**"Family-friendly" benefits prompt non-parent backlash**

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YOU CAN'T PLEASE EVERYONE-not that in employers haven't tried. Eager to attract and retain top talent, [corporations](http://www.allbusiness.com/management/3494552-1.html) have paid heed to the pleas of working morns and dads in the past decade or so with an array of "family-friendly" policies. But instead of receiving notes of thanks for flextime, daycare centers, telecommuting opportunities, child-care reimbursement accounts and the like, human resources executives often face angry backlash from employees who don't have children and believe they aren't getting their fair share of benefits.

Employers should make it clear that flexible benefits aren't contingent on whether employees have children.

"Employees without children have lives outside of work and consider their needs and responsibilities just as important as those of workers with kids," says Tom Coleman, an [attorney](http://www.allbusiness.com/management/3494552-1.html) and executive director of Unmarried America (formerly called American Association for Single People), a nonprofit advocacy group in Glendale, California. "Resentment occurs and festers if employers expand programs that cater to married couples or workers with minor children without offering alternative benefits to those who are not married or who aren't raising children." He ticks off a list of policies that often favor families and parents, from working hours to health benefits and even company-sponsored "family" picnics.

But Joan Williams, director of the Program on Gender, Work and Family and professor at American University's Washington College of Law, maintains that there's nothing inherently inequitable about being family-friendly. "We need these policies because a lot of the talent pool is made up of women, as well as men who aren't willing to make the work/family tradeoffs that their fathers made," she says. "If there's a backlash by singles, the problem isn't with the policies. It's with their implementation and management."

Supervisors frequently make the mistake of cutting "secret side deals" with individual workers who request special arrangements for flexible hours, compressed workweeks or telecommuting. Such informal agreements are surefire recipes for bad feelings and charges of favoritism, says Williams, who also wrote the book Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It. To avoid ill will, companies can institute a formal application process available to all employees, whether they want the time to take a yoga class, play golf or attend junior's soccer game. "That sends the message that you understand that adults need flexibility for a whole range of reasons," she says. "End the special deals, open the process to everyone who is qualified and can make a business case for it, and the resentment and stigma will evaporate."

At Deloitte & Touche, parental status is "irrelevant," says Stan Smith, national director of the company's Employer of Choice-Next Generation Initiatives. Employees who request a flexible work arrangement are not asked to state their marital/family status or explain why they are malting the request. They need only prove that they can meet their job requirements. "We believe that a flexible environment that helps our people navigate their personal and professional responsibilities is a part of sound business practice," Smith says. "Flexible arrangements are available to all of our people, whether they're married or single, parents or non-parents, provided that they continue to meet the service needs of their clients and the arrangement makes business sense."

That emphasis on "business sense" is critical for deflecting negative feedback from naysayers. While many companies institute such programs under the guise of "social consciousness," they are, in fact, business decisions. And that's the frank message that employees need to hear, says David Russo, who spent 20 years as vice president of human resources for SAS Institute and now runs Eno River Associates, Inc., a human resources consulting practice in Durham, North Carolina. "By and large, companies don't effectively communicate that these benefits are recruitment and retention tools that heighten workforce productivity and create more effective and efficient business environments," he says. "Companies need to explain how the programs benefit all employees, how they benefit the company, that they are not gifts you are giving to someone else, and how they do not infringe on any one person's piece of the action."

Communication and positioning are key. At Household International, for example, Mary Bilbrey, vice president of employee benefits, presents the company's Complete Rewards benefit package as a "menu of choices," so employees can pick and choose programs that suit their particular needs, lifestyle and stage of life. The comprehensive offerings include something for everyone-from flexible work hours, training opportunities and incentive plans to subsidized dependent-care accounts, tuition reimbursement and various discounts and services. In addition, a Life Balance program offers phone consultations, crisis counseling and literature on a variety of issues, as well as "concierge" benefits, which vary from personalized referrals for child/elder-care resources to information on where to get the best deal on a major appliance or car.

It's important to publicize the benefits through the intranet, in-house newsletters and other mediums. Connie Jacot, global work/life effectiveness manager at Intel, publicizes individual success stories and makes the company's broad spectrum of benefit choices as visible as possible. One such story: An employee who has a passion for painting is at his most creative in the morning, so he was able to rearrange his daily schedule to arrive at work a few hours late. Another employee, a musician, leaves at 4 p.m. when he has a gig. "Because we continually communicate all the choices we offer, from flextime to financial-planning seminars or our fitness center, we don't have the appearance of favoring one group over another and employees see that work/life doesn't equal child care," she says.

Before instituting such benefits, however, companies should understand their employee demographics-how many are married, how many have children and what percentages are in various age tiers-and use focus groups, surveys and similar tools to solicit their input in the program's design. "Do due diligence. Conduct a proper analysis that takes into account your employees' needs and desires," Russo says. "And when designing programs, look for costaccountable ways to apply them universally." The idea is to open up as many benefits as possible to as many people as possible. For example: Lactation rooms can be instead called "personal space" and made available to anyone who needs to escape for a bit-whether to pump breast milk or seek relief from a migraine. Child-care programs can be expanded to include elder care.

That three-pronged approach-understanding the employees' needs, soliciting their input and making the benefit accessible to everyone-is precisely the tactic that the Hartford took when it recently revamped its paid-time-off program. Previously, employees could take days off for vacation, personal time or sick days. "But those three 'buckets' often didn't mirror people's lives," says Lynn Farrell, assistant vice president of human resources strategy and planning. Through surveys and focus groups, the insurance giant learned that employees with families, especially single parents, wanted a more lenient unscheduled-absence policy. In response, the company designed a paid-time-off program that provides a set number of days for employees to use as they wish. "Whether someone wants to take an afternoon to attend a school assembly, close on a house or go to a yoga class, the decision is up to the individual. This meets the needs of single and non-parent employees as well as those who have families," Farrell says.

When it comes down to it, the very notion of "family-friendly" benefits may be pass-or at least have outlived its usefulness. "Many companies have dropped the term in favor of other descriptions that do not use the word 'family,' " says Martha Muldoon, who previously led RankBoston's work/life strategy and today is a Boston-area independent consultant who specializes in contemporary workforce issues. "Almost all of us have traditional concerns that transcend family status, whether we're caring for aging parents or partners who are ill, fulfilling volunteer commitments, furthering our education, managing difficult commutes or saving to buy a home."

The bottom line for human resources is that the solution-and the challenge-is to realize that when it comes to benefits, one size does not fit everyone, Muldoon says. Companies must establish and publicize programs and policies that all employees can participate in, whether they are married or single, parents or not. She adds that it's also important that the benefits be part of a larger culture of fairness and respect. "If employees are listened to and allowed to share their concerns, and if actions are taken in response to those concerns, the sense of favoritism will be minimized. Companies that recognize the diversity, complexity and reality of people's lives both on and off the job, and create a menu of benefit options that address their differing needs, will be rewarded by a more committed and productive workforce."