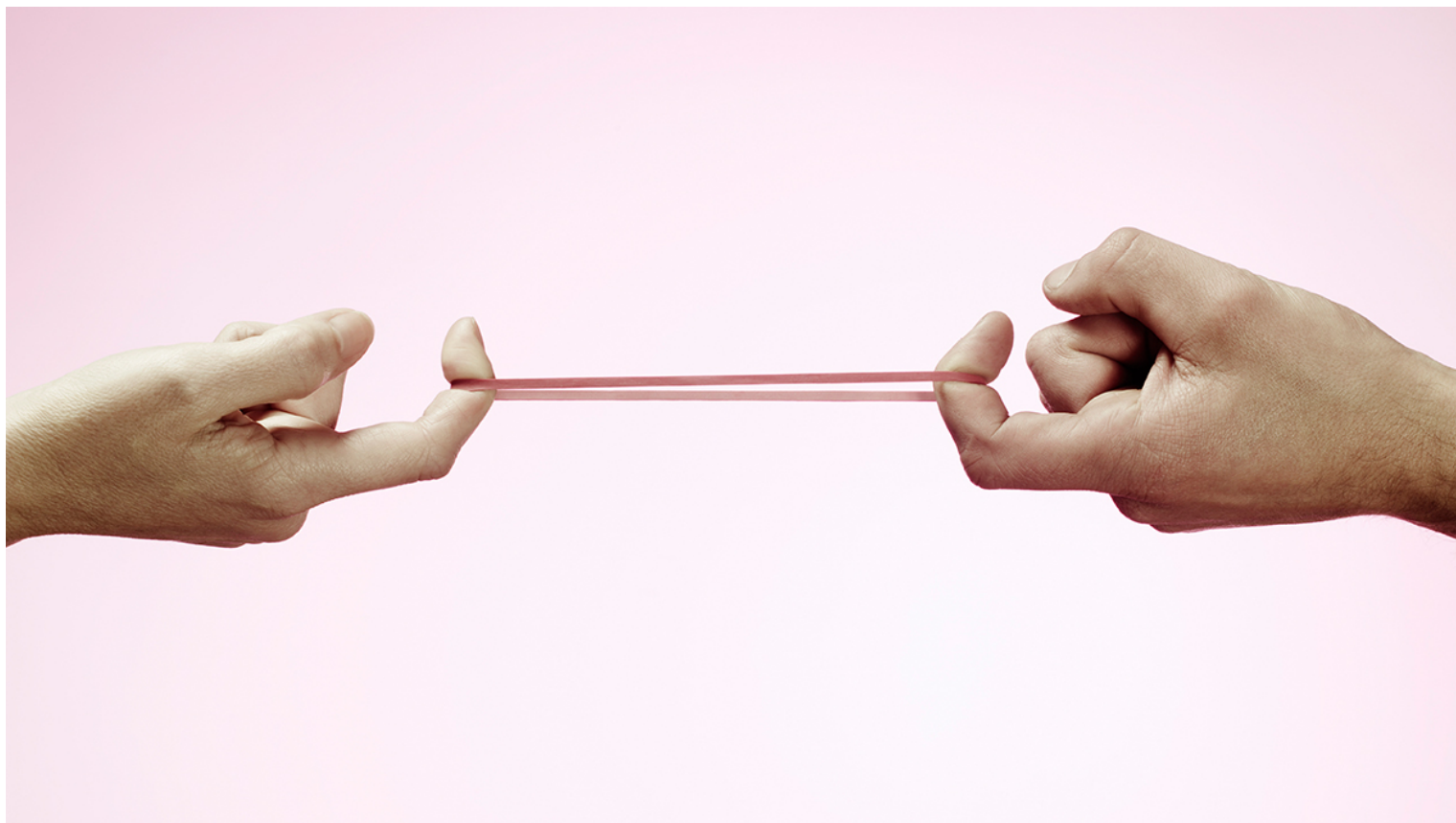


TALENT MANAGEMENT

Your Company Needs a Better Retention Plan for Working Parents

by Daisy Wademan Dowling

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You're a leader with ambitious goals for yourself and your team in 2019. The plan is set, the performance, growth, and efficiency targets committed to. But, to be fully prepared for the year, there is one issue that should be at the top of your priority list: the Working Parent Problem.

This is a new, simple label we can use to describe the sometimes overwhelming challenge of trying to earn a living and build a career while also parenting well. For organizations and people in positions of leadership, it refers to the challenge of effectively employing and fully unleashing the potential of the folks who are trying to navigate the demands of work and family.

If you've thought about the Problem before as a manager, it's probably been under a different, hazier label ("work-life balance" or "integration"), and potential solutions may have seemed like a nebulous, elective effort; there was no clear path or upside to getting involved. Even if you've directly confronted the Problem in the past – for example, you've had a star performer suddenly decide to stay home at the end of a parental leave – the issue probably still felt adjacent to your core business goals, a relatively small and inevitable cost of doing business.

But it isn't anymore. In the current economic and cultural landscape, the Working Parent Problem has moved up to the forefront of leadership concerns, and it's going to stay there. Ignored, it can become a powerful and insidious threat to your team and organization's success.

Here's *why* focusing on working parents is so important:

Because the demographic is huge... Let's look at the cold hard data: In the United States, the age-25-to-54 civilian workforce is 102 million people, and 52 million of them are working parents, according to the Department of Labor. It's therefore possible – probable, even – that 50% or more of your new-product sales team, or line managers, or clinical care providers, or the candidates for that specialty role you've been recruiting for and that's proving impossible to fill, are trying to be committed professionals while also raising their kids in a present and loving way. At the same time, unemployment rates are at near-record lows. So, if you're having serious trouble finding the talent you need already, it's probably time to start paying attention to ways you can attract this huge pool of working mothers and fathers, retain them, and ensure they deliver at work.

Although I've used the United States as an example here, data on the growing ranks of professionals with children in other countries are also eye-opening. (In England alone, there are a million more working mothers now than 20 years ago.) In today's war for talent, working parenthood isn't a skirmish – it's a major, central battle.

...and the struggle is arguably more difficult today than in past decades. Not only is the sheer *number* of working parents large and growing, but those men and women also carry much heavier loads than previous generations have. Today's working parents are three times more likely, on average, to be part of dual-career couples or to be single than they are to spouses at home full-time. That means the majority of committed, working-parent employees have no slack in their system: no one to whom they can hand off the school pickup or pediatrician visit or 10 pm feeding. And as wonderful as many technological changes are, some have also made working parenthood harder: iPhone in hand, there's no reason, or excuse, to ever be "off" of work, even during the parent-teacher conference or family dinner. Translation: Being a working parent isn't a marginal or occasional concern for mothers and fathers on your team; it's one of the central challenges of their lives, and they grapple with it daily.

Because more working parents care more – and may vote with their feet. Several recent studies indicate that for working parents, flexibility and work-life balance trump every other career decision-making criteria – including pay. And research shows that men, historically less engaged in childcare and other child-related activities, are becoming increasingly committed to it: today's dads overwhelmingly report wanting to be present and on-the-job at home. They're becoming increasingly willing to make serious career choices around it, too. So working-parenthood isn't a "women's thing" anymore – it's a universal concern driving whether people join or stay in your organization.

Because it's a bellwether. How you treat working parents is an indicator of how you treat talent in general, especially in the eyes of prospective or more junior employees. Do you include information about family-related policies in the Careers section of your corporate website? If not, there's a risk that candidates – whether they have kids or not – will quickly move on to other sites and job opportunities that appear more parent-friendly. And if up-and-coming stars with young children are leaving your team or organization to stay home, or for jobs where it seems more feasible to combine work and family, their younger colleagues (folks who aren't part of that 52 million yet, but want to be someday) will notice and start wondering if they've found the right place to build their long-term careers.

Bottom line: Without a good approach to working parenthood that you're willing to showcase publicly and some visible examples of moms and dads succeeding and thriving in your organization, you'll have a hard time developing a reputation as a great boss or persuading people that your company is "a great place to work."

Because the issue pervades our public dialogue. Scan the headlines, look at your screen, or type the term "working parent" into a browser, and you'll find a deluge of articles, commentary, and opinion generated in the past two to three years – all underscoring the immediacy and scope of the Working Parent Problem. It's certainly top-of-mind for anyone directly affected by it, and increasingly for people who aren't, and it's likely to stay in that spotlight for the foreseeable future. If you're a senior leader who hasn't yet gotten a question of some kind about the issue from a reporter, investor, board member, in front of a crowd at an employee town hall, or from a star performer during a mentoring conversation, you probably will soon. You don't want to get caught without a thoughtful stance on a hot-button topic that affects so many people.

Because external help probably isn't on the way – at least, not anytime soon. Yes, there has been a lot of discussion recently in the United States and other countries about working-parent friendly legislation, including paid and/or extended parental leaves. While those types of laws could eventually be helpful for parents and for organizations, they may not pass or pass as proposed, and they could be delayed for years. To be effective, your talent strategy has to be based on the here and now, not on "maybes" of the future.

So what exactly does a strong and feasible strategy look like? And how, in the face of this large, complex challenge can individual leaders take charge and make an impact? In my consulting work, I've advised executives and organizations of all sizes and types in various industries to focus on six key things:

1. Demonstrate personal support for working-parent employees, in a highly visible way.
2. Define your organization's working-parent challenge from the front-line employee perspective, through both a quantitative and qualitative lens.
3. Engage allies within and outside of the HR team to identify and execute on solutions.
4. Take a comprehensive approaches rather than relying on "silver bullet" solutions.
5. Support – and help to shape – grassroots, employee-led solutions, such as peer-to-peer working-parent mentoring programs or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

6. Out-communicate the competition when it comes to working-parent matters.

Ultimately, every leader and organization will find different ways to solve the Working Parent Problem. But, as with any challenge, acknowledging its reality, size, and nature is always the right place to start.



Daisy Wademan Dowling is the Founder and CEO of Workparent, a consulting firm that provides practical, commercial advice, solutions and training to working parents and to the organizations that employ them. She has led successful human-capital strategy, leadership development, and diversity efforts within several Fortune 500 companies – and now works as coach, consultant and advisor to a broad range of organizations seeking to drive performance through their people. She can be reached at daisydowling@workparent.com or through www.workparent.com.

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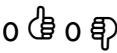
3 COMMENTS

Michael Barata a day ago

Though the sentiment is good, isn't this just another way of managing people instead of managing the work? Suggesting a flexible work arrangement where some get it, but others don't? Pitting one lifestyle against another?

Why not set clear objectives about the work and trust the people to make responsible decisions about how they work and live?

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