for doing the same job.

This is beginning to change at some companies, especially some of the Fortune 500 employers. A dozen of such companies responded to our survey last year. Their responses were encouraging.

Some include "marital status" in their equal opportunity nondiscrimination policy. Others have adopted cafeteria-style benefits plans which are very flexible. At others, work-family programs are now work-life programs, with personnel managers realizing that all employees have a life outside of work, including single and unmarried workers.

Domestic partner benefits programs are becoming more common, with most of them including heterosexual as well as same-sex couples.

The two stories on this page are yet another indication that workplace policies and practices are changing. That's encouraging news.

Thomas F. Coleman
Executive Director

University study focusing on singles in the workplace

by Leigh Woolsey, Tulsa World

Single and attractive female underling at an advertising agency feigns a traditional, soon-to-be-married life trying to convince her boss that she's stable and worthy of a big-time promotion.

If you've rented the dated chick flick, "Picture Perfect" starring pre-Brad-Pitt Jennifer Aniston, then you know the story well.

It's your run-of-the-mill characters playing out a predictable plot. Or is it?

At a closer look, the 1997 film asks a question that's red hot in today's workplace. Are single people on the job treated differently than their married counterparts?

Looking for an answer, University of Tulsa Assistant Professor Wendy Casper and a group of graduate students recently touched off the first leg of a research study on the at-work experience of singles.

In the last decade, family-friendly has been the office buzzword, making unmarried people an almost-forgotten species, Casper said.

"We don't really look at singles because they don't have a family in the sense of a spouse and a child," she said.

"We don't really think they have issues outside of work, things in their life that may conflict with work or a need to balance the personal and professional life."

Employers are bending to parents now more than ever, and that's a good thing, Casper said, but they can't forget that a good chunk of the work force is single.

Unmarried Americans got a second glance when the 2000 Census showed the population ballooned from 38 million to 82 million in thirty years, making it one of the biggest demographic blocs.

With one-person households on the rise – accounting for about 25% of households today – the job force is adding singles to its list of priorities, which the nuclear family once monopolized.

A singleton herself, Casper pursued the study after realizing how neglected working singles are, years of research and recalling her past experience as a
See *University Study*, pg. 12