Does it balance? Exploring family and careers in accounting

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As the millennial generation enters the work place, the importance of work/life balance is becoming paramount. With more than half of accounting graduates in the country comprised of women, and the rise of dual career families, providing the appropriate balance that can mix work and family is increasingly important. For the accounting industry, does a strong work/life balance go beyond the balance sheet? This study examines how family friendly current human resource practices are in three accounting firms in the Midwest. Through sampling, employees work and family experiences, as well as the outcomes of those experiences are assessed.

Keywords: accounting, family, work/life balance, careers, human resources

INTRODUCTION

The accounting industry has undergone a remarkable change in the past 22 years. According to the AIPCA[1], the percentage of female graduates entering the accounting profession has increased to 56% of all new entrants, compared to 50% in 1986. With the increasing number of women entering the profession, there is increasing pressure to provide an appropriate work/life balance that addresses both employee desires and employer needs.

This study focuses on three areas related to this year: 1) the impact of gender and family structure affect work and family commitments, 2) the role marriage has on career success, and 3) the role children has on career success.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire adapted from Friedman and Greenhaus [3] was developed and placed on SurveyMonkey.com for easy access to respondents. Information about, and a link to, the survey was sent to 3 small accounting firms in Wisconsin. To increase the response rate, employees were offered entry into a drawing for a $100 gift card if they completed the survey.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A good response was received from two of the three accounting firms surveyed. For the first accounting firm, the survey was sent to 74 employees (47 female, 27 male) and 33 responses (44.6%) were received. For the second firm, 36 responses were received out of 91 (39.6%). For the third firm, a link to the survey was sent out with a company newsletter to 350 employees, and only 90 employees responded.

Overall, the demographics of the survey were 71% female with 99% of the respondents identifying themselves as Caucasian. Not surprisingly, given the focus of this research, the respondent group was well-educated, with 100% earning a bachelor's degree, and 67.1% earning a bachelor's degree and certification. The age of the respondents was spread out with 42% between 20 and 30 years old, 25% between 30 and 40 years old, and 24% between 40 and 50 years old. Given the focus on family, 60.8% of respondents were found to be married, and 41.6% had children. For those with children, 34.4% of respondents returned to work less than a month after the birth of their child, and 81.3% returned to work within three months. Upon returning to work, 78.8% returned to full-time status.

FINDINGS

Career Involvement

How gender and family structure helps to understand work and family commitments was first examined. How involved are accountants in their careers? Looking at hours worked per week, it was found that men average significantly longer hours per week in accounting firms than women (t=3.702, p=.001). Men averaged 50.2 hours worked per week (s=6.16), while women averaged 6 hours fewer at 44.2 hours per week (s=7.28).

Career aspirations of male and female accountants were also examined. Do males differ from females in how far they want to climb the career ladder? Respondents were asked to rate their aspirations on a 9-point scale ranging from (1) first level manager to (9) top executive. It

was found that men had significantly higher career aspirations than women (t=4.79, p=.000). Men averaged 8.17 (s=1.11) while women averaged 6.62 (s=1.68).

A third way of measuring how involved accountants are with their careers is looking at career importance compared to their partner. Overall, no statistically significant difference was found. Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated that their careers were of equal priority to their partner. In terms of gender, 38% of males and 54% of females thought their career had a higher priority than their partner.

A fourth way of examining career involvement is by examining psychological involvement. Determining how psychologically involved accountants were in their job was accomplished by taking the average of 3 questions: (1) "A major source of satisfaction in my life is my career;" (2) "Most of the important things that happen to me involve my career;" and (3) "I am very much involved personally in my career." Respondents rated their answer from 1-low to 5-high to each of these 3 questions and the average score was taken. No statistically significant difference between males and females in psychological involvement was found, as both are significantly involved. Males averaged 3.72 (s=.64) and females averaged 3.51 (s=.71).

Marital Impact on Career Success

A second area of interest was the impact of marriage on career success. Table 1 summarized means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the study variables for males.

One measure of career success is overall annual income. Respondents were asked to indicate their current income from an array of salaries listed in $25,000 increments. The majority of respondents earned between $25,000 and $75,000, with 41.8% earning between $25,000 and $50,000, and 32.9% earning between $50,000 and $75,000.

Freedman and Greenhaus' [3] hypothesis of whether having a family is considered a bonus or a penalty was tested. Historically, having a family has been perceived as a bonus for married men, as they are seen as more stable and responsible, with strong support of spouses [3]. For women, however, having a family is seen as a penalty. Women are perceived to be less committed to their careers, and are a riskier investment, as they may leave work to have children [3].

To take into account the possibility that the age of the respondent might affect the difference in income between married and unmarried men, a regression analysis was conducted with income as the dependent variable, and age and marital status as dependent variables. Table 2 shows the results. While the regression is significant ($F = 19.50$, $p = .000$), age was the only significant variable, which supports the notion that as age increases, one's salary increases as well.

Table 3 summarized means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the study variables for females. To take into account the possibility that the age of the respondent might affect the difference in income between married and unmarried females, a regression analysis was undertaken with income as the dependent variable, and age and marital status as dependent variables. The regression was insignificant ($F = 1.95$, $p = .153$) indicating that there was no significant difference in income between married and unmarried females.

A second measure of career success is the position currently held by respondents in the organizational hierarchy. Similar to the 9-point scale regarding career aspirations earlier, respondents were asked to rank what position they held from (1) first level manager to (9) top

executive. 47.4 percent of respondents indicated they were in a lower-level position (1-3), 33.3% in a middle-level position (4-6), and 19.2% in an upper-level position (7-9).

Our research demonstrates a significant difference between married and unmarried men (t=4.08, p<.002). 52.17% of married men were in an upper level position compared to only 4.35% of unmarried men. As with income, the age of the respondent was taken into account when considering the relationship between the highest position achieved and marital status. A regression analysis was undertaken with position achieved as the independent variable, and age and marital status as dependent variables. Table 4 shows the results. In this instance, not only is the regression significant ($F = 19.50$, $p = .000$), but all variables are significant as well. Not only does age positively influence one's position in the organization, but marital status does provide that bonus as well.

Does the same bonus occur for females? With highest position achieved as the independent variable and marital status and age as dependent variables, the regression equation in Table 5 found marital status did not provide a "penalty" for women pursuing a career in accounting. Rather, like men, women benefited as well by getting married.

A third measure employed to example the relationship was marital status and career satisfaction. Does marriage positively impact career satisfaction? Respondents were asked to indicate their current level of satisfaction with their career on a 5-point scale, with "1" indicating "highly dissatisfied" and "5" indicating "highly satisfied." For males, marital status did not play a statistically significant role ($t = .05$, $p = .96$), as 93.33% of married males, and 87.50% of unmarried males were "satisfied" or "highly satisfied" with their career. A similar result is found when comparing married and unmarried females ($t = 1.26$, $p = .123$); 87.87% of married women, and 82.61% of unmarried women were "satisfied" or "highly satisfied" with their career.

Impact of Children on Career Success

Does having children help one's career as an accountant? As with marital status, income, position achieved, and career satisfaction were also used as measures. To take into account the possibility that the age of the respondent might affect the difference in income between male parents and male nonparents, a regression analysis was conducted with income as the dependent variable, and age and parental status as dependent variables. Table 6 shows the results. While the regression is significant ($F = 4.91$, $p = .020$), age was the only significant variable, which supports the notion that as age increases, one's salary increases as well. There was no significant difference between parental status and income.

A similar approach was taken with regard to female parents and female nonparents. A regression equation was undertaken with income as the dependent variable, and age and parental status as dependent variables. Table 7 shows the results. Not only is the regression significant ($F = 3.46$, $p = .039$), the parental status of the female impacts the income one earns in accounting firms independent of age. Instead of being penalized, women get the "bonus" that might have expected for men for having children

For position achieved for males, a regression analysis was conducted with highest position achieved as the dependent variable, and age and parental status as dependent variables. Table 8 shows the results. The regression was statistically significant ($F =37.48$, $p = .000$), indicating that being a male parent leads to a significant jump in one's position in the organization. Does the same result occur for women? Table 9 shows the results.

In this instance, the regression was also significant ($F = 11.00$, $p = .000$), but the impact on having children was much smaller than for men, with women only getting a 1.78 position

bump compared to 3.27 for men. This fits with the "penalty" hypothesis that Friedman and Greenhaus [3] present.

CONCLUSIONS

As this research indicates, gender and family roles play a significant role in one's career aspirations and development. Both men and women benefit career-wise when climbing the corporate ladder, but men benefit more than women. The number and age of the children, length of the marriage/relationship, income of partner, satisfaction with one's own or family income might also be additional and relevant variables for future research.

REFERENCES

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TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Male Respondents

Level 1 Variables	n	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4
1. Income[a]	23	129.55	133.26				
2. Highest Pos. Achieved	23	5.61	2.54	.65***			
3. Married[b]	23	0.65	0.49	.44*	.70***		
4. Age	23	36.74	11.93	.60**	.78***	.66***	
5. Parental Status[c]	23	0.68	0.48	.49*	.87***	.79***	.72***

[a] Income is measured in thousands of dollars
[b] Dummy-coded: 0 for unmarried, 1 for married
[c] Dummy-coded: 0 for not a patent, 1 for parent
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2
Regression:Income vs. Age and Marital Status for Males

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	.301	1.655	0.18
Age	2.605	0.920	2.25*
Marital status	.811	2.150	0.71

$p < .05$

TABLE 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Female Respondents

Level 1 Variables	n	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4
1. Income[a]	52	55.19	25.36				
2. Highest Pos. Achieved	55	3.31	1.86	.67***			
3. Married[b]	56	0.59	0.50	.25	.46***		
4. Age	56	34.46	9.71	-.01	.31*	.32*	
5. Parental Status[c]	56	0.55	0.50	.33*	.53***	.60***	.34*

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[a] Income is measured in thousands of dollars
[b] Dummy-coded: 0 for unmarried, 1 for married
[c] Dummy-coded: 0 for not a patent, 1 for parent
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 4
Regression:Position Achieved vs. Age and Marital Status for Males

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	1.91	0.69	2.79**
Age	1.19	0.37	3.25***
Marital Status	1.70	0.90	1.89*

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
***$p < .01$

TABLE 5
Regression:Position Achieved vs. Age and Marital Status for Females

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	1.73	0.51	3.42***
Age	1.50	0.47	1.51
Marital Status	0.36	0.24	3.18***

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
***$p < .01$

TABLE 6
Regression: Income vs. Age and Parental Status for Males

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	0.41	1.77	0.23
Parental Status	1.28	2.51	0.51
Age	1.88	1.05	0.09*

* $p < .10$

TABLE 7
Regression: Income vs. Age and Parental Status for Females

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	2.55	0.27	9.40**
Parental Status	0.68	0.26	2.63*
Age	-0.12	0.13	0.37

* $p < .05$
** $p < .001$

TABLE 8
Regression:Position Achieved vs. Age and Parental Status for Males

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	2.26	0.52	4.35**
Parental Status	3.27	0.74	3.40**
Age	0.60	0.30	0.59*

* $p < .10$
** $p < .001$

TABLE 9
Regression:Position Achieved vs. Age and Parental Status for Females

Variables	b	s.e	t
Intercept	1.82	0.49	3.68*
Parental Status	1.78	0.46	3.87**
Age	0.29	0.24	1.23*

* $p < .01$
** $p < .001$