

15. Part-Time Work: A Relic - Swiss Companies Must Seize Their Potential

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Switzerland has a lot of catching up to do. Our part-time models are outdated or nonexistent, and women and men alike suffer from the rigid frameworks set by our companies and the expectations of our managers and colleagues.

In Switzerland today, an estimated 50,000 females with a university degree stay home. This is a highly unsatisfactory situation, preventing the Swiss economy and society from benefiting from the knowledge, expertise, and commitment of these highly qualified women. Additionally, the funds invested by the government in their training, approximately CHF 5.75 billion, no longer flow back into the economy.

With the debate around the restriction of immigration by foreign workers, this topic is now receiving new momentum. Domestic companies will in future be able to recruit fewer foreign skilled workers. The shortage of skilled workers that companies have been bemoaning for years will further intensify. The mobilization of currently unemployed yet highly educated women will play a key role here.

Companies can reap diverse rewards by employing women: They can choose from a larger talent pool; women have a better understanding of customers' and consumers' needs, especially in the fields in which they make the purchasing decisions; and women contribute different perspectives and problem-solving approaches to the discussion. Leadership teams made up of more than 30% women are proven to sustainably deliver better results, with higher employee satisfaction. Mixed teams generate better results than teams comprised exclusively of men. Women not only help to create a more professional and courteous working atmosphere, they also generally have a more consensus- and solution-oriented leadership style.

Once Part-Time, Always Part-Time

When highly educated Swiss women decide not to work, there are multiple reasons. In economically strong Switzerland, wages remain only a secondary consideration.

The trigger for the exit is almost always the birth of a child. The birth of the first child marks the key break in a woman's career planning and often means transitioning to part-time work. A survey showed that the part-time rate among women over 40 years of age stagnates at a very high level until retirement.

Lack of Enthusiasm on the Part of Employers

While some women consciously decide to take on the role of housewife and mother, there are many well-educated women who would like to work in an interesting job with good career prospects after the birth of a child. On the one hand, the lack of enthusiasm on the part of employers when discussing options during pregnancy, the limited contact and flow of information to new mothers during maternity leave, and the poorly orchestrated reentry into the organization post-maternity leave can act as deterrents. Companies are not proactive enough in offering an attractive working environment for women who want to temporarily reduce their working hours.

But it must also be said that many women fail to demand this emphatically enough. The belief that it is only possible to have a career if you work full-time is widespread. The part-time work offered to returning women is often much less demanding than their previous full-time position, or the payment for the part-time position fails to properly reflect the actual workload. This situation is aggravated by the inflexible opening hours of public day care centers, which may open at 7:00 a.m. but mostly close by 6:00 p.m. More flexible private day care centers or private childcare are unaffordable for many Swiss employees.

Culture of Presence Instead of Flexible Working Hours

The male-dominated corporate culture is another reason why women struggle with careers after maternity leave. The key factors are the male-dominated work relationships and networks, as well as the widespread culture of "being seen" in companies. Many Swiss employers still have a hard time with the idea of flexible working hours or remote working. Little consideration is given to the needs of women and men in part-time work, and permanent physical presence is still seen as a hallmark of good performance in many companies, regardless of whether the quality of the work is actually better than that of employees working from home or part-time.

The Ideal of the Housewife and Mother

One particular Swiss challenge is that the image of the housewife and mother is still relatively broadly perceived as the ideal. The pressure of these expectations - which are less and less based on reality - comes from both men and women, in both the personal and the professional sphere. However, this pressure not only prevents women from choosing a lifestyle with a career, it also prevents men from considering a part-time model in favor of an equal partnership allowing two careers in parallel.

It is often argued that any additional wages earned by the working mother would be "eaten up" by the cost of childcare, and thus would not really be worthwhile. However, these arguments overlook the fact that, even with part-time work, the woman is investing in her future and the future of her entire household, since she remains attractive in the job market long-term. In many innovative industries, it can be very difficult to rejoin the workforce as an expert after a few years of absence.

Women Are too Quiet in Voicing Their Demands

Companies have been aware of this problem for some time now and proclaim flexibility and women's advancement programs in their mission statements and on their websites. However, in the vast majority of Swiss firms, these claims have not yet altered the mindset of managers or the working culture. But the demands voiced by the affected employees are also still much too quiet. Ideally, employers should start a targeted dialog during the recruitment process, especially

with female workers, and explain that career opportunities as well as the option of part-time work remain open even after the birth of a child. Women who have left the workforce for a period should be mentioned specifically as target candidates in job postings, and women rejoining the workforce should receive appropriate training to update their expertise.

Tailored Solutions Increase Loyalty of Female Employees

Flexible working hours give women the opportunity to increase their workload. They can fulfill their demanding professional responsibilities and still have enough time for their families. Women who want to continue pursuing their career after maternity leave appreciate solutions tailored to their specific situation. However, this also requires concrete, active planning on the part of the employee, supported and initiated by the company. What is critical is that part-time work - for women and men alike - has to be appreciated and promoted more strongly by employers if the model is to gain social acceptance. Only by aiming for equal treatment can change be accomplished. Part-time work also offers companies the ability to retain the best employees in the long-term. If part-time work or other flexible working models become the norm on a broad scale and are also practiced by managers, the company will be better prepared for future demographic shifts and for the desires of a younger generation that places more value in flexible models for work and life.

Part-Time Models Require an Explicit Service Level Agreement

In flexible working time models, the loss in wages, and especially in benefits, is often drastic compared to full-time employees. And yet, part-time employees often work considerably more than the contractually agreed percentages; phone calls and e-mails are answered on days off, and important meetings on off-days are attended anyway. A service level agreement between employer and employee clearly governs the duties, including for instance taking calls on days off, but at the same time, also the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for the additional work. Employees in flexible working models are certainly qualified for leadership positions, especially if they already know the company or have worked in a comparable position.

Day Care Providers Are Also Needed

The inflexible childcare situation in Switzerland spells a clear disadvantage for mothers and fathers pursuing a career. In particular, the 13 weeks of vacation for school-age children and the comparably early pickup times in public day care centers put parents under pressure - especially when important meetings are scheduled outside of regular day care hours, international travel is required, or presence in the office is (often tacitly) a prerequisite for career advancement. Flexible working time models must be practiced in such a way that mothers and fathers are able to leave early without consequences during vacations or in the evenings at day care closing times, and to finish their work in their home office if necessary. The same applies to their children's school vacation. It's not about reducing the workload, but about increasing flexibility in organizing the calendar.

Gender Diversity Is the Inherent Responsibility of Every Manager

In order to emphasize the vast importance of gender diversity, it must be incorporated in the mission statement of a company and become part of the corporate strategy. This responsibility cannot be delegated to a "women's officer" but is an inherent part of every CEO and manager's job. Change will happen only if companies practice what they preach. Mentoring programs can help to identify solutions and career opportunities. In many respects, it can be considered mutual coaching: enabling managers to better understand the challenges of women and men with part-time life models. Like with any leadership goal, the objectives have to be regularly measured, reviewed, and adjusted.

Summary

When it comes to the topic of women in management, there is still enormous potential to be seized. Differences in education are no longer an issue today - quite the contrary: Women represent more than half of all university graduates. And yet the number of women in management is stagnant, and middle management is often the end of the line for them. Waiting for the educational advantage to lead to an automatic increase in the rate of women in top management will not deliver the required results. Some companies are therefore already taking action. The frontrunners among the analyzed companies show how it's done: With coherent overall concepts, they leverage the enormous potential of women. But there is still plenty of room for improvement: 80 percent of Swiss companies still have considerable potential to bring more women into the executive suites. If companies truly want to benefit from the diversity of their workforce, they must consciously use part-time models as a strategic competitive advantage and firmly embed them in their corporate culture. What we need is primarily a change in the mindset of managers: They have to not only promote cultural change, but also practice it themselves. Society will then follow. Daughters and sons will be proud of their working mothers and will naturally emulate the model in which both parents have their careers and times off in their own relationships.

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