

EO Files (May 2012)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”

### **Hong Kong Needs a Pro-Family Attitude**

*Lam Woon-kwong advocates changing our work-fixated culture to encourage a more fulfilling home life, and says bosses can lead the way.*

“I want to spend more time with my family.”

Such a sentiment is familiar for many Hongkongers. The International Day of Families on May 15th provides us with an opportune moment to ponder this year’s theme, “ensuring work-family balance,” and ask ourselves: Have we done enough to make sure that our family gets the attention they deserve in our hectic lives?

We all have the responsibility to care for our family. Our rapidly ageing population, coupled with the lack of comprehensive elderly care services, mean that many of us have to look after our elderlies. At the same time, the ever increasing competition in the local education system means that our children too demand more of parents’ time than ever, whether in supervising homework or accompanying them on extracurricular activities.

On top of demand at home, Hong Kong’s workers face very long working hours. According to a 2010 survey from the non-governmental organization Community Business, Hongkongers work an average of 48.7 hours per week, which is 22 percent higher than the recommended 40-hour work week of the International Labour Organisation.

The problem is compounded by a near absence of family-friendly work arrangements and policies in Hong Kong’s workplace. According to a study commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 2006, only 10 percent of the respondent

employers had in place formal policy or guidance for creating a family-friendly workplace.

The stress caused by an inflexible workplace is keenly felt among employees and their families. In the Community Business survey, 37 percent of respondents said that they do not have enough time to spend with their partner and family. It is not surprising then that, in the recent poll commissioned by the South China Morning Post, about half of respondents who had no children thought Hong Kong was not a good place to bring them up. On a related note, the city's fertility rate is among the lowest in the world.

The predominance of gender stereotypes imposes additional strains on work-family balance in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that many families now have dual income earners, the majority of household responsibilities, including family care, still falls on women. According to data from the Census and Statistics Department, women currently spend triple the average number of hours per day than men on unpaid activities, including care for family members and housework. Without family-friendly policies at work, many women are forced to choose between their career and their family, leading to a drain of female talent.

Yet work-family balance is far from being a "woman's issue." A study released by the EOC last week indicates that men also face difficulties in balancing work and family due to the changing social landscape and gender role expectations. At the root, men find themselves increasingly displaced because of stereotypes: Men still largely construct their self-identity on being the family's traditional breadwinner and protector. However, they also face larger demands on their involvement as a father. Yet they often lack institutional support for family duties in the workplace due to the stereotype that such tasks are women's work. Many hesitate, for instance, to ask for time off for family matters or flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work after the birth of a new child, for fear of being branded lazy.

So the road ahead remains long. The EOC advocates a number of

achievable measures which can help to better balance our work-family obligations.

First, family considerations should be integrated into employment policy planning, in order to signal the importance we place on caring for our loved ones. Such policies, both at the company-level and across society, will also help to enable true gender equality, as supportive measures can facilitate men and women to share equally in household chores including family care.

Second, we must change society's mindset by raising awareness on the ripple effect of work-family balance. After all, a worker who is able to balance between work and family obligations tend to feel more engaged at work. This leads to better job performance and lower turnover, which helps the company's overall productivity.

A better work-family balance also leads to happier families, enhancing social harmony. Despite the fact that domestic workers are readily available in Hong Kong, most parents prefer be involved in their child's development. Research suggests that greater parental involvement from both mothers and fathers in childrearing leads to children who are healthier, perform better in school, and are less likely to have behavioural issues.

By shifting our attitude, we can promote a culture of openness and mutual understanding between employers and employees. This is to the benefit of all. Without a willingness to discuss and share ideas, employees will be less likely to use work-family arrangements even if they exist, and employers cannot benefit from the programmes they have invested in to establish. By building a supportive work culture, companies can become employers of choice.

"A happy family," wrote the playwright and Nobel Laureate, George Bernard Shaw, "is but an earlier heaven." This piece of heaven is not out of reach, but we must work together to make it a reality.

LAM Woon-kwong  
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: An abridged version of this article was originally published in the *South China Morning Post* on 17 May 2012.)