Working dads push for more family-friendly policies, making life better for working moms [1]

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EXCERPTS:

Edward was at a work dinner with his boss when he first decided to broach the idea of paternity leave. His wife had just given birth to a baby girl-their first child- and he knew he wanted to take a few months off from his job as an IT manager to spend some time at home. His proposal didn't go over well. "My boss dead-eyed me," Edward says, "and said he would kick me in the balls if I applied."

Welcome to the plight of the working dad: spouses, teachers and a growing chorus of child-rearing experts expect him to take a more active role in parenting. His boss would rather see him at the 7 a.m. client meeting.

Still, a growing number of Canadian men are pushing for more family-friendly workplaces-and most employers are responding. In 2011, about 30% of Canadian fathers stayed home for at least a little while after the birth of their babies. While that number still falls far below the 90% of mothers who take leave, it's a large and recent jump up from the 20% of men who took parental leave in 2006, and the 3% in 2000. For those interested in seeing social roles-and the corporate landscape-reflect gender equality, the steady climb upward is good news, and not just because it means men are starting to shoulder more of the burden of parenting. Some say this generation of working mer could help solve the work-life problems that have plagued women for decades.

When Kelly Milroy, an associate vice-president at TD Bank, took six months off in 2001 to care for his family's new baby-a request that was cheerfully granted by his employer-his leave helped further his wife's career. "She got to go back to work six months sooner than she would have otherwise," he says. "And I had one of the most awesome experiences of my life." That experience ultimately benefited other TD parents too-when Milroy came back to work, he joined a "flexible work options" committee to help develop policies that enable workers to balance career and home demands. "I want people to understand that you can have flexibility in your life," he says, "and that you can make time for family." The message is getting through-at TD, paternity leave increased fivefold between 2005 and 2012.

Working-dad momentum appears to be growing: Yahoo made headlines this summer by offering eight weeks' paid paternity leave to new fathers, and Prince William caused a stir around the world when he asked for two weeks' paid leave from the Royal Air Force after the birth of Baby George. Even the hard-working "salarymen" of Japan are being urged to take paternity leave. The country's largest insurance company, Nippon Life, announced this month that a week of paid leave for new fathers is now mandatory.

And with every week, or even afternoon, that a father takes off, a working woman has more time to further her career. One Swedish study came to the surprising conclusion that every month a father took in parental leave translated to a 7% lifetime salary increase for his partner. Cameron Phillips, founder of the Vancouver consultancy Bettermen Solutions, says that workplace accommodation of fathers is the other half of the feminist movement. "We've solved nothing until we do the other half," he says.

Phillips has worked with clients including Vancity, Clearly Contacts and Electronic Arts to help them improve the work-life balance options available to working fathers. He generally starts with a "working-dad audit," gathering volunteers in a room to discuss life as a career parent. Fathers often tell him that their deep desire to be more hands-on as a parent is stymied by a fear of being stigmatized, or turned down. "There's a discrepancy between those who wanted to ask for flexibility versus those who actually did."

Phillips then brings the concerns that he's heard back to management, and advocates for solutions. Smaller fixes include making it more obvious that flexible work options and parental leave aren't just for moms. Big requests might include topping up EI benefits, so that fathers (and mothers, if companies don't offer it) can afford longer leave and don't have to use up their vacation days.

At Vancity, working mothers and fathers now get a top-up to 85% of an employee's full salary-a move the company made in 2010. It also offers a number of flexible-work options, such as a compressed or reduced workweek, as well as job-sharing. Roger Kang, a new dad who recently returned to Vancity after his pat leave, says that the company is working with him and his wife to help them figure out a new schedule, one that combines time in the office with stints working at home, and helps them maximize both their careers while factoring in time with their son. "He was really sick on Monday, so I had to leave early," says Kang. "Everybody understands. All kids get sick."

Kang makes transitioning into the role of working parent sound easy, but for many men, it isn't. A new study by researchers from Yale, Harvard and the University of Texas shows that men tend to believe that they're less likely to be granted flexible work options than women are.

Ironically, the study also shows that they're more likely to get it. Perhaps this is because of the much-documented difference in negotiating

styles between the genders: career women are as confident and self-assured as their male colleagues when representing their teams, but can become hesitant when seeking things for themselves. At Deloitte-which offers some generous family-friendly benefits, including 17 weeks of 100% maternity leave top-up for new moms and six weeks of equivalent top-up for dads-subtle differences appear in interviews with the members of the company's "career moms" and "Deloitte dads" groups. Both groups talk about the range of flexible schedule options and say they feel comfortable coming in late or leaving early for doctor appointments or hockey games. But they talk differently about their approach to work-life balance and how they coach members to ask for it. The founders of the three-year-old dads group, Rob Lanoue and Andrew Hamer, use words like "negotiate," and speak about an increasing "war for talent" that makes it an economic must for companies like Deloitte to accommodate parents. Anushka Grant, who co-founded the moms group in 2007, uses words like "courage," and speaks about what new moms need from their mentors.

Both sexes, however, bear the burden of "coming out" as parents in the workplace. At many companies, men already take "invisible leave" to spend time with their children-they might take an afternoon off to take the kids to their baseball game, for example, while allowing their employer and co-workers to think they're meeting clients. "Men are more likely to be in managerial or supervisory positions, so people don't know if they're playing golf with a client or dealing with childcare," says Jennifer Berdahl, a professor in organizational behaviour at the Rotman School of Management. When they go public about their intention-or need-to take care of family, however, they meet the same criticism that working women do. Researchers at the University of Toronto recently documented widespread workplace discrimination against fathers who participate in child-rearing-managers and co-workers were likely to label them slackers or "failed men."

"Men have to get over this perception that it's unmanly to be around the house," says Milroy, of TD. "You could almost call it a diaper ceiling."

That's the sort of criticism working women understand-they've endured a double bind for years, facing suggestions that they aren't serious enough about their careers when they get pregnant, and being accused of being heartless when they prioritize work. "In Canada, there's a dichotomy: you're either a good woman or a good worker," says Berdahl. But even if you're seen as a good worker, the idea that you're a bad woman can still hurt you professionally." This is partly why Berdahl believes that it's important for more men to ask for official leave or flexibility. Making the public conversation around work-life balance gender neutral could help eliminate the bad-worker, good-mom divide, she says.

One of the most effective ways to encourage men to take paternity leave is through legislation-most of the increase in Canada's dad-leave stats is thanks to Quebec, which introduced five weeks of leave available only to fathers in 2005. Since then, the number of Québécois men taking leave has jumped to 76%, compared to 11% in the rest of the country. (This echoes Sweden, where the 2002 introduction of eight weeks of leave for fathers pushed the uptake rate to 85%.)

Increasing the length of time fathers are entitled to could also lead parents to work together to push back against the all-too-real workplace "parent track." Berdahl, who co-edited an edition of the academic journal Social Issues that focused on the so-called flexibility stigma, says research shows that taking parental leave reduces earnings and career advancement, regardless of who asks for it. But the hit is greater for mothers, perhaps because of the longer average length of their leave-the average Canadian mom takes 40 weeks, while most dads now take only two.

Dave, an analyst in Saskatoon, recalls worrying about the impact of paternity leave on his career. He'd only been working for his employer for a few months when his wife had their baby, and when he asked about the possibility of paternity leave he was stunned to discover that, having passed the necessary probation period, he was eligible for 8 1/2 months of leave-at 75% salary. His manager told him he could take it, but Dave was concerned that he'd be seen as taking advantage of the company. So he waited until he had a few more months under his belt and then asked for the summer off. Even then, he says, he asked his boss if his career was going to suffer. "My line of work is one that you really have to stay on top of," he says. "And I knew that I wasn't going to light up the scoreboard that year." Still, he's glad he took the leave: "Even now that I'm back in the office, my family life is better because I took that time, and in the end, everyone in the office was fine with it."

Most of the men interviewed for this piece say they haven't faced setbacks. Milroy got a promotion at TD when he returned from his time off, and Lanoue says he's still as ambitious in his work at Deloitte. While he makes a point of attending his son's soccer games, he takes conference calls on the field when necessary. "I'm always available on my cell, and I don't let things slip. I work a lot from nine to midnight to make up those hours."

Having been at the company for 16 years, the 44-year-old says he's seen attitudes change over the years. "Flexibility for dads is much more a topic of conversation now than when I joined the firm," he says.

His colleague Hamer, who's 30, thinks the next generation of dads has changed the dialogue around parenting. "I perceive a distinct difference in the cohort I grew up with that counters the world view that it's a career or a family," he says. "That is not a necessary trade-off."

Edward, the IT manager who was denied paternity leave, would agree. He'd always had a backup plan in mind-piecing together a short leave by carrying over some holiday time and adding in a few weeks of future vacation-and in the end, he wound up using it and got his time with his daughter. But when he came back to work, he didn't stick around. "I ended up leaving that job a year later."

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