

Dads, not moms, benefit from flexible work ^[1]

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Source: Washington Post ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Aug 2014

EXCERPTS

Flexible work is often touted as the answer to everything that's wrong with the modern workplace. If workers can use technology to set their own hours, and work when, where and in whatever manner they're most productive, innovative and efficient, everybody wins, right?

Time-crunched parents and caregivers can juggle work and family demands more easily. Mothers and women, typically the primary caregivers, will no longer be disadvantaged by the "motherhood penalty" as they are now - earning lower wages and fewer promotions - if good work is no longer judged by how many hours of face time you put in at the office. And everyone can make more time for what's important in their lives. At least, that's the theory.

But what if the same old automatic assumptions about gender roles that plague the traditional workplace - that men are supposed to be the main breadwinners and providers and women the caregivers - get in the way?

What if flexible work makes men look good and continues to hold women back?

That's at least what Christin Munsch, a sociology professor at Furman University, found and presented at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting.

In a survey of nearly 700 people between the ages of 18 and 65, Munsch found that people rated men who ask to work either flexible hours in the office or to work from home twice a week as much more committed to their work, more competent, more worthy of promotion and more likeable than equally qualified women who asked for the same flexibility.

In other words: Advantage men.

Nearly 70 percent of the survey takers said they would "likely" or "very likely" grant a dad's request to work from home twice a week for child care reasons, compared with 57 percent for moms. (Munsch called telecommuting "Flexplace.")

Nearly one-fourth found the dad to be "extremely likeable," compared with just 3 percent who found the mom extremely likeable. And only 2.7 percent found the dad "not at all" or "not very" committed to work, compared with 15.5 percent who thought the equally qualified mom requesting to work from home wasn't committed to the job. "This really highlights how our expectations about men and women and how we think they're supposed to act can influence our judgments and behaviors," Munsch said. "If a man asks to work flexible hours or at home, we think he's still fulfilling his responsibility as a breadwinner, but he's also helping at home. We think, 'What a great guy.'

"But for a mother, we think there's no way she can work at home effectively. This goes back to our expectation that motherhood is intensive and that being a mother should be a woman's number one priority," Munsch continued. "So if she's working flexibly at home, we expect that she'll be putting puzzles together with her kids or taking them to the park. We think, 'How could she possibly get her work done?' But with a man, we think he'll just plop his kids in front of the TV and get the job done."

Men, in fact, already regularly telecommute more than women do, the Families and Work Institute and others have found, despite the assumption that moms are the ones who do it.

Munsch also found the same "flexibility stigma" that other social science research has - that people tend to think less of workers who don't fit the mold of the "ideal worker," or someone who puts in long hours at the office and is totally work devoted.

But while people tolerated flexible work requests for child care reasons, the survey showed they thought less of childless workers who wanted flexibility for something other than caregiving - studying, traveling or training for an athletic event. Munsch's work would seem to contradict other social science that found that men who ask for flexibility are punished more severely than women. That research found that when men ask for extended family leave, they're less likely to be promoted, given challenging assignments and are even more likely to be laid off or fired.

But Munsch noted a difference: The men in her study were still seeking to work full-time hours, just in a flexible manner, and thus were still adhering to their traditional gender role of provider. "But when men want to take weeks and weeks off, that triggers the thought that he's no longer providing for his family and bringing home the bacon."

Joan Williams, a work-life scholar at the University of California at Hastings School of the Law, said the difference in how men are rated has to do with what she called a "threshold effect."

"If men are occasionally involved [at home], they're saints," she said. "If they are really 50-50, then they're losers."

With work-life advocates and even policymakers at the White House calling for more flexible work, Munsch's work shows companies would be wise to proceed with caution.

"I'm a big proponent of flexible work, but this work shows that unless we're careful about how we implement it, we may just exacerbate inequality," Munsch said. "We have to become aware of our own unconscious bias and come up with much more objective ways to measure performance and productivity and make decisions about who to hire and who to promote."

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