

Workplaces must promote the inclusion of childfree workers

*Employers often see employees who don't have children as ideal workers who dedicate themselves fully to the job. Co-workers and managers often expect them to take on extra work, do overtime and take up travelling. **Anne Theunissen** spoke with childfree employees in various industries across the EU. On this International Childfree Day, she writes about the stigmatisation and exclusion of these workers and suggests steps to promote their inclusion.*

International Childfree Day, which is celebrated on 1 August, was originally called Non-Parents Day, and was initiated in the United States by the [National Organisation for Non-Parents](#) in 1973. This day recognises people who have chosen not to have children and raises awareness of their stigmatisation and exclusion. While in the past few decades it has become increasingly normal for organisations to introduce inclusionary measures and practices to support parents, much less attention has been paid to employees who [don't have children](#).

To highlight the childfree experience in the workplace, I have conducted interviews with childfree workers across multiple sectors in a variety of European countries. In celebration of International Childfree Day and to support organisations in promoting a working culture that is inclusive of both parents and childfree workers, I share the insights of my research.

Childfree workers as “ideal workers”?

Sociologists [have shown](#) how employees who don't have (or are perceived as not having) (child)care responsibilities are often seen by their employer as ideal workers, because they are presumed to dedicate themselves fully to their job. The childfree workers I interviewed tend to be seen as “ideal workers”, as in their experience, their co-workers and managers often expected them to take on extra work, including activities outside office hours and tasks that involved travelling. Indeed, some of the people I talked to did not have any care responsibilities and volunteered for such extra tasks to

boost their career progression.

However, many had unrecognised non-child-related care responsibilities or were expected to do extra tasks (such as covering for colleagues on maternity leave or staying longer hours) that were unrewarded, leading these childfree workers to have a bad work/life balance and low levels of job satisfaction. Interviewees shared how, in their experience, the child-related non-work needs of parents were more easily recognised as activities to legitimately be prioritised over work tasks than the needs of childfree workers. Examples include childfree workers struggling with requesting flexibility during depressive episodes or when taking care of a friend with a severe illness.

In some cases, childfree workers even decided to quit their job due to the lack of recognition of their work/life balance needs. One of the childfree workers I spoke to, for example, felt that the continuous travelling he had committed to for years was taking too high of a toll, but thought that he could not make a convincing case for travelling less. This made him decide to look for a less demanding job elsewhere. Hence, the lack of recognition of childfree workers' needs can be bad for organisations.

What can leaders and co-workers do?

Issues on talent retention and job dissatisfaction can be addressed by creating a workplace that is inclusive of both parents and childfree workers. Accordingly, leaders need to recognise that not only parents but [all workers need a healthy work/life balance](#). While it has increasingly become the norm that childcare-related tasks are approached by co-workers and managers as legitimate reasons to balance work and life, this norm should be broadened to include non-childcare related activities. This not only involves overcoming stereotypes and fighting unfounded presumptions about childfree workers' availability and care responsibilities, but also activities such as introducing flexible work, leave, and benefit arrangements that are not necessarily tied to the (nuclear) family.

Undermining childfree identities

Besides lacking recognition for their work/life balance needs, childfree workers also shared how, depending on their gender and sexuality, they lacked recognition in the workplace of their childfree decision as a valid choice. While queer men felt that their colleagues took for granted that they were childfree, workers who were perceived as

female, straight and of child-bearing age thought that (some of) their co-workers and leaders approached them as potential future mothers. Almost all interviewees who identified as women shared experiences of co-workers questioning or even attacking their childfree decision and telling them that they would probably change their mind.

Many interviewees experienced these workplace interactions as stigmatising, and they felt that they could not bring this up as a valid issue with their manager or with HR. They thought they would not be taken seriously, as (unlike legally protected social identity characteristics) being childfree was not seen as a form of diversity that needed to be protected in their organisation. A few interviewees were so frustrated by these dynamics of exclusion that it influenced their decision to quit their job.

Moreover, many of the female-identifying interviewees thought that in promotion and recruitment decisions they were disadvantaged like any other (potential) mother, as they did not necessarily 'out' themselves as childfree and/or felt that they were not believed to stay childfree. This hampered their career progression and prevented them from fully realising their potential.

What can leaders and co-workers do?

While parenthood tends to be approached as the norm for heterosexual workers of child-raising age in many workplaces, this norm needs to be broadened to stimulate a working culture that is inclusive of childfree workers. This would allow organisations to reap the benefits of their entire workforce. Including childfree workers in the organisational EDI agenda may help to raise awareness of the forms of exclusion and stigmatisation with which childfree workers are confronted, as the findings of my research suggest that many co-workers and leaders do not (yet) approach childfree workers as an identity group that needs recognition and support.

This may not only make co-workers and leaders more sensitive to the types of workplace interactions that make childfree workers feel more included, but it also helps to incorporate childfree-related matters in wider efforts to generate gender equality at work. The results of my research illustrate how even women without care responsibilities might be approached as 'less ideal workers' when it comes to career progression (while simultaneously being expected to take on extra, potentially unrewarded tasks once they are hired). There is a clear need to continue challenging workplace practices that

prevent all women from fully thriving in their career.

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