

Despite women's gains, mothers still face hiring obstacles

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Two accomplished, midlevel professional women walk into a job interview, both with identical qualifications and nearly identical resumes.

One has a child. One doesn't. Only one walks out with a new job.

Hint: It's not the mommy.

A landmark study by Cornell University has quantified what many working mothers have suspected for years: Women with children are less likely to get hired and are paid less in starting salaries than similarly qualified fathers or women without children. This disparity often follows them throughout their careers.

"Sadly, it's not surprising," Melissa Hart says about the study. Hart is an associate law professor at the University of Colorado who specializes in employment discrimination. "It's a huge problem."

The findings become especially significant since about 70 percent of American women with children under 18 work outside the home. Additionally, in six of 10 marriages, both parents hold paid jobs.

While women may have made enormous strides toward parity with men in the job market, Hart says when children are added to the picture, the attitudes of potential employers change.

Dick Gartrell hears it all the time.

As director of human resources at the University of Denver who also runs seminars to teach corporate managers good hiring practices, Gartrell says employers complain when told they shouldn't let parenthood influence hiring decisions.

"They have a job to fill, and they want to be able to ask a woman if she has children or if she is going to have children so they know if she will leave. I tell them you have no more reason to ask ... than you would to ask a man if he is going to have a medical disability," Gartrell says.

Still, there is little legal recourse if an applicant feels wronged.

There is no federal law prohibiting a potential employer from asking a woman - or man - about their family. Some states have such laws, but their effectiveness varies widely.

Shelley Correll, author of the study and an associate professor of sociology at Cornell in Ithaca, N.Y., says she not only found proof of discrimination in her 18-month study, she also found salaries for working mothers tended to decrease exponentially with each additional child.

She launched the study - "The Motherhood Penalty" - after hearing complaints from mothers for years.

To test her suspicion, she created two fictitious applicants seeking a job as a marketing director for a communications company. Both had virtually identical qualifications and resumes with no indication of gender or family status. The applications were presented to 60 undergraduates - both men and women - for evaluation. The reviewers found the applicants to be equal and said they had no hiring preference.

Correll used undergraduates because she believed them to be most closely attuned to the current hiring climate. She also assumed they had been raised in an age when sensibilities about working mothers had changed.

Next, the same resumes were shown to another set of undergraduate evaluators. This time, though, the applicants were both women.

A memo was slipped into one of the application packets mentioning she was a mother of two. Her resume was changed slightly to include a reference to being an officer of a parent-teacher association.

The outcome changed dramatically. The evaluators said they would hire the childless women 84 percent of the time. The mothers were given a job only 47 percent of the time.

The mothers also were offered a starting salary of \$11,000 less than their counterparts without children.

Correll recently moved her test into the real world.

In an undisclosed Northeastern city, she created 300 pairs of cover letters and resumes to apply for advertised midlevel marketing positions. One "applicant" said in her cover letter she was relocating with her family. The resume mentioned the parent-teacher board position. The other cover letter said the "applicant" was relocating but made no mention of a family.

Early results of this study show the applicant who did not mention a family was called in for an interview twice as frequently as the mother.

"It documents what a lot of working mothers already feel," says Correll.

It's not that employers don't like mothers, Correll adds. On the contrary, she thinks society values motherhood. But she does think "cultural ideas of motherhood are seen as pretty incompatible with cultural ideas of the workplace."

According to the "ideal worker" belief, says the study, a committed worker is willing to "drop everything at a moment's notice for a new work demand," will "devote enormous hours to 'face time' at work," and will work late nights and weekends.

"The cultural logic of 'intensive' mothering in U.S. society ... assumes that the 'good mother' will direct her time and emotional energy toward her children without limit," says the study.

"It's Neanderthalville all over again," says Liz Ryan, a 25-year human resources executive and mother of five. Ryan is founder and chief executive of WorldWIT, a Boulder, Colo.-based national and international online community for professional women.

"I hear it all of the time from my members: It's 2006, and (companies) are still asking 'Are you going to have kids?' " she says.

Ryan speculates the tightening job market is giving potential employers a sense they have the upper hand and are more free in their questioning than they would have been a few years ago.

She also wonders if there is a backlash brewing against mothers - and increasingly, fathers - who have demanded more flexibility from companies to be with their families.

Ryan tells this story of a friend working in Dallas: The woman's company was bought by another in Chicago, and wanted her to relocate. She negotiated a way to spend most of the week in Chicago and work one day from home in Dallas so she would not have to uproot her family. The company agreed, then sliced her pay 20 percent.

Gartrell says he cautions employers not only is it bad form to ask about children during job negotiations, it is dangerous for the company. While not illegal, if a comment has been made during an interview and then a problem later arises, that comment could come back to haunt.

Certainly examples abound of working mothers who have succeeded in their fields.

But, Ryan says, often those negotiations occur after a woman is established and valued within a company and then has children. What troubles her most about this new study is it proves working mothers are being barred at the front door.

Hart, the law professor, also worries about the tension between women with children and those without in the workplace over such things as time off for sick kids or leaving

promptly to spend more time with families. She calls it a systemic problem in the corporate climate of this country.

"No one is given life balance," she says. "Forget about family balance. People are resentful (of women with children) because they are looking over their shoulder and thinking someone is getting a better deal than they are. But the truth is no one is getting a good deal."