

[WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: DION KLEIN]

Singling out discrimination

Singles and work

Many singles feel their needs are trivialised or dismissed — they want support for their needs outside work, and recognition of their personal needs, just like those with families

A FEW years ago at a Healthy Cities task force meeting, the topic of discussion was workplace health and well-being issues. One woman expressed her experience of indirect discrimination for being a single person. She felt that her peers relied on her and rather expected her to stay back to deal with last-minute deadlines or troubleshoot emergencies because she did not have family obligations. At first I didn't take much notice of her observation, but later, after reflecting on my own work situation, I realised that I too had experienced similar situations throughout my single life.

The subject has been one of growing concern, especially in the United States, and Australia may follow that country's lead.

Work/life balance has been a hot topic over the past year with most articles focusing on balancing work and family life. How does one balance the responsibilities of being a partner, parent, and employee without damaging one's personal health and overall well-being? This is the typical question a married-with-children person asks and the organisation tries to resolve. Managers tend to have more empathy with those employees who have a sick child or who manage the day-to-day challenges of raising children and tend to have provisions to make life easier for those with a family (which also includes taking care of parents).

As of June 2000, 82 per cent of Australians 15 years and over were members of a family. Just over half (53 per cent) of these families did not have dependants. One-parent families were the next largest group, more than two-thirds having dependants, while 83 per cent of the single parents were female.

Comparative US statistics (2000) indicated there were almost 60 per cent married workers and 40 per cent unmarried workers, with the majority of both categories being male.

Singles (i.e., those with no serious partner and/or children) struggle to attain the same acknowledgment that they may "have a life" and other responsibilities which may take priority over work. Dr Mary Young, a work/family expert in Boston, stated that singles wanted to be able to leave work on time and not feel guilty, similar to their working-parent colleagues. Many singles feel their needs are trivialised or dismissed; they want support for their needs outside work, and want to feel that they have legitimate personal needs, just like those with families.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions website devotes much to working families; very little, if any, acknowledges the needs of childless or single people. Many of the proposed guidelines focus on work and family issues, including personal/carer's leave, improved access to accrued leave for family purposes and to paid and unpaid maternity/parental leave.

It is true that the stress of increased workloads and pressure, and concerns about job security are making things harder for families. Unions and workplaces are trying to encourage work/family-life balance and hence putting policies and programs in place to promote the initiative. Those same stressors affect singles.

Though many anti-discrimination policies include marital status, singles may still subtly feel increased pressure and work demands on them from managers who assume they have fewer responsibilities at home. Unmarried America is a singles'-rights group whose purpose is to ensure that singles do not get discriminated in pay or benefits. In her book *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, Elinor Burkett highlights the changing demographics in the workplace between the growing numbers of mothers in the workforce as well as a new growing group: childless adults. She also points out the inequalities in tax breaks, workplace and government entitlements while providing insight to solutions in catering to the childless worker.

Syndicated columnist Dr Julianne Malveaux quoted a worker at a Fortune 500 company which had received high marks for its family focus: "My co-workers say they need to leave early to pick their children up from school, and I'm expected to work an hour or so longer to accommodate them. But none of them would work late so that I could go to the opera or to the doctor. I'm all for juggling work and family, but we all have obligations and interests, and mine should count for as much as theirs do."

Single people do have similar obligations to family people except they have to tackle them all without a spouse to handle half the workload. Ask any single parent about that challenge. Additionally, just because a worker is single doesn't mean there's no partner or significant other sharing the worker's life.

Organisations need to identify the demographics of their workforce to cater for their needs, including their marital and family status. This will help in developing programs for single people which may increase their loyalty to the organisation. For example, one way to cater for singles with regard to benefits is to offer "cafeteria"-style benefits programs, which allow each worker to choose an array of benefits that best suits his or her family or personal needs. A working mother might select

employer-subsidised childcare, while a single worker might choose a sabbatical or paid tuition.

The composition of the workforce is changing and will continue to change, especially as our workforce ages. Just as most parents choose to have children, singles are single by choice or because of a partner's death, and they don't think they should have to pay for their situation by doing more in the workplace.

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Australian Council of Trade Unions. www.actu.asn.au.

Australian Employee Attitudes — Research Analysis 2003. actu.labor.net.au/public/news/1056943398-20796.html

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Bruzzese, A. "Employers can overlook single workers' needs". *The Des Moines Register*, February 7, 1999.

Malveaux, J. (September 4, 2000). "But Who Watches Out for Singles?". *Los Angeles Times*.

Unmarried America. www.unmarriedamerica.org

SINGLE FRIENDLY?



Does the organisation:

- know the number and per cent of its unmarried employees?
- mention single people in its diversity program?
- consider the needs of unmarried workers in its work-life program?
- consider the needs of single parents in its benefits program, such as flextime, telecommuting or childcare benefits?
- have a domestic partner benefits plan? Sources: **Unmarried America.**

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