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Research and Training Center
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Managing Employees with Dependent Care Challenges: Human Resource Professionals' Perspectives

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Work-Life Issues

- Employed parents having children with mental health difficulties must respond to the needs of the 24/7 workplace:
 - High commitment to work
 - Extended work hours, and
 - Responsiveness to periods of peak demands (Heymann, 2000).
- Over and above the usual demands of parenting, these family members must:
 - Arrange for and participate in planning their children's treatment;
 - See that their children's special educational needs are met;
 - Provide nurturing child care with caregivers who can meet the emotional needs of their children
 - Handle immediate crises that are frequent in these children's lives (Brennan, Penn, Bradley, Huffstutter, & Rosenzweig).



Role of HR in Managing Employed Parents

- Integrating demands of work and family life can be extremely challenging for these families (Rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie, 2002)
- Competing demands can lead the employee to seek assistance from human resource (HR) professionals (Brennan et al., 2005).
- HR staff attend to needs of employees and business goals of organization, shape policies and practices, resolve workplace problems, and manage organizational supports (Society for Human Resources Management, 2000).




Work-life Integration

- Refers to the degree to which people are able to find a functional and satisfactory level of assimilation in their work and personal lives, and
- Acknowledges that at times the amount of time spent in either domain will be different across different stages over the life span (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002)
- Is affected by disclosure, stigma, and flexibility arrangements experienced by the parents. (Brennan et al, 2005).



Disclosure

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- Disclosure of child's mental health status at work comes with risks and benefits.
 - Benefits include greater support, such as social support or formal supports such as flexibility, and in some cases protection from job loss.
 - Risks include negative reactions from supervisors or co-workers and the potential of job insecurity or job loss.

— Rosenzweig & Huffstutter, 2004



Stigma

- Mental health stigma refers to, “a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against people with mental illness” (President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).
- Courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963) refers to mental health stigma applied to family members and others associated with the person with mental illness (Corrigan & Kleinlein, 2005).



Flexibility



- Flexibility is a cross-domain concept: workplace flexibility, family flexibility, and childcare flexibility are necessary to maximize work-life integration (Emlen, 1999)
- Employee-driven workplace flexibility permits family members to have a degree of autonomy to control work location, timing, and/or process (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005).
- Workplace flexibility can be either formal or informal (Eaton, 2003):
 - Formal flexibility is approved by HR professionals and written into organizational policy
 - Informal flexibility is not documented as policy, but available to some employees based on supervisory discretion



Research Questions

- ***What are the perspectives of HR personnel about workplace issues and practices specific to employees whose children have mental health disorders?***
- ***How do human resources professionals work to combat barriers, and to secure resources and benefits these employed parents need while attending to the business goals of the organization?***



Methods: Sampling

- Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990).
- Goal to reach human resources professionals from a variety of employment contexts
- Recruitment through human resource professional networks and computer listservs.
- Information provided about study and invitation to contact research team with questions or to sign up for study.



Methods: Procedures

- Focus group discussion topics derived through prior research and literature reviews.
- Prior to start of group, informed consent collected and demographic questionnaire administered; permission to tape session obtained.
- Protocol began with more general questions to familiarize participants with the topic, then proceeded to more specific questions (Kreuger, 1997).
- Moderators supported discussion and probed to clarify information or deepen the conversation (Kreuger, 1998).



Methods: Analysis



- Systematic coding process using grounded theory approaches.
- Open coding by two researchers working independently.
- Preliminary coding and agreement established through meetings of research team to discuss and compare interpretations.
- Secondary/axial coding focused on establishing substantive themes and relationships among them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)



Results: Participants

- 3 groups of HR personnel (N = 17; 14 females)
- Mean age = 45.2 years ($SD = 8.4$).
- Experienced in HR work (M = 15.6 years in HR; $SD = 9.1$).
- 58.8% held certification in the field, and 82.4% were supervisors.
- Most worked in large organizations (Median number of employees = 400).
- 88.2% were European American.



Results: Themes



- Four themes emerged from analysis of focus group data:
 - Managing flexibility in a climate of accountability.
 - Trusting the employee seeking accommodations
 - Negotiating the boundaries of communication
 - Dual roles of HR personnel.



Managing Flexibility in a Climate of Accountability

- **Flexibility** in schedule and work arrangements was granted on the basis of employee request, and their **job type**.

An HR professional in a privately held company: *“If there was a situation where a sales associate would need flexibility, it would really have to be dealt with on an individual basis... because the showrooms are driven very hard to make money. As for...administrative positions...we can be very flexible in allowing parents to flex their schedule.”*



Managing Flexibility in a Climate of Accountability

- Despite a desire to be helpful, HR participants were also mindful of **business outcomes.**
- *“We have very narrow margins that we run under. We would attempt to help...we would refer to whatever community resources that I could come up with for this person, but as far as employment, that would be a rough thing for our organization.”*



Trusting the Employee Seeking Accommodations

- **Performance history** was critical in decisions about making **workplace accommodations**:
One HR participant reflected: *“If I have an employee who has been a good employee and trustworthy...then I can make a lot of accommodations.”*
- HR professionals still worried about being “gamed,” but would take a **risk** with the expectation of **employee retention** and loyalty.
“Hopefully [employee], I know you are not going to take advantage of me. This is going to work for both of us, and I hope you stay with me as we grow.”



Negotiating the Boundaries of Communication

Employees often needed to **disclose** their children's situation in order to gain flexibility.

- One participant reported “*If she hadn't [disclosed] I'm sure she would have been fired for attendance. I think once the manager understood there was something drastic going on, there was an extra effort [to be flexible].*”
- Another reminded the group about **legal requirements**: “*The FMLA laws do require documentation from a medical provider that this is actually a serious health condition and falls under the criteria that is stipulated.*”



Negotiating the Boundaries of Communication

HR professionals also worried about **knowing too much** and the resultant **confidentiality issues**.

- One participant noted, “[We] *may be motivated by fear that in a situation that is highly personal like this, you have conflicts with confidentiality issues and you have [to worry] how much as I as an employer should know, and how much do I dare ask, and how much do I need to rely on the employee.*”
- “*Most HR people would agree that it is very difficult to get into that, because you want to be careful that you are following the law, but you don’t want to get into a situation where you are overstepping whatever boundaries.*”



Negotiating the Boundaries of Communication

- They were also concerned about feeding the **rumor mill** at work, but also having the person who got accommodations misunderstood.
- *“When the other employees don’t know and don’t understand the circumstance, then the rumor mill gets cranked up, and then the peer pressure and the backbiting and whining and moaning goes on... You can’t walk in and say...her son is a schizophrenic and he is nervous and slashing himself .”*
- HR professionals also understood that families might be subject to **stigma**, due to their children’s mental illness. “...Mental health is a scary issue to people because there is still a lot of mystery surrounding it.”



Dual Roles of HR Personnel



Participants reported needing to maintain a dual focus: creating a positive work climate and protecting the company from negative legal consequences.

- *“I think the more compassionate your culture is, the less people are going to get mad at you if you do something that is probably not right. They will cut you a little more slack and are less likely to sue you later.”*
- *“A lot of it is the attitude of the organization. If you are willing to work with them, you can pretty much figure out a way to stay legal and get around issues.”*



Conclusions

- Addressing work-life integration requires a willing partnership between employee and employer
- Both parties perceive that there are risks involved
- Key factors in accommodating employees include:
 - Perceived value of the employee (e.g. work and performance history, position in the organization, labor market)
 - Organizational culture
 - Managers' roles
 - Job design



Conclusions

- The onus may be on individual employees to “prepare a case” that HR can support
- Wide variation in access to flexible work arrangements and benefits
- Existing workplace support systems are not designed for employees with the long term and dynamic needs of these families



A final word from a group participant

- *“You can always solve a problem if, in fact, you want to do it. If you don't want to do it, you can always find policies, procedures or rules, regulations or whatever, that inhibits it being done”*
- *“ I just put together [my humaneness] ...with the business sense I hope I have, and come up with a solution that is both humane and works for the company”*





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