

Childfree In the Workplace: Demographics, Stigmas, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore one particular phenomenon that can be associated with the millennial generation, and that is the increasing number of childfree employees in the workplace. We examine the demographic data on childlessness in the workplace and the literature on issues and perceptions of childlessness and childfree individuals. Research has demonstrated various social stigmas associated with childfree; among these are perceptions that the childfree are more immature, selfish, autonomous, and less desirable to be around. The social stigma attached to the choice to remain childfree has certainly impacted the extent to which firms have sought to address these issues, and researchers have also tended to avoid conducting significant empirical and qualitative work in this domain. There is a very real need for high quality research efforts focused on understanding the issues raised by childfree workers in the structure of contemporary organizations, along with work needed to identify innovative ways organizations can adapt to the new reality of childfree employees. For managers, there is a clear need to think carefully about the implications of childfree workers in the workplace. Managers should be encouraged to engage in honest discussions with employees about disparities in familial status, and to work with teams to encourage greater acceptance of the diversity that comes from these differences. The trend toward childfree individuals in the workplace is likely to continue, with the result that managers will need to address the issues raised in this analysis.

Keywords: Millennials, Voluntarily Childfree, Stigmas, Workplace Effects.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the U.S. workforce crossed a threshold: for the first time, millennials – those born between 1982 and 2000 – became the single largest generational cohort in the workplace [59]. According to the Pew Research Center, there are over 55 million millennials in the workforce, which exceeds Generation X (those born between the mid 1960s and the early 1980s) and baby boomers (those born between 1946 and the mid-1960s) [45]. Compared to previous generations, millennials are now more than one third of the current labor force [17].

Several authors have noted the possible impacts of millennials on organizations and management [20] [28] [59]. Frequently such analyses examine the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the millennial generation and how these may differ from previous generations; the authors then go on to explore how these differences might affect managerial practice. This is certainly valuable work as it provides insights into how managers should deal with the different needs, wants, and expectations of the millennial cohort. With this new generation comes changes in needs and desires, and the burden of fulfilling those needs has been placed upon the employer. When these needs are not met, millennials have demonstrated that they will not hesitate to leave their company behind in search of another manager or organization who will take their desires seriously [42] [46].

To better address the implications these changes will have for organizations, it is important to understand the motivations and concerns of the millennial generation. The desires and expectations of millennials will obviously differ among individuals, but there are many commonalities. With many human resource practices in need of modification because of the changing demographic landscape, companies are going to have to revise the approach to several aspects of employee relations policies and programs. Millennials' needs and desires are distinct and cannot be ignored. To do so could create difficulties and challenges for many organizations. If firms choose to overlook the millennial generation's expectations, companies are going to find it difficult to retain the best millennial employees [38]. Without the best possible workers for the job, firm performance will undoubtedly suffer.

It is therefore likely that companies are going to have to change their outlook on both hiring practices and employee benefits in the foreseeable future. The purpose of this paper is to explore one particular phenomenon that can be associated with the millennial generation, and that is the increasing number of childfree employees in the workplace. Demographic data will show that millennials, more than any other generation in recent history, are increasingly choosing to be childfree by choice. This will result in greater numbers of childfree employees in the workplace. As will be discussed, the issues associated with the childfree can differ from workers with children. Our intent is to investigate and offer suggestions to remediate the issues this presents.

We will begin by examining the demographic data on childlessness in the workplace. Following this we review the extant literature on issues and perceptions of childlessness and childfree individuals. Note that, consistent with current practice, we use the term "childfree" to indicate those persons who have voluntarily chosen to forego having children and parenting, as contrasted with "childless" which can refer to those who are not able to have children due to involuntary factors (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). We will then use this knowledge base to examine the potential impacts of these issues on the workplace. We will conclude by offering some suggestions for future directions for research and managerial practice with childfree individuals in organizations.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS

Now perhaps more than ever before, young adults are actively choosing to delay having children, or to not have children at all. According to the Urban Institute, after 2007 birth rates declined more than 15 percent amongst people born between 1980 and 1995, also known as the millennial generation [3]. As noted, these (often childfree) individuals are now entering the

workplace in large numbers. With this increase of childfree employees into the workforce, managers are seeing shifts in workplace dynamics. For example, 37% of companies in the United States currently offer paid parental leave [46]. Programs like this are not relevant to millennials who have made a choice to remain childfree, and such benefits are of little value to these individuals.

According to the Pew Research Center, highly educated women are deciding to have children later in life. The more education a woman has (up to a bachelor's degree), the less likely she is to become a parent [36]. In a Gallup Poll taken in 2013, Americans were asked what they perceived as the ideal number of children to have. The answer was 2.6 children, with 48% of participants stating that they thought 2 children represented a superlative family [54]. This may not seem significant, but it is the lowest estimate since the survey's inception in 1930 [54]. Voluntary childlessness varies among racial and ethnic groups as well. 17% of Caucasian women aged 40 to 44 are childfree, the highest of any racial group [36]. Hispanic women are on the other end of the scale with only 10% remaining childfree into their early 40s [36].

The millennial generation is seeing declines in parenthood on an even larger scale. Nearly half of women aged 25 to 29 were childless in 2014, the highest percentage since the Census Bureau began tracking the data in 1976 [37]. In 2013, the National Center for Health Statistics recorded only 62.9 births per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 to 44 [35]. The total fertility rate in the previous year fell to an all-time low of 1.86%, meaning couples were not producing enough children to replace them after their death [35]. Demographers have seen this rate steadily fall since the recession of 2007, when it was at 2.1% [35]. In 2016, fertility rates among millennials in the U.S. were driving overall rates to record lows; and this decline in birth rates can be observed across not only the U.S. and western Europe, but in countries such as India, Mexico, and Australia as well [48].

There are several theories as to why millennials feel the need to delay their plans of parenthood. Since the United States recession in 2007, young adults have reported feeling less financially secure than their parent's generations [3]. Many people are choosing to wait until later in life, when they feel, they are better equipped to care for a child. Experiencing lower birthrates in times of economic downturn is not a new phenomenon, however. So why does America's young workforce feel less need than ever to start a family? The answers are likely due to a combination of reasons.

Women have more access to education, healthcare, and contraception than ever before. A study done at York University examined three types of undergraduate women: those who wanted to delay having children until their educational or career goals were met; those who were not waiting to fulfill educational or career goals before starting a family; and those who reported that they did not want to have children at all [22]. Those who reported that they were delaying motherhood said that their psychological fulfillment was less dependent on motherhood and more dependent on achieving what they perceived to be more important goals. This study helped reveal that the rejection or endorsement of parenthood was a function of changes in these women's personality, rather than an inherent need. Women were now ascribing traits that were traditionally thought to be "masculine" traits, such as independence and ambition, to themselves when it came to planning their career goals [22]. This study also indicated that

young men and women who have good access to healthcare and contraceptives are more likely to put off becoming parents until later in life [22].

As to the motivations behind the decision to remain childfree, research by Park (2005) found that women claimed that parenting conflicted with career and leisure identities, indicated a disinterest in children, and a lack of maternal instinct [44]. Women also were influenced by the parenting models of significant others. Men tended to reject parenthood due to perceived sacrifices, including the financial expense. Both were motivated by perceived personality traits that were viewed as incongruent with good parenting [44].

Several reviews of the literature seek to identify why adults choose to identify as childfree. Blackstone and Stewart (2012) note that explanations include such factors as women's increasing labor force participation, increased reproductive choice, autonomy, and personal freedom [5]. Other factors identified included freedom from childcare responsibility, self-fulfillment, aversion to the lifestyle changes associated with parenthood, the ability to develop relationships with other adults, and spontaneous mobility [5]. A review by Agrillo and Nelini (2008) noted additional factors that can influence the choice to be childfree include freedom from the economic responsibilities of raising a child and the perceived trauma of pregnancy and childbirth [1]. Other issues have included perceived loss of control over oneself and one's future, impact on marital harmony, and personal fulfillment through alternative goals [8].

CHILDFREE IN THE WORKPLACE: STIGMAS

Perceptions of Childlessness

An important stream of research in the literature on childfree persons has examined the psychological and sociological aspects of voluntary childlessness [29]. Early research suggested that choosing to be childfree seems like a violation of important societal norms, and those who are childfree by choice can be viewed as deviants [56]. None the less, there have been studies that examine this phenomenon, and the issues raised may be particularly relevant in light of the demographic trend toward voluntary childlessness among millennial workers.

For years, becoming a parent has been seen as a hallmark of maturity and adulthood. When the voluntarily childless enter their adult life, they are forced to confront a reality that potentially sees them without this maturity. Not only are they seen as lacking characteristics of adulthood; other negative traits are often attached to them due to their parental state. Park (2002) noted that "Compared to parents, the voluntarily childless were seen as less socially desirable, less well adjusted, less nurturant, and more autonomous and respondents expressed a desire for more social distance from them" [43:24]. In this case, women were viewed as less socially desirable than men [43].

In choosing to have children, individuals are seen as shedding the last vestiges of immaturity. However, when a couple chooses to abstain from parenthood, they do not go through this process. Not only are childfree individuals seen as immature, they are seen as deviant to the status quo [56]. Having children is tantamount to clearing the last passage into adulthood. When an individual does not have a child, they will likely be seen as immature well into their adult years [1].

As well as immature, childfree individuals are seen as more autonomous. While this may sound like a benefit, it is actually perceived as selfish [1, 24, 43]. The childfree are able to make more decisions for themselves without taking others into account. Parents can often resent this about the childfree because it is an option that is often not available to them. Therefore, those without children are perceived to make more self-centered decisions without considering the implications those decisions will have on others.

As mentioned, the childfree are seen as less desirable to be around by those who have children [43]. Society naturally categorizes people into different levels of desirability [39]. Parents can often avoid the childfree because of the choice of the childfree not to become parents; individuals will tend to associate with those who share similar characteristics. Those who are childfree are generally not attending PTA meetings, youth sports or arts activities, and similar events associated with children. Not only do parents feel that they have little in common with the childfree, they often feel that they are “a league above them” [43]. This feeling of superiority places a wall between the two groups of people and can stunt the growth of meaningful relationships.

Research has indicated that parents are perceived as warmer than non-parents [13]. Women tend to have more positive attitudes about “childlessness” than men [33]. In addition, older couples who are viewed as unlikely to have children are viewed more negatively than those who are seen as likely to become parents [32].

There are several stigmas that follow the voluntarily childless in their day-to-day life [43]. Consciously choosing to refrain from parenthood can be seen as unnatural or abnormal [56]. Childfree persons were viewed less favorably with respect to personality attributes than those with children [1]. Childfree couples have been perceived as less sensitive, less loving, and not as well-adjusted as those with children [1, 30].

Recent research has suggested that, because childfree individuals lie outside many societal norms, those who are voluntarily childless tend to experience moral outrage, anger, and disapproval from others [2]. The result is that childfree persons are seen as outside the norms of society and are viewed negatively by others [24]. These perceptions can be widespread and impactful. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these negative perceptions will have consequences for the childfree at work.

Childfree at Work

Childfree trends may change the landscape of the workplace. There are several theories to describe the way people work together, and in their research Miner et. al (2014) show how Expectation States Theory can help explain the nuances of being childfree in the workplace [39]. This theory suggests that hierarchies are created by groups with a shared task based on assumptions members make about each other’s ability to complete those tasks [39]. Individual participants rate other group members’ competence based on two factors: skills and abilities as well as prestige features. Skills and abilities can be based on technical learning or prior experience. Status or prestige is assigned based on factors such as age, race, gender, etc. [14]. These prestige features are influenced by the perceptions that the group holds of the individual. When employees bring in their preexisting stigmas and prejudices against the childfree, these perceptions can be harmful to the group dynamic [39]. The perceptions of immaturity that are

attached to individuals without children can undermine their credibility [43]. Not only does this weaken the group, it can often place an undue burden on the rest of the group to fill in those perceived gaps seemingly left by the childfree individual. These kinds of hindrances can leave a team at a disadvantage, one that can have effects throughout the organization. The weight of reconciling these shortcomings can often be left on the shoulders of management.

It is also possible that this perception of immaturity intensifies as the childfree individual grows older [24]. There is seemingly a relationship between the age of the individual and the impact of the perception of immaturity on the employee's career. The younger a childfree individual is, the less that the perception of immaturity is due to their childlessness and, therefore, the less the perception hinders their career. The opposite would, then, be true for older childfree individuals.

Workers use these and other types of social categorization as well as stereotyping every day, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Both social categorization and stereotyping are cognitive factors that lead to workplace incivility [15]. Few may feel this as much as working mothers. It has been shown that group members assign lower status to female workers, especially those that are working mothers, and also make judgements about them based on their assigned statuses [39]. This may be yet another reason why women especially are choosing to delay or forgo childbirth. Women are no longer citing family and children as their number one priority. Rather, work and higher education have become one of the central concerns for millennial women [24].

Because young women are more career-oriented than ever before, the behavior they observe of their peers who have chosen motherhood may affect them [52]. At present, men occupy about 60% of all managerial positions, but this gap is narrowing; the majority of new managerial jobs created between 1980 and 2010 are held by women, and some managerial positions are dominated by females [49]. Millennial women have seen female mentors and managers leave work or reduce their hours to spend more time with their families much more often than their male coworkers. They have also seen these women's careers put on hold, or even stagnate, because of these decisions. Likewise, when women in powerful positions do decide to leave in order to be with their children, they are often replaced by men [52]. This sends a subtle yet powerful message to millennial women about the choices they need to make in order to rise in an organization.

Childfree men and women are also reporting incivility in the workplace due to their chosen life paths. It has been shown that, while working mothers may experience more discourteous and impolite behavior, they have also reported that their dual role as "mother" has helped them learn to cope with these experiences [39]. Childfree women do not necessarily have these dual roles, especially when work is their singular focus. Childfree women experiencing incivility report lower job satisfaction, experience higher depressive symptoms, and account for higher turnover rates than their other female-mother counterparts [39].

All of these factors lead to what is called "minority stress" or "the stress felt from being the member of a minority group (in this case, an employed woman without a child) that is marginalized and oppressed" [60]. Minority stress is unhealthy and changes both the individuals' ability to process information and their outlook of their working environment [60].

Working childfree women who rank their careers as their first priority are often perceived as “selfish”, “competitive”, and “trying to act like men” because they forfeit traditional motherhood characteristics like being nurturing and compromising [39]. Working childfree women have the aforementioned perceived autonomy, but they also have the perceived selfishness that comes with it [43]. While their female peers with children are seen as giving up too much time at work to be with their children, childfree women are seen as being self-seeking in their pursuit to make time for themselves and their work, rather than for their children. This can be especially harmful in a group setting. When one member of a team is perceived, correctly or incorrectly, as not being committed to the group but rather to themselves, the team’s entire culture can be affected.

While childfree millennial men do not report experiencing the same lack of respect that their female coworkers do, they actually are more prone to incivility than most of their other male colleagues who happen to be fathers [39]. Men are generally perceived as more stable and competent when they are parents, especially when these men are seen as “breadwinners”. Working fathers are perceived as more stable, are offered higher starting salaries, and received more job offers than their female and childfree male counterparts [39].

Using that logic, becoming a father would be beneficial for working men, would it not? The answer is: not always, at least, not if a father wants to spend more time with his family or even act as the primary caregiver. Women are much more likely than men to feel as though their absence is negatively impacting their child, but that does not mean that fathers are not staying home with their children [52]. Of the 27 million men in professional and managerial careers, about 6.5% have willingly decided to work part time [51]. Because the decision to work long, dedicated hours is often seen as a masculine trait, many fathers working part time hours may feel they are negatively perceived for their decisions. Men feel more social pressure to reject part time work than women and are often looked down on when they question policies surrounding paternal leave [51].

Even if a father can overcome the social stigma of working part time, there are tangible consequences for men looking to spend more time at home, just as there are for women. If a father chooses to work part time, even if he simply reduces his hours to 80% of his original schedule, he will experience a 15.5% drop in overall pay over the next 27 years [51]. Because many young millennial men are not feeling supported by their organizations, nor are able to find successful role models in their coworkers who decided to adopt a part time schedule, they are deciding to focus on their careers rather than become fathers.

The negative feelings felt towards these men and women can impact the workplace. Because voluntarily childfree individuals are often deemed less desirable to be around, an adequate amount of workplace bonding and networking may not take place. A company’s culture is centered on the employee interactions that happen every day. When an entire group (and a growing group, for that matter) is alienated because of their parental status, the balance in the workplace is thrown off to the detriment of management and the organization as a whole.

Every day workers will use social categorization and stereotyping to make sense of their complex social atmosphere, but often this does more harm than good [15]. In order to fix the disparities experienced between those who are perceived to be higher or lower status workers,

it is crucial that managers recognize the differences in the perceptions of parents and childfree employees.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

What does this mean for organizations? As the largest cohort in the U.S. workforce, millennials make up the major part of the workforce. We know from the demographic data that many of these persons will be in childfree relationships. The review of the research indicates that there are significant stigmas and perceptions associated with the childfree. This new demographic of childfree personnel has the potential to disrupt and change the organizational culture. What can managers do in response to this increase in childfree workers?

It has been reasonably well established in the literature that organizations benefit from programs that improve organizational diversity and inclusion [31, 47, 53]. The differences between workers with children and those who are childfree are clearly present and real in many organizations [10]. Gaining the full benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce will necessitate providing an inclusive environment for those with differences in family situation as a result of the decision to remain childfree. A study by Casper and her colleagues (2007) identified five aspects of a workplace culture that is viewed as inclusive by those who are childfree: social inclusion, equal work opportunities, equal access to benefits, equal respect for nonwork life and equal work expectations [11]. Utilizing these frameworks from existing research paradigms, we suggest that there are two areas that managers should address to create a workplace that is inclusive for those who are childfree by choice: equality in the work situation, and managing the stigmas associated with the childfree.

Equality in the Work Situation

There has been a trend in recent years to make organizations more “family friendly” [27, 50]. Family-friendly policies include such benefits as flex-time, job sharing, temporary or permanent switches to part-time status, allowing work to be done away from the worksite, maternity/paternity leave, parental leave, family medical leave, flexible emergency leave, family health benefits, and child care, bringing children to the workplace, tuition or scholarships for children of employees, and family issues as part of an employee assistance program [55]. While research suggests that such policies may have little impact on firm performance [6], the trend in popular literature is to associate family-friendly practices with “good” companies [25].

The problem, of course, is that such “family friendly” policies tend to be biased toward families with children (e.g., maternity/paternity leave, parental leave, child care, scholarships for children, family health benefits). Such benefits are of little value to childfree workers. Research has noted that the impacts of family-friendly human resource practices differ between parents and non-parents [23]. In fact, it has been suggested that family-friendly practices “cheat” the childless [7, 46].

They may feel that they are not being granted the same benefits as their peers with families, and they do not believe that that is right or just [26]. On average, organizations pay twice as much for insurance for workers with families as they do for employees without children, according to the Employee Benefit Research Institute [46]. While parents are usually left with a higher bill for family coverage, childfree workers may still feel this disproportionate spending

on the part of the employer is prejudiced against those with no children. Managers who recognize this criticism can take actions to alleviate the issue. Organizations can offer perks such as cash back options of alternative health care options, particularly for younger millennial workers whose health care costs tend to be lower due to their age. Or, if this is not feasible, they can also offer additional benefits to their childfree employees to even the field, such as health club memberships to encourage a healthy lifestyle [46].

Another issue is that parents are often given certain working alternatives that their childfree peers are not [39]. For instance, parents are more likely to take advantage of a company's telecommuting or flex time policies [52]. While these policies are also often offered to all other employees as well, childfree workers have indicated that they are frequently looked down upon for taking advantage of these programs. Parents are twice as likely to use flex-time and other benefits as childfree employees; about 93% of the employees who take advantage of alternative work arrangements are parents [46]. Childfree workers may want these policies to be offered to them both on paper and in practice. One way a manager can address this complaint is by encouraging all employees to take advantage of these policies, regardless of parental status. When requesting time off, childfree workers often prefer to not cite their reasons for their request as they believe they will be rejected when their reasoning is not deemed to be as important as that of another employee [46].

Especially in highly demanding jobs, childfree millennial workers feel that they are left to work when parents leave to spend time with their families [46]. This is especially noticed during overtime hours, holidays, and the third shift. Childfree employees have reported that they are happy to help their peers and their families. However, workers often prefer to be recognized for their extra work [46]. Managers can do this by directly acknowledging employees who take extra steps to help their coworkers or through extra compensation plans, as well [46].

Parents can often be given extensive personal time at work. This time can be used for instances such as staying home with a sick child or attending one of their children's school functions. Employees without children can habitually feel that this time is not afforded to them to the same extent that it is to their coworkers [46]. Staff without children have made it clear that they would also like personal time for sabbaticals, travel, volunteer work, etc. Managers who are looking to be more inclusive when offering personal time may want to consider offering floating days that do not require specific criteria for acceptance. Human resource leaders can also consider offering time off on a first come-first serve basis so as to eliminate any biases when awarding personal time.

Workers without children want to feel that their time is valued just as much as employees with spouses and children [46]. Companies may also want to consider making their policies well known to all employees so that they are encouraged to take every advantage that is afforded to them. If management can clearly outline all policies, they can eliminate the likelihood that employees will be keeping track of what others are getting and they are not [46].

It has been shown that people who play multiple roles in life, i.e., parent and employee, are better equipped to handle the stresses that come with work and workplace incivility [39]. Encouraging employees to pursue multiple roles can help lower reported anxiety and depression, increase life and job satisfaction, and increase a worker's mastery and purpose.

While millennials are choosing more and more to delay or abandon the potential role of “parent” in their life, it is important that an organization encourage work/life balance for all employees, not just parents. People who are able to adopt multiple roles are able to have more balanced lives and greater flexibility in the face of stress [39]

Along with the importance of multiple roles, Miner et al.’s (2014) study found that it is important for management to communicate the importance and appreciation of all workers, not just those with children [39]. With the presence of working mothers in the labor force, childfree millennial workers feel that their work goes more and more unnoticed and underappreciated. A written or vocal statement from management about the importance of all employees would be one of the most impactful ways to reinforce an inclusive and positive workplace for all personnel regardless of parental status [39].

Not only will the trend of childlessness affect the current labor force, but it will also impact the incoming labor market. In-house childcare, extended parental leave, and similar benefits do not apply to employees who are childfree. Such “parental” or “familial” perks will not draw the attention of potential candidates. Millennials are seeking new and different benefits in their careers. If an organization does not offer the benefits that they are looking for, the millennial generation may well move on to a company that does [46].

In addition, firms can seek to provide similar benefits to employees with children and those who are childfree. For example, childfree employees can be offered similar flextime and job-sharing arrangements, emergency leaves for issues relating to a spouse or partner, off-site work arrangements, and tuition assistance might be tailored to the needs of those who are childfree yet may well have additional family issues with a spouse, partner, or parent(s). Efforts on the part of management to develop such policies and programs may well prove beneficial to childfree workers.

Many firms are recognizing the issues associated with childfree employees and are taking positive actions to address the needs of these workers. Companies such as Trader Joe’s, Ernst & Young, Boeing, Levi Strauss, and General Mills offer flexible paid time off (PTO) programs that are highly valued by childfree workers for the flexibility it provides in their work schedules [12]. Microsoft and Johnson & Johnson have developed flex-time policies that do not stigmatize or exploit childfree employees [9]. Such efforts to recognize the needs for equity and fairness for all employees may help increase feelings of inclusiveness for the childfree.

Managing the Childfree Stigmas

Recognizing the differences in desires and state of mind between parents and childfree employees is critical to managing this young generation, as well. Being aware of the biases that are attributed to gender and parental status is not enough [21]. In many cases, simply informing employees about biases can actually increase the negative impacts of those biases. It is not adequate for managers to only make workers aware of the prejudices and condemn them. It is far more effective for management to inform those in the organization that the majority of people are actively trying to overcome these misconceptions [21]. By using this technique, employees feel as though they need to be a part of the group, and in this case that means abandoning their prejudices. Management can both bring to light employees’ biases and

delegitimize these. Such efforts will address the need for social inclusion that is essential to creating a work culture that is inclusive for the childfree [11].

Efforts to manage the stigmas include the use of positive language and rhetoric around the choice to remain childfree; such narrative scripts have been shown to improve the ability of individuals to cope with the perceived stigmas [41]. As has been done with other forms of diversity, companies can consider creating affinity groups for employees who are childfree to foster communication, interaction, and a sense of belonging. Having the opportunity to share experiences and emotions with others in similar childfree situations may help employees realize that they share a common frame of reference with others.

Park (2002) identified a range of techniques utilized by the childfree to cope with the associated stigmas [43]. These ranged from defensive or reactive behaviors, such as identity substitution (in which the work identity might be substituted for the parent identity) to proactive responses, such as redefining being childfree in a positive way. An additional method is to surround oneself with supportive others [29]. One recent effort has been the use of technology and the internet as a means of creating an “online” space for the childfree to connect with others [4].

Firms may consider providing counseling through employee assistance programs specifically to address issues that arise from the decision to remain childfree and the associated prejudices and perceptions. As more and more persons choose to be childfree, mental health providers and counselors are recognizing the needs to address these issues and are proactively taking steps to address the needs of these individuals [18, 19, 40]. By proactively addressing these issues through counseling and employee assistance programs, firms can help employees work through their concerns and may be able to better retain these employees.

Finally, managers should seek to encourage activities through the workplace that help foster a sense of community for those who are childfree. While these activities may not always occur in the work setting, by making the effort to provide opportunities for the childfree to interact with one another it may be possible to lessen the stigmatization of the childfree. Activities such as beer or wine tastings (clearly off limits to children) and other forms of recreational pursuits that are intended for adults might enable childfree workers to socialize with one another in a way that will be supportive and affirming. Firms such as Texas Instruments [57], Johns-Hopkins, and Starbucks [34] have created support groups for single and childfree employees that include professional development seminars, networking (with happy hours) events, social events, and community volunteering activities that bring together employees who are childfree around common social activities to increase inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Clearly the issues raised by the presence of the voluntarily childless in the workplace are going to be a concern for organizations in coming years as the millennial generation moves through their careers. The social stigma attached to the choice to remain childfree has certainly impacted the extent to which firms have sought to address these issues, and researchers have also tended to avoid conducting significant empirical and qualitative work in this domain. There is a very real need for high quality research efforts focused on understanding the issues raised by childfree workers in the structure of contemporary organizations, along with work needed to identify innovative ways organizations can adapt to the new reality of childfree employees.

To the extent that we have noted some of these issues and suggested avenues for exploration, we trust this effort will be beneficial to academics and practitioners alike.

For managers, there is a clear need to think carefully about the implications of childfree workers in the workplace. Team dynamics, stress, workloads, employee health, diversity, and a whole host of organizational issues are impacted by the trend toward childlessness. Where will firms find future employees if there is in fact a “baby bust?” How can managers address the different life-work needs of workers with familial obligations with those who are childfree by choice? To what extent should organizations have a role in overcoming the social stigmas associated with childlessness? These issues are not well understood.

The stigmas and discrimination experienced by the childfree have tended to keep the topic from receiving substantial attention in management literature. Certainly, when contrasted with the research available on family-friendly work cultures, the issues of the childfree pale in comparison. However, as noted, the demographic trend toward childfree individuals in the workplace is likely to continue, with the result that managers will need to address the issues we have noted.

The workforce of the 21st century is not only different from preceding generations in terms of values and beliefs, but in terms of very real characteristics such as family status. As the childfree workers become more and more prevalent, organizations and managers will need to consider the impact on group dynamics and workplace performance that result from the attendant social norms and stigmas. Taking proactive steps and creating policies and programs that provide benefits for the childfree workers will become increasingly important as the demographics of the workforce continue to change. Managers should be encouraged to engage in honest discussions with employees about disparities in familial status, and to work with teams to encourage greater acceptance of the diversity that comes from the differences between employees who choose to be parents and those who are childfree by choice.

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