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Fathers' opportunities to integrate work and family

Introduction

Advancing employees' opportunities to integrate work and family is increasingly considered a sign of social responsibility in organisations (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016; Heikkinen et al., 2020). However, despite the increased participation of women in the labour market, dual-earner couples and demands for gender equality, many organisations still view this topic merely from the perspective of mothers (Kangas et al., 2017). The issue of the opportunities available to fathers to combine work and family is not often regarded as important.

In many workplaces, the traditional gender ideology prevails. According to this belief system, men do not have responsibilities and worries outside of work because they have a (working) wife who takes care of the family members and the household (Margsiglio, 2012). In this study, with the help of a qualitative case research strategy (Tight, 2017), we aim to address this bias and are interested in fathers' viewpoints around the integration of work and family.

Research questions

1) We present a research and development (R&D) project, *Equality and Fathers*, concerning fathers' work-family integration, and answer the questions: What are the objectives of the project? Why did the case organisations choose to participate in the project?

2) An empirical case study answers the question: How do the respondents describe fathers' opportunities to integrate work and family in their organisations?

This case study contributes to discussions in the intersection of changing masculinities and socially responsible human resource management. The starting point is that despite the prevalence of traditional gender ideology in many workplaces, gender roles and identities are becoming increasingly more fluid. Thus, the idea of a more involved fatherhood is emerging and

this new, expanded role is being expected of fathers in many societies (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Kangas et al., 2020; Pučėtaitė et al., 2020). This poses a challenge for organisations' human resource management (HRM) to respond to these expectations and ideas concerning men's changing gender identities and masculinities.

Organisations which are 'family-friendly' receive external benefits, such as a good employer brand and positive publicity (Padavic et al., 2020), and family-friendliness is considered a socially responsible way to act (Heikkinen et al., 2020). Creating opportunities to integrate work and family to all genders has multiple consequences for organisations, such as employees' increased commitment, satisfaction and well-being, with the overall objective of enhancing organisational effectiveness (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Hobson, 2011; Nie et al., 2018; Padavic et al., 2020).

Theoretical background

In many societies, although men are traditionally valued as the breadwinners of families, and this pattern of masculinity is dominant, this role is increasingly being questioned, and, as a result, men's caring role as involved fathers is increasingly resonating (Kangas et al., 2019; Pučėtaitė et al., 2020). According to Holter (2007), both ideological factors and new circumstances are promoting this change. The ideological reasons are that the attitudes towards equality in parenthood are more positive than ever before, while new circumstances refer to the practical changes in parents' lives. These changes are encouraging fathers to behave in a different way than merely assuming the breadwinner role. In particular, women's participation in the labour market and the dual-earner model are factors that are increasing the pressure on fathers to participate in household work and childcare.

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

Socially responsible human resource management (SR-HRM) means that there is a priority and ambition to fulfil employees' personal and social expectations and needs beyond the organisation. This includes the idea that employees can combine their work and family lives successfully (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016; Nie et al., 2018). SR-HRM extends employees' personal and family needs above the legal minimum and provides employees the organisational care, support and justice to achieve successful work-family integration (Heikkinen et al., 2020).

The current demand to integrate work and family has compelled HRM to innovate family-friendly practices to attract employees and obtain their commitment (Padavic et al., 2020). Organisations are thus offering opportunities, such as flexitime, teleworking, leave policies and childcare services, to provide organisational support towards this aim. These practices are designed to help employees manage both work and family demands, but too often they are developed mainly for women, in particular for mothers with young children, with less emphasis placed on men's experiences and the meanings of new fatherhood (Moran & Koslowski, 2019). Consequently, the opportunities for fathers in organisations to integrate work and family are often hindered by biased and sceptical attitudes (Allard et al., 2011; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2019).

For example, a recent study by Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2019) showed that fathers are not allowed to ask for work-family practices in organisational life, and support for them on this issue is scarce. In fact, they may even be subject to career penalties if they use these practices. Moreover, the fathers often perceive a lack of managerial support around this issue. Yet, this lack of managerial support does not automatically mean that the organisation has no official work-

family policies. Thus, the words and deeds can be in conflict in this matter (Heikkinen et al., 2020).

The study by Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2019) reported that participation in executive education is considered a legitimate reason for men to ask for flexibility, as this perpetuates the man's image as an 'ideal worker'. In contrast, asking for flexibility for family reasons weakens the man's image as an ideal worker. The ideal worker norm and the related dominant idea of traditional masculinity in the workplace underlie the incompatibility between men's asking for flexibility and their career ambitions. Consequently, requesting and using flexibility for family reasons tends to have negative repercussions on fathers' careers. In contrast, the common work-family discourse which emphasises the mother's viewpoint on work-family integration is hardly ever questioned in the daily life of organisations (Padavic et al., 2020). Particularly, the unequal treatment of employees, lack of managerial and supervisor support and fear of unjust workloads seem to be problematic issues in the actual use of work-family practices (Heikkinen et al., 2020).

Methods

Two case organisations – called A and B here for anonymity – were investigated. The selected organisations are medium-sized business companies in Finland. They operate in different business areas: A is an industrial company in the energy sector and B is an international consultancy. Moreover, the companies are different in terms of gender distribution and geographical location. A is a male-dominated company (about 80 percent of the personnel are men), while B is more balanced in its personnel gender distribution. However, a balanced gender distribution is not visible in either companies' top management, which are decidedly male-dominated spheres. A operates in one city in Finland but has a remarkable regional impact. This

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

company employs slightly more than 200 people. B operates in several locations in Finland, with about 600 employees in total.

The companies participated in the *Equality and Fathers* project concerning the development of the organisation's family-friendliness, especially from the viewpoint of fathers, and expressed their active interest in the research. They can be considered exceptional case examples (Tight, 2017) in that they show a special interest in promoting fathers' work-family integration. This topic is novel in the study context (Kangas et al., 2019; Kangas & Lämsä, 2020) and in many other societies as well (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Pučėtaitė et al., 2020).

To be able to answer the questions concerning the objectives of the project, and the organisations' reasons to participate in the project, the following data were used: An open-ended interview related to the topic was conducted with a group of key managers in both companies. Moreover, two blog texts published by the financial manager in A and the human resource manager in B were used. Key figures of personnel data were also obtained from the companies. Finally, we referenced the project plan and the companies' equality and non-discrimination plan in our research.

The data for the empirical study concerning fathers' opportunities to integrate work and family in the case organisations were obtained from focus group discussions among employees. To be able to understand the participants' experiences and opinions, they were motivated to talk freely to each other according to open-ended questions (Morgan, 1997). The following topics were discussed: use of family leaves and experiences of this use, organising work during family leaves, organisational communication, managerial and peer support, organisational attitudes and behaviour, career advancement, gender and organisational rules and instructions. In total, 19 employees from the case companies participated in the focus group discussions. Seven people

were from A and 12 people from B. The sample consisted of 13 men and six women employees. All the participants had a child or children. Two focus group discussions were held in A and one discussion in B. The discussions were recorded and transcribed word-by-word. A thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data.

Findings

Objectives of the *Equality and Fathers* project

The *Equality and Fathers* project (2019–2021) is an R&D project with the aim of promoting the case organisations' father-friendliness and improving gender equality in their working culture and practices. The main funding for the project comes from the Finnish Work Environment Fund. The project is led by the Family Federation of Finland, called Västöliitto in Finnish. This is an expert organisation that produces research and services, carries out national advocacy work and coordinates development projects. The organisation aims to promote a family-friendly working culture, equality, human rights, and birth rate and family policy in Finland (https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/in_english/how-we-operate/).

One of the key issues of Västöliitto is the concern for work-life balance and reconciling family and work. To this end, the organisation has developed the *Family-Friendly Workplace Program*. In the program, organisations develop their activities to be more family-friendly in terms of their organisational cultures, practices and policies that support employees' opportunities to integrate their work and family lives successfully. The initiatives include the promoting of positive attitudes towards work-family balance among the organisations' members, as well as family-friendly practices, such as flexible work schedules and teleworking possibilities. As a result of a successful development process, an organisation achieves the Family-Friendly Workplace Certificate as an indication of its social responsibility and

commitment to family-friendliness (<https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/perhe-ja-tyo/perheystavallinen-tyopaikka/>).

The *Equality and Fathers* project is based on the *Family-Friendly Workplace* agenda, with a special focus on fathers and fatherhood. Firstly, the project is important and novel in its societal context because it supports the government programme of Finland (2019) aimed at actively promoting fathers' parental leaves. Secondly, more detailed knowledge and understanding of fathers' perspectives is needed in the discussions and activities concerning reconciling work and family in the Finnish society, as well as elsewhere, in the attempt to close the global gender gap in equality. In Finland, it is mothers who mostly use the family leaves, which are legally guaranteed right for parents (Miettinen & Rotkirch, 2017; Kela, 2018). Fathers in Finland typically use only the parental leaves specifically designated for them, and only a small percentage of fathers use their right to a legally-provided voluntary parental leave. In addition, the father's right to a parental leave is shorter compared to the mothers. About 25 percent of fathers do not take any time off work when their children are born. Moreover, the vast majority of the child homecare allowance (also a legal right in Finland) users are mothers (Kela, 2020). Although the topics of equality and, especially, father's involvement in childcare are increasingly discussed in the society, this discussion is not so strongly embedded in organisational life (Kangas et al., 2019). Overall, the participation of fathers in taking family leaves is still relatively low in Finland compared to other Nordic societies.

Reasons to participate in the project

The four main reasons why the case companies wanted to participate in the project are as follows:

1. Promoting equality through father-friendliness

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

2. Appropriate timing
3. Need for the development of HRM practices
4. Development of company responsibility
 1. Promoting equality through father-friendliness

Company A wanted to make concrete efforts to increase father-friendliness as well as to improve its communication on the topic. Although the company seeks to advance a positive organisational culture, fathers' leave is currently perceived as an extra expense. In the future, the aim is to actively encourage different genders to take family leaves more equally than now. In addition, the desire to avoid unnecessary turnover due to the lack of flexibility and old-fashioned attitudes is important in this company.

It has been noticed in A that differences in attitudes towards family-friendliness between different age groups and working units exist. For example, the younger generation is generally more positive in their attitudes and more willing to use options for paternity leaves and family leaves. Also, in the working units in which remote work is possible or working times are more flexible, the attitudes toward family-friendliness differ compared to the units with more inflexibility and rigid working times or shifts. Moreover, not enough common guidelines for managers and supervisors concerning the topic have been provided, with the result that the attitudes and behaviour of the managers and supervisors vary in terms of family leaves, gender roles and equal parenting. Some represent new thinking and ideas about gender roles and parenthood, while others are caught up in old-fashioned and traditional gender roles.

Furthermore, the personnel's age structure in A is such that a change in organisational culture is necessary. In the coming years, a significant proportion of the employees will retire. The ability to recruit new skilled professionals will be easier if the company's image, operating culture and

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

practices support the reconciliation of work and family, which is a value of growing importance in society, especially among the younger generations.

Company B was inspired by the project specifically as an equality project. The project was seen as potentially helpful in promoting gender equality and increasing the number of women in top management. Sharing parental and family leaves more equally is understood as a key to this objective. Although some fathers have taken paternity leave in the company, unlike women, they have often not used long parental leaves or partial parental leaves. Therefore, a crucial aim in this company is to encourage fathers to take longer family leaves. Another aim is to train supervisors and managers so that they have sufficient knowledge of family leave practices and related legislation and, as a result, are capable of dealing competently with situations concerning parental leaves.

In B, it has been noticed that if issues related to family leave and father-friendliness are not adequately communicated internally, the staff may think that reconciling family and work is not valued. Therefore, the company actively sought that such a perception be corrected during the project. In B, a crucial challenge related to the advancement of fathers' family leaves is thus understood to be communicative. Similarly, a cultural change is needed so that more fathers are supported to choose longer family leaves in the future.

In both companies, the top management is strongly male-dominated, and there is a desire to bring about change to this imbalance in the long run. Both companies saw the project as potentially helpful in this aim. When drawing up staffing plans, both companies are motivated by the fact that the new generation of employees considers work-family balance important and valued.

2. Appropriate timing

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

The timing of the project fit well in terms of the companies' strategic development. They were contacted during a time when the issues related to equality and fathers, as well as the development of business practices and corporate image from the family-friendliness viewpoint, had just become topical and important. Topics such as the possibility for an employee to take time off because of family reasons without infringing on the rights of other employees, as well as teleworking practices, were being discussed in the companies. Therefore, tackling these issues practically was considered crucial, and the decision to get involved in the project was made easily. In addition, in both companies, there was a need to share more information on family leaves. In particular, young supervisors were seen as a group that lacked accurate information.

3. Need for the development of HRM practices

The case companies already had practices that support family-friendliness in place, such as flexible working hours and the individual placement of holiday periods. However, in A especially, the rigid working shifts and lack of substitutes and sometimes conservative attitudes of performing workers towards work-family flexibility were seen to require change, compared to the more liberal attitudes of employees working in clerk positions. For example, teleworking was viewed sceptically by the workers. Because of this, HRM had not started implementing teleworking, and the rules around teleworking practices were lacking. These HRM practices especially needed development in the company, and the project was expected to meet this need well.

In B, the need to develop employees' self-management skills was stressed. If these skills were good, it would not be necessary for HRM to constantly monitor the time and place of working. Company B recognised that it is the responsibility of each employee to record working hours properly and ensure adequate recovery from work. Yet, the company also felt it was

important for HRM to implement innovative and novel practices so that the professionals did not overwork and become too stressed.

4. Development of company responsibility

Both companies stressed that participating in the project was a matter of company responsibility. They understood that they could be role models and exemplary cases to influence the development of positive attitudes towards work and family reconciliation not only in the workplace but also in the larger society. An objective was to emphasise both social and environmental responsibility. The work-family relationship as a topic is embedded in SR-HRM, but the companies saw that the environmental aspect, and especially the fight against climate change, needed to be taken into account in the project. In addition, an objective of both companies was to promote social responsibility by advancing employees' well-being in the intersection of work and family.

Fathers' opportunities to integrate work and family

An overview of the results from the focus group discussions show that the tone of the discussions was positive and open. According to the interviewees, the case companies are interested in advancing family-friendliness, but the mothers are usually seen as having the main responsibility for family issues and family leaves. In particular, communication regarding legal rights and rules, as well as the companies' own instructions concerning family issues in general and family leaves in particular, were perceived as insufficient and in need of clarification and development. Moreover, the respondents highlighted that the arrangements for substitution when someone is off work due to family reasons tends to be underdeveloped. Next, the themes that were analysed from the data are presented in more detail.

Manager (who is a woman) with a family is an advantage

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

Supervisors and top managers were perceived as key actors in providing support and role modelling to employees to integrate work and family successfully. Even though the respondents did not stress so much the gender of the manager, it was mentioned that when the manager is a woman, she understands better than a male manager an employee's needs around work-family issues. This finding is similar to Nie et al. (2018), and in line with the traditional ideology (Kangas et al., 2019; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). The fact that a manager, whatever the gender, has a child/children was seen as a notable advantage. The respondents stressed that this helps the manager take into account the viewpoint of a parent rather than seeing the situation solely from the viewpoint of working life. Yet, when it comes to the practical arrangements regarding the instructions, rules and legal rights in the intersection of work and family, the supervisors were often perceived as unaware of and inattentive to men's opportunities in this respect. Especially young supervisors were believed to have problems knowing the rights. Therefore, this issue was not only gendered, but the age of the supervisor played a role here.

Father of a newborn can work more than before

The data showed that the respondents' attitudes towards men's opportunities to use family leaves and participate in family life were generally positive when the instructions of the company and the supervisor's knowledge of the topic are sufficient, concrete and communicated well. This indicates that some change in gender roles, at least at the attitudinal level, may be occurring in these organisations (Holter, 2007). However, similarly and contrariwise, it was also brought out that when a family has a newborn, it is a good opportunity for fathers to put their efforts more into work because the wife is at home taking care of the baby. This indicates that despite the attitudinal changes, the actual changes in gender relations within the family may not

be so evident, and this tends also to have an impact on gender roles and equality in the workplace.

Supervisor supports as long as work is done

The respondents stressed that the supervisor shows support to work-family issues as long as the employees can do their work, even using their free time to meet this expectation. Especially employees who are engaged in project work with highly specific aims and tight schedules were seen as facing this problem, causing them pressure to prioritise work over family. This finding lends support to the study of Heikkinen et al. (2020) which found that particularly in expert work, employees are expected to be available whenever or wherever they are needed. Such an expectation presents a challenge to the participating companies' SR-HRM target and image pertaining to family-friendliness. From a gender viewpoint, this expectation strengthens the idea that the ideal worker is a man who is fully devoted to his work (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2019; Kangas & Lämsä, 2020).

(Young) father is an appreciated trailblazer

The respondents highlighted that some change not only in attitudes but also in practices is occurring regarding fathers increasingly taking family leaves and carrying more responsibility for childcare than previously. Young fathers were mentioned as trailblazers in relation to this issue. Their attitudes towards children and family are often positive, and they are willing to spend time attending to their children's lives. This can be seen as a change in the male gender role towards more involved fatherhood in general (Kangas et al., 2019). It was mentioned that the young fathers' interest in the issue was often surprising to the supervisors of the companies. The respondents felt that these fathers are worth praising and appreciating because they offer a role model in the workplace, even though the fathers' leaves were clearly shorter than the leaves

of mothers. The respondents also reported that they did not perceive the same kind of appreciation in the workplace towards the mothers. Consequently, they revealed a gendered bias in this respect in their organisations in favour of fathers over mothers.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our study results indicate that fathers' opportunities to integrate work and family can be perceived in varying ways in organisational life. Yet, the study implies that traditional gender ideologies tend to be emphasised: it is women's responsibility to handle family issues, while men are considered secondary parents. This finding is in line with previous research in the study context (e.g., Kangas et al., 2017; Kangas & Lämsä, 2020). On the other hand, in this study, the men's gender role was considered more family-oriented compared to the traditional understanding of genders. The family-oriented understanding tended to occur at the level of the employees' mindsets (Holter, 2007) in this study, but, in practice, especially regarding family leaves, mothers, not fathers, were perceived as the primary actors who carry the main responsibility for childcare. Moreover, the practices related to the fathers' opportunities for work-family integration were not explicitly communicated by HRM and the supervisors. This result confirms previous findings (e.g., Kangas et al., 2019; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2019) that although more involved fatherhood seems to be increasingly valued in the mindsets of people in organisational life, workplaces may not have enough practices in place for supporting fathers' work-family integration. This topic requires more clarification in the future. Moreover, more information is needed about how male managers and supervisors who are clearly supportive of fathers' work-family integration are perceived by organisation members. As suggested by Kangas and Lämsä (2020), the gender composition of an organisation may play a role here.

RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

From the practical management viewpoint, the integration of work and family for fathers requires SR-HRM to take more responsibility for the careful planning of related practices and especially for developing their communication practices to be explicit, positive and timely. The attitudes and role-modelling behaviour of managers and supervisors to support fathers' work and family integration is a crucial area for development in organisations (Moran & Koslowski, 2019; Kangas & Lämsä, 2020; Heikkinen et al., 2020). The managers are in an influential position which allows them to promote or hinder new practices and related values and norms in their organisational cultures. We suggest that it would be beneficial that work-family issues and gender sensitiveness were part of the training and induction programs for managers, supervisors and employees.

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RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

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RUNNING HEAD: FATHERS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE

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