

Conversations with the Experts

The New Dad: Exploring Fatherhood Within a Careers Context



Brad Harrington

Bio: Brad Harrington is the Executive Director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family (CWF) and a research professor and faculty member in the Organization Studies department of the Carroll School of Management. In his role as the Center's Executive Director, he is responsible for the Center's research, convenings, and corporate partnership strategy. Previous to his present role at the university, Brad served as Associate Director of the Center for Corporate Citizenship.

In his faculty role, Brad's teaching in the Graduate School of Management focuses on career management and work-life integration and the management of organizational change. His research interests are career management, mobilizing and leading organizational change, contemporary workforce management strategies, and organizational learning. He is a frequent presenter and keynote speaker at professional conferences and business schools and has published a number of articles and book chapters. Along with Professor Douglas T. Hall of Boston University, he has recently completed *Career Management and Work/Life Integration: Using Self-Assessment to Navigate Contemporary Careers* (Sage Publications, 2007). In 2006, Brad was named as one of the "10 Most Influential Men in the Work-Life Field" by *Work/Life Matters Magazine*. In addition to his work at the University, Brad also serves on the advisory board of the International Centre of Work and Family at IESE Business School in Barcelona, Spain.

*An Interview with Brad Harrington
by Judi Casey*

What was the purpose and focus of your study?

It's clear that things are changing radically for men, women, and working families. Today, about 75% of couples are dual-career, and in about one-quarter of these couples, the woman out-earns her male spouse. As a result, men's roles are changing as they expect to take on a greater share of caregiving responsibilities. We wanted to better understand the experience of today's new fathers to learn how they make sense of their dual role as breadwinner and caregiver.

What are some of the factors that influence the roles and expectations of today's fathers?

The major factor mentioned above is dual-career families along with the high number of single-parent families. Additionally, in recent years, women have really outshined men in higher education, receiving 57% of bachelor's degrees and 60% of master's degrees in the US. Finally, the recession we are experiencing has had a much more detrimental impact on men. As a result, men's role as the primary economic provider is not as clear as it once was. Our research found that men want to be much more engaged on the home front than they were even 10 years ago.

How have perceptions of men at the workplace been affected by their becoming first-time fathers?

Perhaps not surprisingly, new mothers experience mixed and negative feedback about becoming a mother from a career perspective. As the 2008 [Kanter Award](#)-winning research "[Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty?](#)" showed, after having a child, mothers are often seen as less committed, less promotable, and even sometimes less competent than their single childless female counterparts. But for men, the messages seem to be, "If you are a new dad, you probably have even more to offer your employer, and you are probably ready to take on greater responsibility than before." This seems like more good news for men and more bad news for women, and on the career front, that may be true. But when you view it from a whole person perspective, you realize that the reason men get the reaction they do is because many employers don't take the caregiving side of fatherhood very seriously. Organizations are stuck in a paradigm where father equals breadwinner, and they don't understand that today's fathers will have to make compromises at work as a result of their increased home responsibilities, just as their female counterparts do.

How do new fathers manage their roles and responsibilities at work and at home? Is this different than what new moms do?

In our limited sample, it appeared that fathers made accommodations to their schedule and used flexibility to get things done or to simply spend more time with their children. But unlike their female counterparts, our dads did not sign up for a formal flexible work arrangement. Instead, they just "made it work" informally. Often, that was with the blessing of their managers, who seemed tremendously supportive. But when needed, fathers used more stealth approaches to getting their family issues met—while at the same time they ensured that they found a way to meet their important business objectives.

How does becoming a first-time father affect the work goals and career aspirations of these new dads?

Not surprisingly, there was a spectrum of answers here. Some fathers said that being a dad hadn't altered their career aspirations that much; at least not up to the point when we interviewed them (the average age of the children in the study was quite young, only 18 months). However, many fathers said that they had begun to look at their careers differently and had modified their view of success. As one father said, "If we're all doing okay and we're happy, that's more important than attaining a certain status or job title."

How do today's dads define being a "good father"?

We were surprised that the word "breadwinner" was not the dominant term used when our subjects spoke about what it means to be a good father. The terms they used were more often being present, being a good role model and mentor, and being supportive. The descriptions seemed very heartfelt and stressed the "soft side" of parenting.

What additional research about dads would be useful?

There are so many possible avenues to pursue; it would be tough to nail a few down. We would love to see more exploration of fathers' experiences with children at different life stages (e.g., school age, teenagers, college students). We would be interested to learn more about single fathers as well as to study the experience of stay-at-home fathers. They are still a small minority—only about 5% of stay-at-home parents are men in the U.S. But they are an interesting group to study because they can tell us a lot about how men function in caregiving roles. As one of our colleagues says, being an effective caregiver or parent isn't about gender, it's about competencies.

Are you aware of any employers that are particularly supportive of dads? How can workplaces support today's dads and working families?

I couldn't name one organization or industry specifically. I think virtually all have a long way to go. However, I think it would be a big help for fathers if employers just did a few basic things.

First, recognize how much the equation for families and fathers has changed. Second, promote work-life programs in gender-neutral fashions. Stop making only women the role models for your work-life initiatives. For the culture to change, we need to really send a strong emphatic message that men are 50% of the equation. Finally, provide forums where men and fathers can talk about their work-family challenges. Men aren't as good at networking on these issues as women, and they may need a nudge to get the conversation started. But if our experiences interviewing fathers was representative of fathers in general, we found that given the opportunity, men are more than willing to talk about their experiences and learn from others.

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