The impact of family-building on the careers of female graduates: Some insights for effective management practice

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Introduction

In the UK, the proportion of couples with dependent children where both partners were in work increased from 57 per cent to 66 per cent between 1994/5 and 2005/6 (Simon and Whiting 2007) and looks set to continue to rise. The imperative for both men and women to manage the competing demands of work and personal life is of growing concern, not only for those involved but also for policymakers and employers. In particular, this demographic trend presents a significant challenge for management in the recruitment, motivation and retention of those employees who are attempting to balance the competing commitments of work and non-work, particularly women who typically take greater responsibility for childcare. This article outlines examples of both good and bad practice to discuss how organisations can effectively support employees in the process of family-building (should they choose to do so). It draws on research into the impact of partnership and family-building on the career aspirations, expectations and orientations among female graduates working across a range of occupations and industry sectors. The data drawn upon in this paper were collected as part of a longitudinal programme of research concerned with exploring the impact of higher education expansion on graduate career outcomes[1]. Primarily, it discusses the findings derived from the interview data collected in the interviews with 1995 graduates conducted seven and ten years after graduation in 2002/03 and 2005/06.

Family-building and the impact of parenthood

Previous research has shown that the work-life interface for highly-qualified women has tended to differ from less-qualified female labour market participants in a number of important ways. They are typically more likely to remain in paid work throughout their adult lives or to have a shorter gap than less-qualified women when having children, to work full-time and to develop successful careers (Joshi 2002). However, patterns of 'asynchronous' career development (Sekaran and Hall 1989) within partnerships tend to develop or accelerate during the family-building 'phase'. Moen and Sweet (2003) suggest that, in work-

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[1] In particular, this article draws on two studies of a cohort of graduates from 38 UK higher education institutions who completed their undergraduate studies in 1995. The *Graduate Careers Seven Years on* study (funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU); reported in Purcell and Elias 2004) conducted in 2002-03, consisted of a questionnaire survey of approximately 4500 graduates from 38 UK higher education institutions and. a follow-up programme of 200 detailed, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of survey respondents. In 2005-06 in a project entitled *'Through the Glass Ceiling'* funded by the European Social Fund (Purcell *et al.* 2006), additional analysis of these data was undertaken, and new qualitative data were collected in follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of the graduates previously interviewed, selected with the explicit focus on gender inequality and career transitions.

rich households where both partners are in employment, parenthood is a watershed challenge, replacing two jobs with an inescapable third set of responsibilities which constitute a further 'job' of unpaid domestic labour. These responsibilities are typically borne by women who tend to make career concessions to accommodate family responsibilities to a greater extent than is typically the case for men (Crompton and Lyonette 2008). Even where both partners have access to family-friendly work arrangements, women still tend to take on a greater share of unpaid work in the home. Women have been shown in many cases to have developed more adaptable, 'secondary' careers (which are less-organisationally 'bounded' and characterised by horizontal, rather than vertical, progression) as an essential 'trade off' to complement the more conventional, linear career of the breadwinner.

Our data tends to bear out many of these tendencies. Much of the discussion of the work-life interface in the *Ten Years On* interviews was underpinned by the issue of family-building. Where interviewees had already started a family, female partners were most often those who had to make most accommodations to this new arrangement, giving up work entirely or, more often, working reduced hours (most frequently working a three or four day week). This was not, however, necessarily at the expense of *ambition* or *desire* for career progression, regardless of a period of entrenchment at the outset of motherhood. In some cases, however, maternity clearly prevented the fulfilment of career ambitions, for example, the pursuit of promotion or a pay increase or movement away from an employer. The interviews provided evidence to indicate that this was not always because career had become a secondary concern, rather as a result of result of organisational impediments, whether cultural, political or structural. For example, having childcare commitments was clearly seen by some women as representing a position of weakness in achieving desired outcomes. This was particularly the case for women in a demanding job with a partner in an equally demanding job, working largely alongside male peers who tend to be supported by non-working or part-time working partners who obviate their need for family-friendly hours of work.

The interview data suggests, however, that impending or recent maternity did not always act as a constraint on women's choices in employment. All of the women who had left employment to have a family made it clear that they expected to return to employment within a few years, although few indicated that they would be returning to the same type of work. In some cases, having children presented the chance to leave an unsatisfactory job or career path, to re-orientate towards more altruistic or satisfying work, to attain more family-friendly working conditions and/or to opt out of 'the rat race'. Therefore, for several respondents, starting a family was seen as presenting an opportunity, a partially 'enforced' career break where a change of direction could be rationalised. It was clear therefore that family-building represents a key pressure point for employee retention.

Issues for management practice

This brief summary of how the arrival of children tended to impact on female employment leads us to consider how they and their employers can either facilitate or hinder the management of competing demands. This has important implications for both recruitment and retention strategies within organisations. It was apparent from the interviews conducted with female graduates ten years after graduation that employers' policies, organisational culture and managerial attitudes are paramount in facilitating the return to work of recent

mothers, retaining their services both during and after maternity leave and ensuring a satisfactory work-life balance for all employees with other commitments.

Many interviews stressed that central to the success of non-standard working patterns or self-employment was individual control over when, how and where work was to be done and the predictability afforded by such control. Several interviewees reflected on the fact that being able to set (some of) the parameters by which they work was central to fulfilling both their domestic and work responsibilities. At the most fundamental level this specifically related to working time and having the ability to work predictable hours. However, in high level jobs, attainment of control appears more difficult than simply having set 'clocking off' times and relates to job content, organisational culture and the attitude and understanding of immediate line management. For some women, self-employment was seen to provide ideal mechanism by which to achieve necessary levels of control over work and, in some cases, it had indeed resolved the tension between competing demands. For others, however, self-employment had failed to provide the flexibility that they had sought, instead blurring work-life boundaries and creating greater conflict between work and personal life rather than resolving it, not to mention the often negative consequences associated with self-employment such as job and income security.

For those remaining in employment, some employers were clearly receptive to flexible working and effective in facilitating the transition from full-time to reduced-hours work. Non-standard working appeared to be significantly more embedded in certain organisations and sectors than others, particularly where precedents had long been established. For example, the research highlighted a number of examples of 'good practice' in the public sector. Conversely, male-dominated sectors where a long working hours' culture tended to exist were those most resistance to effective flexible working, especially where it was to accommodate family responsibilities (for example, the construction industry). Paradoxically, the ICT industry and those industries in which the graduate jobs held by our respondents were concerned with the manipulation of ICT also appear to be among the worst, despite the fact that many new technologies inherently have the potential to make employment more flexible and adaptable to the needs of employees.

The interviews also clearly highlighted the importance of job content and the type of work that an individual does in ensuring that not only are those working reduced hours able to fulfil both their family and work commitment, not only in terms of 'getting the work done' but also in terms of personal fulfilment. In responsive roles, for example those that are client-facing (such as recruitment consultancy), the demands of customers for 9-5, five days a week 'access' to specific individuals can create tension in the role and reduced hours working. Alternatively, proactive 'project-based' modes of working, for example, appeared to allow the management of workload more effectively to match individual circumstances and working hours without the 'guilt' of letting down colleagues or clients. This also comes down to organisational culture where: *"it's not frowned upon if you go home having done your hours"*. Of course, it is not only the type of work and industry sector that shape degrees of access to effective non-standard working. Previous research has often highlighted that many organisations are more likely to be accommodating to the flexibility requirements of key staff or those with scarce skills or developmental potential in order to retain these employees. This was apparent in a number of cases.

Part of the impediment to the successful balancing of work and other commitments was, therefore, structural, relating to long-established working patterns and labour processes. However, these impediments weren't necessarily absolute in disallowing the effective balancing of work and personal responsibilities. More important were cultural barriers, particularly at a local level. Sectoral or organisational 'norms' as regards non-standard working are mediated through the attitude and actions of line managers who have the ability either to reinforce or override good or bad practice. In several interviews with respondents working across a variety of occupations and sectors, the support and understanding of line management to the needs of those working non-standard hours or who have outside commitments was clearly essential to the success of flexible work patterns. However, unless this support is underpinned by a strong organisational commitment to flexible working, both culturally and in terms of explicit policy and practice, the capacity to accommodate non-work responsibilities and support in managing work-life balance is likely to be patchy.

Summary

The data collected in this study highlighted how organisational culture, work organisation and managerial attitudes are able to significantly assist in the effective resolution of competing work and personal responsibilities, but also how they can contribute to difficulties faced by employees. These pressures tend to be particularly acute in situations where both partners have established successful and demanding careers. It clearly shows a need for organisations to address cultural and (micro-) political barriers to work-life balance, including ensuring consistent peer and line manager support, to ensure that those dealing with competing demands maintain the challenge and career development opportunities that make up a significant element of their motivation to work. Interviewees clearly reported that when they felt that they were no longer in control of their working lives, they had sought to take steps to redress this balance often by finding or creating employment opportunities that would allow them do so. The obvious problem for employers is that this is likely to lead to the wastage of skills and experience and unnecessary costs associated with dysfunctional labour turnover. Organisations that had enabled their early-career graduates to accommodate family-building and other non-work responsibilities clearly were retaining and motivating their staff more effectively than those that did not.

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