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Delayed career entry: A new source of talent

Many corporations have initiatives to attract and retain talented individuals with dual commitments to family and career. These efforts largely ignore a small but significant group of employees who delay career entry for family purposes. These individuals offer a new source of talent for organizations.

By Robert Drago, Carol Colbeck and Anne Bardoel

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Many corporations have recently introduced family-friendly policies to promote simultaneous career and family success among their employees. Related initiatives include telecommuting, reduced hours options, paid family leave, lactation rooms and flexible work arrangements. Each of these initiatives makes caregiving and career more compatible, with the ultimate goal of attracting and retaining talent. But another, largely ignored source of talent is those individuals who start their family early in the life course and do not focus on career until later. These individuals seek *sequential* career and family success, rather than *simultaneous* success in both endeavours (terms coined by Mary Blair-Loy). In fact, people often make choices that fall somewhere on the

continuum between sequencing and simultaneity, entering or re-entering the workforce while their children are in kindergarten, grade or high school. Employers need to rethink hiring, training and promotion policies if they are successfully to recruit and retain professionals who have delayed their career entry.

In this article we provide some context for delayed career entry, explore the scope and meaning of delayed entry, and offer ideas that will benefit employers, educational institutions, governments and individuals themselves.

Delayed entry in context

Most work-life initiatives for professionals are designed to accommodate a version of the ideal worker model. The ideal worker is one who goes straight from high school to college, and then pursues an entry-level career position. These workers put in long hours for a period of years, and eventually achieve a mid- or high-level position. Then, typically when they are in their 30s, they often want to start a family. Work-life initiatives such as paid leave, reduced hours, telecommuting or child care services help these individuals respond to the dual demands of career and family. Employers are correct in believing that without these initiatives they would lose many talented individuals, particularly mothers.

Today most professionals who become parents return to employment in a matter of days, weeks or months, but this was not usual in the past. In *Back to Work*, published in 1981, Eileen Appelbaum noted that mothers began entering the labour force during the 1950s, but usually not before they had spent

several years at home raising their children. Employed women who became mothers during the 1960s typically remained out of the labour force for at least three years. Women continued to delay their entry into the workforce, but they did so in smaller numbers as relatively continuous employment became the norm.

Appelbaum found that women who delayed their entry into the labour market suffered a wage penalty compared to mothers who re-entered quickly, and the disparity remains to this day. The wage differential may be partly due to a shortfall in experience resulting from a woman's absence from the workforce. It seems likely, however, that the ideal worker model is also partly responsible, because traditional thinking suggests that ideal workers do not take years out of their careers for any reason.

It is easier for employers to hire and retain members of a group that experiences discrimination. That explains in part why employers should view individuals who have delayed career entry as a ready source of talent. In other words, non-discriminating employers enjoy a competitive advantage.

The mothers that Appelbaum studied were not usually professionals, but the pattern of women in the workforce change as they began entering higher education in large numbers. Today in the U.S., more women than men receive college degrees, and many of these women are "returning students," pursuing their degrees in their late 20s, 30s or older.

Delayed entry among academics

We recently completed a study, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, of almost 5,000 faculty in English and chemistry at over 500 colleges and universities in the U.S. We surmised that the academic world might have biases against caregiving, and that individuals who make family commitments -- or who even *appear* committed to family -- may have less opportunity for promotion, fewer resources, smaller pay raises, and so forth.

Specifically, we were interested in strategic "bias avoidance" behaviours whereby employees minimize or hide family commitments in order to appear as ideal workers. Our study results confirmed that bias avoidance is both reasonably prevalent and heavily gendered. Female faculty more often felt compelled to avoid or hide family responsibilities.

One of the survey questions specifically asked whether the faculty member "delayed starting my academic career in order to start a family." We originally believed that delayed entry represented a form of bias avoidance -- "hiding" family commitments by putting them in the past before initiating career entry. On reflection, however, we came to view the phenomenon differently, in part because it is very difficult for a job applicant to conceal any extended absence from the labour force. In addition, as Appelbaum's work implies, delayed career entry may actually invite biases, since the employee has in fact put family first in the life course, instead of barreling headlong down the career fast track.

Of 4,980 respondents, 472 or 9.3 percent claimed to have delayed their careers to start their families. The fact that almost one-tenth of faculty reported this behaviour signals that the pool of delayed career entry individuals is substantial. In fact, the actual number may be even higher than our study shows. For example, discrimination might drive some delayed entry academics to give up their careers altogether, or to deny that family was the primary reason for doing so.

The data confirm that more women than men have delayed entry careers. Of 2,937 men, only 119 or 4.2 percent said they delayed their career entries; of 1,952 women, 346 or 17.7 percent claimed they delayed their academic careers to start a family. *Almost one-fifth of our sample of professional women had delayed their careers for family purposes.* This represents a significant pool of prospective employees, particularly for employers who find it difficult to attract and retain women.

Terminal degrees, usually a PhD, are required for employment as a faculty member. We found that, on average, both men and women obtained their terminal degrees five years later when they delayed entry for family reasons -- for men, age 34.7 versus 29.8; for women, age 36.3 versus 31.5.

Some jobs may be more amenable to delayed career entry. For example, mathematicians typically perform much of their research at an early age. On the other hand, appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court is usually limited to individuals nearing or beyond the traditional retirement age. Similarly, chemistry is more of a young person's game than some other disciplines, because research in chemistry typically involves long hours in the lab and significant face time with team members. English studies, on the other hand, can more often be undertaken in solitude.

To find out whether the field of English is more compatible with delayed career entry relative to chemistry, we compared the proportions of men and women who delayed entry into the two fields. We discovered that only 2.9 percent of the male chemists delayed their careers, compared with 5.2 percent of men specializing in English. For women, the numbers were 13.2 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively. These results imply that *some jobs are more consistent with delayed career entry than others.*

Some institutions may also be better at hiring and retaining delayed career entry employees, and the prestige of the institution could be a factor. Highly prestigious institutions have an advantage in hiring, and may therefore discriminate against delayed entry individuals more often. For example, when Harvard or Stanford selects a new faculty member, they likely expect to get the ideal candidates. For this reason, they may tend to exclude candidates who have taken substantial time off to start a family.

We used a classification system developed by the Carnegie Foundation to distinguish faculty at the

most prestigious institutions from those employed at less prestigious ones. At the most prestigious schools, only 3.5 percent of the men and 13.6 percent of the women reported delaying their careers. At the less prestigious institutions, 4.4 percent of men and 20.2 percent of women claimed to have delayed career entry for family reasons. These results support the hypothesis that *our most prestigious educational employers tend to discriminate against delayed career entry employees.* These schools might improve their talent pool if they were more open to delayed career entry individuals.

Of course, there is always the possibility that individuals who delay their career entry are generally less committed to their work, and choose to work in less prestigious ? and presumably less stressful ? institutions. However, evidence from numerous studies find working parents -- a group that includes many delayed entry employees -- exhibiting high levels of commitment where work-family programs are available.

Implications for employers, individuals and educational institutions

Our survey targeted college and university faculty, but undoubtedly there are significant pools of delayed career entry employees available in other professional fields. For example, delayed career entrants in law or accounting are not overly handicapped because they can obtain degrees in their field in fewer years than it takes to get a PhD. It is likely that a *significant group of prospective talent for professional jobs exists among women who have delayed career entry. Therefore, employers who are open to hiring candidates who have delayed career entry for family reasons will enjoy a competitive advantage in the search for talent.*

Employers interested in tapping the market for delayed career entry professionals should consider the following options:

- Train employees who are responsible for

hiring to focus on quality, not the age of the applicant or gaps in career.

- Provide entry ramps such as training programs, or entry-level positions that fit delayed entry and returning professionals. For example, Queensland University of Technology in Australia offers women who have had career interruptions (typically for family reasons) fellowships or scholarships to support re-entry research, to improve opportunities for them to qualify for senior academic positions.
- Provide a level playing field for promotions, pay raises, and so forth, to ensure that delayed entry employees have the same opportunities as others.
- Offer flexible work arrangements, including telecommuting, reduced working hours, flexible schedules, and paid family and medical leave.
- Provide caregiver supports such as on-site or subsidized child care, support for after-school programs in the community, and child and elder care resource and referral services.
- Consider relevant skills involved in parenting and community activities that would carry over to the job, such as organizing, leadership, the development of knowledge bases, budget-keeping and networking.
- Recognize that re-entering employees have often been out of the workforce for some time, and may need support from managers and co-workers to help build their confidence.

For *individuals* considering delayed career entry, we suggest:

- Select a profession consistent with delayed career entry. In professions where performance is more critical than credentials (such as sales and some services), penalties for delayed entry may be reduced.
- Time education to fit delayed entry. For

academics, obtaining a Ph.D. and then delaying career entry would likely damage hiring opportunities. Waiting to receive the PhD until career entry is near would make more sense. Similarly, it may make more sense to obtain an MBA, law or accounting degree until the delay is nearing an end.

- Keep a finger in the pot while delaying career entry. Become active in professional associations, volunteer for relevant activities, work reduced hours in a related job, and take advantage of any training or educational opportunities that arise.

Educational institutions seeking to facilitate delayed career entry should:

- Offer flexible education, such as on-line or evening courses.
- " Provide support for student-parents, including on-site or subsidized child care and lactation rooms.
- Develop admission criteria for professional degrees that do not involve standardized tests. Tests such as the GRE, GMAT, LSAT and MCAT all presume the individual was recently in an academic setting. Allowing individuals the option of taking a small number of courses to qualify for admission would be both appropriate and fair.
- Develop recertification professional degree programs for students with relevant degrees obtained earlier in the life course, with admissions criteria considering earlier degrees.

Governments seeking to facilitate delayed career entry should:

- Provide return to work programs. For example, the South Australian government offers the Parents Return to Work Program, to assist parents who are returning to work after a child care absence. The initiative

provides financial assistance for parents enrolling in training that will improve their workforce/employability skills.

- Act as a role model by employing delayed career applicants.

Career delay is part of a broader phenomenon in which individuals move in and out of professional careers at various ages. Some women and men may wish to take time out to rear children after establishing their careers. Others may wish to pursue both career and family commitments simultaneously. Others may need to ramp down their careers for a time to help an ailing parent or partner, while others may wish to delay career entry. Still others may have a break in their career due to migration or refugee status. Employers seeking a competitive advantage in the hiring and retention of talent will find ways to attract and hold individuals in these diverse circumstances. Employers who continue to require that individuals fit the ideal worker model, and ignore these new facets of the workforce, will be left behind. **■**