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Natasha Mutch (Class of 1988)

## Best workplaces create a milieu that works for employees

■ **Natasha Mutch**

The people of the Aka tribe in Africa have it sorted. Their approach to shared parenting is well documented:

fathers take on all parenting responsibilities while mothers head off to hunt and bring home food. Then they swap. Pretty straightforward.

Three years ago I wasn't a parent, so I never googled the Aka tribe, and issues facing mothers and fathers was stuff that happened to other people. Then my partner and I boarded the baby express and as our train pulled in to Parent Town we realised we had landed on a sort of Harry Potter-esque platform 9¾.

There was a whole other world out there. Here's what we discovered: being a parent is not easy, being a parent and both working is not easy, being a parent and both working full-time — no, wait, isn't there a lot out there about flexible

workplaces and work-life balance? Surely, society has come a long way since the 1960s. Well, it seems society still needs some work. In some areas, such as the workplace, are we still clinging to the idea that being a parent means being a mother?

Are "mother" and parent interchangeable but not so "father" and parent? Does workplace flexibility apply only to mothers? And what if the concepts of "mother" and "father" aren't defined by gender? There's a whole other consideration around how same-sex couples would deal with the discrimination and judgmental prejudice sometimes faced by fathers.

You would be forgiven for thinking flexibility in the workplace is a buzzword. It's everywhere — in job advertisements, on company websites and spruiked in speeches. But what might be on-trend for employers keen to attract a broader pool of

quality candidates does not necessarily translate into reality. I've heard stories from friends, colleagues and people I've only just met about their challenges in being a father at work. One told me his supervisor gave a female co-worker extended time off to look after a pet but challenged his leave request to take his child to the doctor.

Granted there are two sides to every story but let's recap this one: man wants to share caring duties of his young child so his partner can work and help put food on the table. His boss smacks him down but grants a female co-worker time off to look after a sick moggy. Scorecard: fur baby — one, human baby — nil.

It seems those gender-balance objectives may look a little unwell themselves. Case in point: a recent article about a father vilified by a woman for changing his baby's nappy in the parents' room at a Queensland shopping centre.

It's a room for "parents". There's a reason why workplaces are changing terminology from maternity leave to parental leave, recognising that fathers are part of the care as well.

That was a light-bulb moment. Not just any light bulb, one of those energy-saving light bulbs that warm up slowly and, as they become brighter, you see more and more.

If men aren't supported to share parenting, women aren't supported to pursue their own careers. Comments like "why can't your wife do it" don't help.

Not all workplaces are the same, of course. Some firms have HR policies dedicated to job-sharing options and flexible work arrangements for men and women at all levels, including senior leaders. The sky hasn't fallen in. The Earth still rotates on its axis. Pretty straightforward really.

For me, the scenarios above seem more disappointing

because the bosses and colleagues in each of them were female. My natural position, rightly or wrongly, is to expect women to endorse men who support women in building their careers. Isn't that pretty straightforward?

So ladies, let's use forums such as International Women's Day on March 8 for good, not evil. Let's acknowledge the men who are actively seeking to address gender balance and equity in the workplace by advocating for shared parenting.

Let's support the fathers who are making a real effort to smooth the way for women to succeed in business and parenting. Gender balance in the workplace starts with support from women as well as men. I'd like to think that's straightforward.

■ **Natasha Mutch** is corporate communications manager with Wesfarmers Chemicals, Energy & Fertilisers