

Just the job

Lina Vyas says companies in Hong Kong must ensure employees wanting to take up family-friendly incentives know it will not harm their careers

As a typical modern society, Hong Kong is characterised by heavy workloads, a fast work pace and long hours. Work and family are the two major domains of life; however, an imbalance contributes to a conflict between the two. As a consequence, we tend to distance ourselves from family commitments.

Hong Kong's birth rate is now one of the world's lowest. This has serious and far-reaching implications, especially on the city's population, leading to an ageing society which in turn means an increased dependency ratio and reduced productivity.

The government's consultation paper on its population policy says that because of our ageing population, there is an urgent need to increase the labour force to maintain productivity. One group that could help meet the shortfall is homemakers who wish to go back to work. But this will only be possible if the private sector implements more extensive family-friendly measures.

One survey conducted since 2006 has shown that Hongkongers constantly struggle to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance. In the poll, commissioned by non-profit organisation Community Business, full-time workers were asked to rate their work-life balance on a scale of zero to 10, with 10 being the most ideal. Their average was only 6.1 last year – barely changed from 6 in 2012, and the score has remained between 5.7 and 6.2 since the survey was first conducted. In general, the onus has always been on employers to do more to make their workplaces more family friendly, and while employees say they are keen to see more measures introduced, they have argued that employers' awareness of such schemes remains low.

Seemingly contradicting this belief, Community Business found that some two-thirds of respondents aged 16-77 in a phone poll as part of the 2012 survey had been provided with family-friendly incentives by their employers. Yet only 60 per cent of those said they had made use of them in spite of a need. Of the 1,002 people polled, 52 per cent were women.

It seems employees fear adverse consequences of being less visible and committed to their work and are concerned that their advancement in the organisation will be hampered as a consequence of prioritising family issues. Undeniably, this will be a problem in a workplace that has a low tolerance for non-traditional work patterns, or if managers are not compassionate about employees' responsibilities of care. To mitigate this, human resources departments should take responsibility for improving work-life balance by reassuring employees that they need not fear being labelled underperformers if they take up family-friendly incentives.

There is an urgent need to eliminate the perceived negative effect on one's career associated with spending time on family responsibilities, while promoting the positive effects of family-friendly policies. This can help affirm the value of such policies to the different stakeholders, which, along with the pressure from low fertility rates, can also drive the government to take immediate positive steps to address the issue.

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