

A flexible and open attitude at work helps bosses attract and keep talent, raising profits, writes **Lam Woon-kwong**

Diversity pays

Regardless of our background, we have a responsibility to care for others. Perhaps you are a parent to young children or a child of elderly parents. Perhaps you have a sibling who has a disability or a spouse who is chronically ill. The obligation to care for our family, in particular, runs deep in us.

Such obligations need not interfere with our work performance. Yet, we often feel we have to choose. Imagine, for instance, that you are an only son who is responsible for the care of your elderly mother, and she has a serious illness. She needs constant attention, but your company does not support flexible work arrangements.

There are others who face additional barriers in their professional lives due to their gender, disability, race or sexual orientation. Imagine being a top-performing salesperson, but as an ethnic minority you are constantly a target of discrimination inside the workplace.

In such instances, would you stay or leave?

In these scenarios, the organisation risks losing valuable staff. Yet, with a slight reorientation in mindset and policies, employers can encourage talent, expand business opportunities and improve working relations.

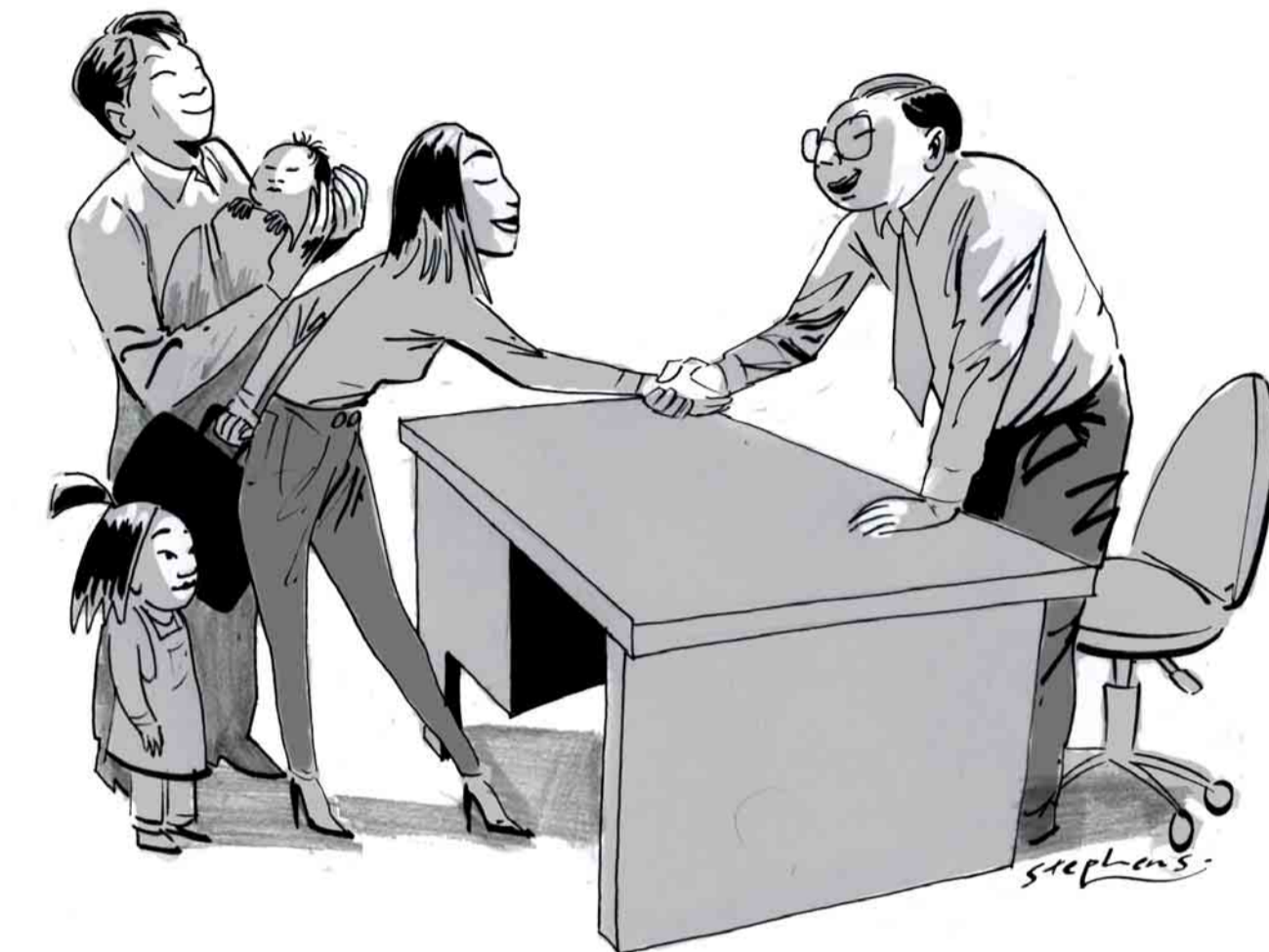
Is it not time for us to rethink our corporate culture?

An equal opportunity workplace can help create an environment of mutual respect that must be good for business. There are four key elements here: the workplace needs to be inclusive, gender-friendly, family-friendly, and talent-oriented.

First, inclusive policies are becoming an increasingly important consideration for top young talent. Over the next decades, we face a looming talent crunch fuelled by our ageing population and low birth rate. Consequently, younger workers will increasingly become an asset. The post-1980s generation grew up with wider exposure through living and studying overseas, and through travel and access to the internet.

They tend to have a wider range of interests, value opportunities to learn and take diversity as a given. Consequently, they are more likely to want both an inclusive workplace and to look for a healthier work-life balance. Employers who cannot fulfil these desires risk falling behind in the race for talent.

Second, employers need to show commitment to promoting gender



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diversity. More women than men are now graduating from universities worldwide. Women have increasing buying power and often make purchase decisions for the rest of the family. This means gender diversity matters, and will increasingly matter, in this city's workplace.

Yet, according to the *South China Morning Post*, women made up only 9.2 per cent of the board directorships of Hong Seng-listed companies last year. Those who lag behind on gender diversity risk losing out: some research has shown that companies with the most female managers tend to outperform their counterparts in the same field. Gender diversity widens the variety of inputs and better equips the company to anticipate the needs of its customers.

Third, family-friendly policies help retain talent, especially female workers. Many women leave the workplace before they reach the top, because they hit a glass ceiling in their careers or because it becomes too difficult to juggle the needs of work and family. This female brain drain is a serious loss to the business and the community.

In truth, family-friendly policies can help ensure that employees do not easily burn out. A recent survey from Community Business indicates that almost one in five working respondents fall sick more often. More than one-third feel that they do not have time for their family, and more than half feel extreme and prolonged fatigue. Tired and sick employees are neither productive nor engaged.

Not surprisingly, nearly 40 per cent said that they would consider leaving their current job for a better work-life balance. Policies which promote work-life balance cost little but can have long-term benefits in building up human capital.

Finally, fostering an equal opportunities culture means judging performances based on merit, not on stereotypical factors. Unfortunately, stereotypical attitudes about different groups remain

prevalent. For example, in a 2009 survey conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission, almost one in four local Chinese respondents said they would not choose job applicants of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent.

In this globalised world, workplace diversity can help companies better cater to their customers' needs. It also fosters creativity and innovation, as well as improving productivity. For instance, according to Harvard Business School research in 2004, there are measurable performance benefits when a racially diverse group chooses to learn from its members' different experiences rather than ignore or suppress them. Therefore, a workplace which embraces diversity allows its workers to contribute their best without distraction.

Everyone can be a leader in his or her own spheres of influence. As leaders, corporate executives have the ability to implement real changes and be a role model for future generations. By taking action, leaders can guide their own company to inspire by example.

Lam Woon-kwong chairs the Equal Opportunities Commission

Su-Mei Thompson

Working marriage

Women's economic empowerment is arguably one of the biggest tectonic shifts of our time. Just a generation ago, women were largely confined to repetitive menial jobs and expected to abandon their careers when they married and had children. Today, they are running some of the world's most successful organisations and are better educated and more prevalent in the workforce than ever before.

However, this revolution has come with a price. Many women feel they have to choose between their children and their careers. In Hong Kong, studies show these pressures adversely affect not only women but also society as a whole.

A recent Women's Commission report found that 68.7 per cent of single women were in paid employment in 2008, compared with only 46.3 per cent of married women. Women cited familial responsibility as the main reason they leave paid work – in particular the need to act as primary caregivers. In another study, 82 per cent of female professionals rated the level of conflict between work and family as "intense" or "extremely intense".

Hong Kong's response to this issue can at times be depressing. For instance, it was disappointing in the wake of the government's recent report on the shortage of doctors in Hong Kong to see factions in the community calling for hospitals to hire fewer women doctors because many of them end up quitting to look after their family. This kind of attitude is troubling, especially if you consider that there are equal numbers of male and female students studying medicine in our universities. Hong Kong needs to find a way to ensure that women – who after all make up half the talent pool – are able to remain productive despite the interruptions of childbirth and they can continue to work without negatively impacting the welfare of their children and their family.

The Women's Foundation believes it is high time for a review of Hong Kong's maternity benefits. Under Hong Kong law, a woman is entitled to 10 weeks of paid maternity leave. New mothers are safeguarded from any unexpected termination of employment

during that period and may be granted an additional four weeks of leave should there be any complications involved in childbirth recovery.

Contrast this with Europe, where many countries today offer up to three years of paid maternity leave. Closer to home, Shanghai has recently re-interpreted existing policy to allow for over six months' post-natal leave provided the mother presents a doctor's supporting document.

The decision is not so simple, of course – lengthy periods of paid maternity leave can put firms off hiring women, which would have the reverse effect to the desired outcome. At the same time, the cycle cannot be broken just by expanding the entitlement to maternity leave without a raft of accompanying changes in policy and practice including flexible work arrangements, more options for childcare support and more retraining assistance for women to re-enter the workforce.

These are not novel proposals. The Equal Opportunities Commission has long championed more family-friendly policies including flexible working hours, job-sharing, paternity leave and sponsored childcare. Yet, its recommendations have not been widely adopted. In a 2006 EOC report, only 14 of 137 Hong Kong companies surveyed had these policies in place or guidance for them.

Ultimately, what Hong Kong needs is an attitudinal shift that accepts that men are equal partners in the birth and care of children within the home and endorses women as being equally important actors in the workplace. Increasing incentives for fathers to spend more time caring for their children would be a novel approach to combating the gender biases that relegate women to caregiver roles and discourage men from taking an equal share in domestic affairs.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation. Dr Bianca Jackson and Lisa Moore contributed to this article, which is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues developed in collaboration with The Women's Foundation

Voices: Hong Kong

Double whammy of price rises and job losses

Lau Nai-keung

Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen highlighted his concerns about "unusual" inflationary pressure and its effects during his question-and-answer session in the Legislative Council last week.

In addition to the well-known cause of quantitative easing on the part of the US Treasury, recent serious flooding in Australia, Brazil and Sri Lanka aroused fears of a global food shortage and boosted the price rise.

Ask anyone in the supermarket, and you will have the unanimous answer that prices have been rising everywhere for some time.

As usual, people can expect very little from our government, except for small amounts of money that are dished out so that it could be seen to be doing something to ease the pain. If we cut through all the mumbo jumbo in Tsang's speech, this was in essence what he told Legco.

Now that the public coffers are inundated with money, the government is well equipped to pursue this course. Even so, Tsang took pains to remind us that, according to the Basic Law, he was expected to balance his budget. That means: don't expect too much.

In fact, without a fundamental change in governance philosophy, there is very little else the government can do, and we cannot reasonably ask a lame-duck government to lead a paradigm shift.

During periods of inflation, it is the underdogs who will suffer the most. Minimum wage legislation will only protect those who still have

a job. Even they, however, will find that the gap between the general price level and their meagre income is constantly widening, and it is more difficult to make ends meet.

On top of that, the introduction of a minimum wage will invariably cause job losses, and a fixed welfare payment is not much of a consolation for the growing number of unemployed.

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The central government has promised to maintain adequate supplies for our daily necessities, but

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with general price rises in agricultural products all over the mainland, there is no way it can guarantee us price stability. Do not demand the impossible from our caring "Grandpa" Wen Jiabao (温家宝); he is not Superman.

Most people can live with hardship, at least for a while, but the distribution of hardship is a different matter. Radicalism is not only rising but also becoming more prevalent here. When people see large companies making huge profits without sharing some of it with their employees, they will get extremely upset. When utilities companies

raise their charges, everybody will scream.

In an election year, our politicians will not forgo opportunities to stir up anti-business sentiment just to gain more votes. The property market is a time bomb which the government so far has not succeeded in defusing.

Hong Kong citizens today will no longer tolerate a non-performing government. With current price levels so high, people are already unhappy, and when housing prices start to rise further, people will get really angry.

In short, hard times are here and, basically, we are our own – with the possibility of a tiny bit of help from the government. Our lame-duck leaders, apart from playing the good guys and appeasing protesters, have very little up their sleeves. There is one thing it can definitely do, and that is: don't raise charges and levies. And, perhaps as the MTR Corporation's largest shareholder, help to limit MTR fare rises.

This year is destined to be a troublesome one. Things could very easily get out of hand and begin spiralling downwards.

Lau Nai-keung is a member of the Basic Law Committee of the NPC Standing Committee, and also a member of the Commission on Strategic Development

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Voices: Poverty

CSSA payment must keep up with inflation

Wong Shek-hung

Every year, the Hong Kong government adjusts its CSSA payment to reflect changing prices.

It uses the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices to track prices for a 12-month period ending in October, and on this basis proposes adjustments to the payouts. The proposal is sent to the Finance Committee for approval in December, and the new rate takes effect from February of the following year, at the earliest.

Thus, there are often discrepancies between the index movement in the previous year and the actual inflation or deflation rate in the current year. During inflationary periods, the poor are adversely affected, since their CSSA payment is based on prices from up to 16 months earlier.

Moreover, the standard payments of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance scheme are inadequate to meet the basic needs of the poor. The current rates are set by a review of the scheme conducted more than 10 years ago; even the review's definition of "basic needs" is outdated. For example, mobile phones, computers and internet access are, in today's world, considered basic needs, but they are not included in calculating basic living costs for CSSA recipients.

According to a survey conducted last month by Oxfam Hong Kong, on the health and living conditions of the elderly poor, 92.8 per cent of the elderly respondents who qualify for CSSA had never applied for it. And even though the majority of respondents (91.5 per cent) had heard of CSSA, 70.6 per cent of them found the application procedure complicated.

For example, the current system accepts only applications on a household basis – the total income and assets of all family members in the household are taken into account before determining eligibility for assistance.

Poor elderly people, though they might be living on an income below the CSSA payment level, cannot apply for help on their own; they can receive CSSA only if their sons or daughters declare they are not financially able to support their parents. This procedure poses a barrier for poor elderly people who may not be able to rely on their children to apply for assistance.

In order to make CSSA payments consistent with inflation, the government should review standard payment rates every six months, and based on the actual price movements of the index. In times of high inflation, rates should be altered ahead of the annual adjustment, shortening the review cycle to a quarterly basis, for example. This would allow people who rely on CSSA to maintain their purchasing power.

In addition, the government should conduct a comprehensive review of the goods and services included in the index, to ensure that CSSA payments cover recipients' living expenses. At the same time, it should simplify the application procedure and modify the requirements, for example, by allowing poor elderly individuals to apply.

Lastly, it needs to promote the CSSA scheme to people in need through public announcements.

Wong Shek-hung is advocacy officer of the Hong Kong Programme at Oxfam Hong Kong

Voices: India

A nation's reputation suffers a beating

Amrit Dhillon

Reeling from embarrassment at the damage done to its image, India has recalled a senior diplomat, Anil Verma, who was posted in the Indian High Commission in Britain, after he was arrested for allegedly beating his wife Paromita at their London home. Neighbours saw Paromita Verma running out of the house, her face bloodied, screaming for help.

Instead of recalling him, New Delhi should have agreed to the British government's request to waive his diplomatic immunity (which Verma invoked at the police station) and let them prosecute him in Britain on domestic violence charges. Such a gesture might have caused further mortification, if and when the case came to trial, but at least it would have sent a strong signal to Indian men that violence against women is a vile crime that cannot be tolerated.

If Verma is to be tried in India, his wife will have to return to file a case against him. But, since she has gone into hiding with their five-year-old son, this is not likely to happen. Even if she returns, there are several reasons for not having the trial in India.

First, the Indian legal system fails to deliver justice. With an estimated 30 million cases stuck in the courts, Verma could be senile and doddery by the time any verdict is delivered. He would be released on bail and, while the case ground its way through the courts over the decades, everyone would forget about it and he would get on with his life undisturbed, except for the occasional court appearance. This month, a couple in their 80s were finally granted a divorce after an

application was first made in 1982.

Second, the pressure on his wife to withdraw the charges would be immense. Indian culture, barring the tiny liberal elite, still dictates that a wife must be dutiful, loyal and obedient no matter how badly she is battered. Government statistics show that one in five married women experience domestic violence and 75 per cent of victims do not seek help owing to concern for "family honour".

The ethos of submission is so ingrained that a shocking number of women, particularly in rural areas, calmly say in surveys that men are justified in beating their wives, the better to "control" them or as punishment for "crimes" such as not getting the dinner ready on time.

Third, the rich and powerful in India never feel the force of the law; they are invariably bailed out by their friends in the establishment. The only hope of any punishment for Verma, if he is guilty of the alleged crime, would be disciplinary proceedings against him by the Ministry of External Affairs.

But, judging by its conduct so far, he will probably suffer no more than a slap on the wrist. That, too, will be more for embarrassing India than for any alleged crime against his wife.

Why would his wife seek refuge in Britain if she were confident of getting justice in India? She has said she fears being forcibly taken back to India. Her desire to remain in Britain is another source of embarrassment to India. What does it say about the judicial system when even an educated and affluent woman feels it cannot grant her justice?

Amrit Dhillon is a New Delhi-based writer