

HR managers must support employees who have children with disabilities

Responsible businesses must step up to support inclusion and promote the UN sustainable development goals, write Abraham Stefanidis and Niki Kyriakidou

In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 3 December as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. In 2020, UNESCO marked the observance of the day with a week-long programme themed: “Building back better: towards an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post COVID-19 world by, for and with persons with disabilities.” At the same time, governments, as well as national, regional, and international organisations reiterated their commitment toward more inclusive societies for persons with disabilities, aligning with the UN’s pledge to “leave no one behind,” which has been focal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Despite these pleasing developments, the UN’s 2018 report on the “realisation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) by, for and with persons with disabilities” recognised that the one billion persons with disabilities (i.e., 15% of the world population) are at a disadvantage regarding several SDGs. Similarly, a population whose unfavourable situation has also been largely overlooked is that of caregivers to persons with disabilities, especially employed parents of children with disabilities (CWD). These employees face demanding responsibilities at home due to their parental roles, a fact that has significant implications in the workplace. Caring responsibilities for a CWD have negative consequences on the number of work hours and the specific duties employees can take on. In the United Kingdom, more than 75% of parents of CWD turn down a promotion or voluntarily accept a demotion. Analogously, when compared with employees with non-caregiving responsibilities, employees with CWD are more likely to opt for part-time positions or be employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs.

The work environment of employed caregivers

Globally, the number of caregivers of CWD has been growing. Despite several welcoming political initiatives and forward-looking employment laws (e.g., Children and Families Act, 2014), unfavourable conditions surrounding flexible and family-friendly work environments for these employees persist. In the UK, parents of CWD are faced with inflexibility in accessing healthcare, lack of affordable childcare, limited education services, and scarce work benefits. Furthermore, they have few opportunities for part-time or flexible work arrangements, and inadequate access to services for unemployed caregivers who wish to find a job. In this context, work engagement, which has become the buzzword for human resource management scholars and practitioners, is considerably undermined for this group of employees.

Drawing on perceived family–work strain and organisational support literatures, we examined whether the support that employed parents receive in their workplace influence their work engagement levels, considering the strain derived from the disabilities of these parents’ children. We focus on support provided by the supervisor, given that employees tend to perceive their supervisors as organisational agents who direct and evaluate their performance. The results of our study suggest that work engagement is per se an employee-level variable that is clearly dependent upon factors both internal and external to the organisation. Our analysis indicates that the work engagement levels of employees who are parents of CWD tend to be dependent on both their organisational and family environments.

Specifically, our study concludes that supportive supervisors have a positive impact on the work engagement levels of employed parents of CWD. Parents value their relationships with their supervisors who provide the necessary support to balance family and work responsibilities. Very importantly, the support provided by supervisors mitigates the strain that employees with demanding caregiving responsibilities experience at home, holding a buffering role in the relationship between childcare strain and work engagement. For employees who have children with more severe disabilities, higher levels of support by their supervisors increase considerably employees’ work engagement levels. Conversely, for employees whose children experience more severe disability types, the role of supportive supervisors in promoting employee work engagement levels is considerably more important than it is for employees whose children experience mild disability types. Moreover, higher-ranked employees tend to work longer hours and to enjoy higher levels of supervisors’ support, a factor that is positively associated with work engagement.

How can organisations support employed caregivers?

Workforce diversity has been receiving increased attention during the past years and is expected to grow in the upcoming decades. To enhance diversity, human resource managers are encouraged to design policies that provide support and accommodations to employees who are parents of CWD, considering disability severity issues. Due to the lack of officially institutionalised practices for inclusive work environments, many employees who have CWD tend not to report at work their increased parental responsibilities, a practice that needs to change.

Overall, addressing employed parents' challenges can contribute to the promotion of positive workplace psychology. Stakeholders, including organisations, HR managers, the government, and policymakers are encouraged to collaborate to:

- establish formal reporting channels so that employees may share their need for accommodations associated with their CWD
- raise awareness that flexible work strategies help employed parents of CWD to achieve a better balance between their work and home responsibilities
- acknowledge that higher levels of supervisors' support lead to improved employee well-being, which in turn translates into higher organisational commitment and performance, as well as lower turnover
- provide opportunities to develop and implement a well-defined career path for working parents of CWD, which can strengthen work engagement
- craft formal family-supportive organisational policies that aid employees in identifying ways to alleviate increased levels of family strain, possibly by providing accommodations related to their CWD (e.g., flexibility regarding daycare services)
- proactively design employment practices and supervisory support strategies that enable more parents of CWD to remain at work and experience increased levels of engagement
- introduce tolerance in societal values and work attitudes regarding the positive role that workplace support can have on these parents' engagement.

Last, keeping employed parents of CWD engaged in their work is not a short-term perk that organisations can secure for their employees; rather, it is a responsible step toward supporting inclusion in society, while promoting the realisation of SDGs by, for, and with persons with disabilities.



Notes:

- This blog post is partially based on: [Work engagement of employees who are parents of children with disabilities: empirical evidence from Singapore and the United Kingdom](#), *International Journal of Human Resource Management*,
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