

Employees should build reputation before using work-family programs

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Employees often suspect that participating in work-family programs could harm their careers, and prior research studies have shown they are right to be worried. Employees who use the programs are at risk of fewer promotions and lower wages than those who do not.

But now, two researchers have shown how employees could gain the intended benefits of work-family programs -- such as flexible schedules with prorated pay -- without harming their careers.

Forrest Briscoe, assistant professor of management, Penn State Smeal College of Business, and Katherine Kellogg, associate professor of organization studies, MIT, call their solution the "initial assignment effect."

After studying the personnel records of nearly 1000 associates employed by a large law firm, Briscoe and Kellogg found that employees who were assigned to powerful supervisors upon entry into the firm had a better experience when, usually much later, they participated in a work-family program.

"By the time they enrolled in the reduced-hours program, employees who had been initially assigned to powerful supervisors had gained access to a greater range of reputation-building work opportunities than other employees," said the researchers, who noted that the average time span between entering the firm and participating in the program is four

years.

Program users who experienced the initial assignment effect were more likely to receive positive performance evaluations and fared better in their careers than those who did not.

Employees not subject to the initial assignment effect should think twice before enrolling in a reduced-hours program. Simply by using the program, they become part of a traditionally disadvantaged group -- mothers and male primary caregivers -- which may invite supervisors to question their commitment, abilities and marketability.

"Given their ability to award wages and promotions, supervisors who feel this way about their employees have the power to damage their employees' careers," said the researchers, whose study appears in the current issue of *American Sociological Review*.

In short, it is important for employees to create a respected reputation as soon as possible upon entering a firm. Those who suspect they are going to use work-family programs in the future should be proactive about taking on large-scale projects and exposing their talents to others within the organization before people start questioning their commitment.

In the organization sampled in the study, initial assignment was a random process, but the researchers suggest that organizations may do well to consider the initial assignment process proactively. Companies can use this as a lever in the strategic management of human capital, as well as the retention and promotion of women and mothers.

Briscoe and Kellogg also expect to find similar results in investment banks, consulting firms and accounting firms, but not necessarily in traditional manufacturing firms where employees work with fewer supervisors. Plus, supervisors in manufacturing firms are typically not

involved in later evaluation of their previous [employees](#).

Workers who participate in employee-rights programs, like sexual harassment or dispute resolution programs, often experience the same vulnerabilities as those who take part in work-family programs.

"Our findings suggest that initial assignment to a powerful supervisor would likely promote positive career outcomes for users of these kinds of employee-rights programs," the researchers wrote.

If true, this would suggest the importance of solidifying one's professional reputation prior to participation in those programs as well, though depending on the program that may not always be feasible.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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