

Paternity leave: storm in a tea cup ?

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Recently I was at a conference listening to some senior people proudly sharing the work life policies at their companies, and the fantastic press they had received for the same. They were a part of the progressive Singapore firms that had taken the initiative to improve the work life balance for their employees through policies such as telecommuting, maternity leave, sabbaticals, etc.

However, the celebratory tone of the conversation was somewhat disturbed when I raised the issue of paternity leave.

I was expecting to hear that it was being planned and just around the corner. Instead here is what I heard from them and other who chimed into the conversation:

1. If we give paternity leave, then people will want grandparent leave, dating leave, so it is better for us to offer general family leave and people can use as they seem fit. Although we don't have any such plan right now unfortunately.
2. If we give paternity leave can you imagine the talent shortage at work?! There will be a crisis in the workplace.
3. Paternity leave is a messy thing because if you give it to knowledge workers, you have to give it to bus drivers and other roles where people do have to show up every day without fail. How will we cope then?

I don't see any of these as legitimate arguments. Here is why:

1. Family leave argument: While I agree that there is a need for over all family leave and I applaud organizations with extended maternity leave policy, here is the problem: if you have maternity leave without even token paternity leave (even if it is only a week), the message you are sending out is that child care is primarily a woman's job.

Clearly such an inclination is not suited to creating gender neutral workplaces. It is precisely the association of women with child bearing - and resulting career breaks - that makes some organizations discriminate against women in recruitment and lead to firing of pregnant women. As long as we equate women with their biology we will never create equitable work places that are fair to all and provide equal opportunities irrespective of gender.

2. Talent shortage argument: Of all arguments I find this one the most difficult to justify. Organizations are willing to give CSR (corporate social responsibility leave), Sabbaticals to learn how to cook or go climb a mountain, unpaid leave to recover from burnout but talk

about even a 2 day token paternity leave and we have a talent management crisis on our hands!

If companies are really serious about talent, why are they not offering more return ships to well qualified women who have taken career breaks and are ready to come back to work? Why are they willing to accept talent shortage for a week if a person is sick but not if they have had a baby? What is it about our deep rooted ideas about men and parenting that prevents us from creating even token paternity leave?

In this era of workforce analytics, I would urge HR professionals to calculate two simple statistics. First, how many men at any given point in time will be off for paternity leave?

Given the abysmal fertility rate if one were to hazard a guess it would be a rather small number, say X %. Secondly, of the X % how many are doing role that are mission critical to the extent that a token leave of a week will lead to a crisis in the organizations. I think by now you can see that statistics do not support this talent shortage argument.

Just as organizations plan buffers for sick leave and even that occasional sabbatical, a similar level of planning can help mitigate the business impact of paternity leave.

3. Type of work: Yes, a bus driver should be entitled to parenting leave as well. His child is also in need of bonding with his father as is the child of an MD. Who will cover for him? It is called contingency planning. Just as you have people you hire for maternity cover, you can hire people for paternity cover. At skill levels of jobs such as manual work in particular, temporary hiring may actually be easier.

What we need to recognize

In my article in Forbes on " Real men don't need work life balance" I explore how men have been effectively marginalized from the work life fit conversation. Singapore has an opportunity to set an example for the world by adopting progressive policies like paternity leave. A week to begin with would be a perfectly great start.

As this nation has recognized the importance of reversing the tide of its falling fertility rates, numerous articles have highlighted the need for work life balance policies. In that context it becomes even more important to acknowledge that we are not advocating single-parent child rearing models here.

It is all about sending a signal, and being clear that fathers are critical at every stage of a child's life and co-parenting is a responsibility that is applauded. Also creating a policy around paternity leave does not mean people will always use it. Indeed research shows that even in places like the US the use of paternity leave is associated with a certain amount of stigma. So the change in mind set might actually end up posing the bigger challenge.

Someone has to make a start to put the 'human' back in human resources, let that someone be Singapore, a country where human capital is our real advantage.