

Academic workplace bias against parents hurts nonparents too

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Credit: Rice University

Parents have reported before that trying to balance work and family obligations comes with career costs. But a new study from Rice University and the University of California, San Diego, shows that university workplace bias against scientists and engineers who use flexible work arrangements may increase employee dissatisfaction and turnover even for people who don't have children.

"As researchers, we're interested in understanding the gap between the traditional 9-to-5 work setting and what workers actually need," said Erin Cech, an assistant professor of sociology at Rice and the study's

lead author. "The majority of parents are in the workforce today, yet the expectations and arrangements of work have stayed more or less the same as they were post-World War II. We're trying to understand this mismatch and its consequences."

The study, "Consequences of Flexibility Stigma Among Academic Scientists and Engineers," examined "flexibility stigma"—employers' and co-workers' negative attitudes toward employees who seek or are presumed to need flexible work arrangements to deal with child care responsibilities—at one university. The study found that people who reported an awareness of the flexibility stigma in their departments—regardless of whether they are parents themselves—were less interested in staying at their jobs, more likely to want to leave academia for industry and less satisfied with their jobs than those who did not report a flexibility stigma in their department. They also felt as though they had worse [work-life balance](#).

"Flexibility stigma is not just a workers' problem," said study co-author Mary Blair-Loy, an associate professor of sociology at UC San Diego and founding director of the Center for Research on Gender in the Professions. "Workplaces where this bias exists are more likely to have a toxic culture that hurts the entire department, not only in terms of work-life balance but also retention and [job satisfaction](#), which may affect department productivity."

The researchers suggest that the study sheds light on workplace issues across a wide spectrum of professional fields.

"Because this is an academic setting, faculty tend to have a great deal of freedom to re-arrange their busy schedules to accommodate family responsibilities," Cech said. "We imagine that the effects of flexibility stigma on job satisfaction and employee turnover might be even more counterproductive in professional workplaces that have less schedule

control. Dealing with work-life balance issues is not just about instituting the right policies, but it is also about undermining the stigma that comes along with using those policies."

Cech also noted that one consequence of flexibility stigma – employee turnover – can be expensive.

"It can be extremely costly—on average, between \$90,000 and \$400,000 when accounting for lab space and student assistants—for startup packages for new science and engineering faculty," she said. "This suggests that reducing flexibility stigma would not only be good for workers, but good for the bottom line as well."

Blair-Loy said that the work-devotion schema – the idea that one's career requires intense time commitments and strong loyalty – is a mandate that is unconsciously part of most professional workplaces and underlies the flexibility stigma.

"Work devotion is useful for employers because it helps motivate senior management, but is destructive to people trying to care for family members," Blair-Loy said. "It underlies this stigma that is damaging to all members of the department, not just the ones that are parents."

Blair-Loy noted that the silver lining of their research suggests that many faculty who are not currently parents are aware of the flexibility stigma.

"These individuals can be real allies in making a more inclusive, welcoming environment for everyone," Blair-Loy said. "It provides the opportunity to broaden awareness of problematic work environments and educate others about this bias."

The study included 266 science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) faculty members at a top-ranked university with pre-eminent

science and engineering programs. The respondents answered online survey questions about whether mothers and fathers with young or school-aged children are perceived as less committed to their careers than women or men who are not parents, and whether individuals choosing to use formal or informal arrangements for work-life balance experience negative career consequences.

Provided by Rice University

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