

GENDER AWARENESS

ACCOMODATING THE NEEDS OF WORKING MOTHERS

Women in the workplace are rising to meet the challenge of breaking the glass ceiling and when they break it they do not want to be recognized as “genderless people” in business suits. Female executives and managers are forced to juggle the roles of working woman, wife and mother. As women we lead hectic lives, fulfilling many roles - partner, mother, career woman, wife, friend and psychologist. Juggling all these balls isn't always easy, and we may feel at times that our lives are out of control and often we are struggling to find our balance in the chaos of our lives.

The absence of work/life balance options can in some instances impact negatively on their productivity, retention and creativity in the work place. Women are still often confronted with the “second shift” at home as they are often responsible for the lion’s share of chores in the home environment. But the most important partner in the struggle in accommodating the needs of working mothers is men. Men need to be brought into this as partners if women are to win this battle.

Can organizations operate to accommodate this? At a conference a few years ago hosted by the Management College of South Africa’s Women in Business and attended by business and academics in Durban on gender equality, Fatima Hendricks said that in South Africa flexi time, part time working and work from home options were practically non-existent. She further added that there was a need for a shift towards rewarding output not hours and what is done, not where it is done!

Although Chapter 2 of the Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998 prohibits unfair discrimination, very little has been done to accommodate woman in this regard as it is not seen as an equity issue. It states “no person may unfairly discriminate, directly, or indirectly against an employee in any employment policy or practice, on one or more grounds including race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, **family responsibility**, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language, and birth.” Making a flexible work place that nurtures and retains female employees is not high on the agenda of most organisations. It may be argued that the lack of provision of childcare facilities and flexi working discriminates against family responsibility. And that as an employer one needs eliminate barriers of entry and advancement of this particular group. Any costs incurred could be considered as an investment in people as the ROI would be improved staff performance, loyalty and retention of skills. For us to have genuine equity in the correct sense of the word of our Employment Equity Act we need to be progressive and embark upon this challenge head on.

In April 2003 legislation was passed in the UK that gives parents statutory rights to request flexible working hours with children under 6 years of age or disabled children and to have their request considered seriously by their employers. The purpose of this legislation was to encourage discussion between employer and

employee regarding working hours and to reach amicable solutions. However, it is essential to note that this is a right for employees to ask the employer to be able to work flexible options. There is no statutory obligation on the side of the employer to grant this right, only to consider it and engage in dialogue. This process as stipulated by their Employment Act is intended as a vehicle to ensure the request is considered seriously, and that there will be no harmful effect or discrimination against the employee for requesting such an alternative.

In South Africa there are a few organizations that are investigating moving towards flexi time packages and reduced working hours for reduced pay. Some already have a number of women working shorter weeks or flexible working hours in order to make provision for family responsibilities. A number of them have made provision or are in the process of making provision for crèche facilities. A possible option is that if an employee has a child at home; a caregiver is required to be present but that the spin off for the employee is that he or she can still have the benefit of being at home but be available for work purposes. The hours are flexible but the minimum of hours per week are needed to be worked and availability during office hours is essential. For example this would allow an employee in terms of a contract to be available from 8.30 to 12.30 and then 15.00 to 17.30. However it is essential to note that this kind of option can only be considered for certain jobs and not a one size fits all. But the most important point is that South African companies are engaging in research and dialogue indicating that there is recognition that such opportunities can indeed be viable in the future.

Organisations in South Africa that are pursuing such options have taken the stance of viewing this as an investment in the right people to ensure performance at the optimal level without comprising work life balance.

This time of year while most of us are busy preparing for compiling and submitting our Employment Equity Reports, how many of us are actually giving thought to gender equity? And committing ourselves to building organizations in which men and women are able to perform at optimal levels while experiencing work/life balance?