

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Parental Leave

Date: 13 July 2018

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Guest: Eric Tsui

Duration: 17:25 min

Ashish: Hello and welcome to the Actuaries Institute CareerView podcast. This is another in the series of diversity related CareerView podcasts that we're running. I'm Ashish Ahluwalia, now parental leave in the workplace has a very low take-up rate for men and this is despite evidence that it's of huge benefit for the father's themselves in helping them adjust to their new lifestyle and to being a father and their new responsibilities. so today we're going to explore this issue and try and understand and unpack why parental leave take up in Australia and more broadly, around the world is the way it is, and so to talk through this issue with us today, I've got Eric Tsui in the studio with us today. Eric is a transactions actuary at Swiss Re and he's currently on paternity leave, so (he's a) perfect person to talk to about this topic. Eric welcome.

Eric: Pleasure to be here.

Ashish: Tell us a little about yourself

Eric: Yeah, sure. Well as an actuary, I started work about 14 years ago in the consulting space. So, I was a consultant for just over 10 years and about 3 years ago I moved into reinsurance at Swiss Re. (I) spent a bit of time in valuations and for the past about 15 months or so, I've been working in transactions.

Ashish: Right, okay sounds great and tell us about your employer and their parental leave policies.

Eric: Essentially, we get the one week of concurrent leave, which is usually taken once the baby is born, but also for primary carers, there's three months of paid leave, so as long as you're the one who's at home looking after the child, you can take that within the first 12 months of the baby being born and also beyond that, you can also take another 9 months of unpaid leave.

Ashish: Right, is that at full pay, that three month period?

Eric: Yes, three months at full pay, it's available for both mums and dads.

Ashish: Right okay, so that's quite a good policy in that it goes well above and beyond the minimum and the government scheme as well, so do you know the background to why that is what your employer does and what's the reason for that policy?

Eric: Yeah, well I think maybe not specifically to the policy itself but generally the company champions diversity and inclusion, so I think it's one of the more forward-thinking companies, more progressive and so we have a whole bunch of other D&I activities as well focusing on gender and sexuality and other sort of cultural aspects as well so it's a very inclusive place to work.

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Ashish: Right, so it sounds like it's been a real focus for the company in having active policies that go above and beyond not just what's required but actually what they think is right.

Eric: Yeah, that's right.

Ashish: Okay that's interesting. I saw recently Hollard have done something similar as well. Have you seen that emerge elsewhere in the marketplace and amongst your friends and colleagues?

Eric: Yeah, so I've seen it at my previous employer as well. At KPMG, they had a similar policy to Swiss Re. At both places, I've seen other dads take it as well, so when it came to my turn, it was really front of mind that it was an option for me to take it. I think it is becoming a more popular option. It's still you know when I walk around the streets close to my home, it's usually mums pushing the pram still, but I think it is becoming a bit more popular.

Ashish: Yeah, it's starting to change. So, tell us about yourself and your family circumstance and where you are in the journey of your family.

Eric: Yes, so I'm married, my wife had our first child Xavier about 10 months ago, so she took off the first 8 months, so that was full time. I was working but then she decided to go back to work part-time, so Monday to Wednesday, she'd be at work and that's the period when I'm off on parental leave, so it's part-time, so I'll be doing that until our son hits one year of age.

I think for most people, family is top priority and I really wanted to actually put that into action, so yeah it was a sort of positive step to take and for me, so my dad died quite suddenly when I was very young, so it was a very sort of early and acute lesson in just thinking you really have to make the most of your time with your family because you never know what might happen, so for me personally that's a big driver and just when it came time for me to decide whether to take the leave, my thinking was that you know "in five years time, what would I regret?" would I regret not missing out on a career opportunity, say that came about when I was on leave or would I regret missing out on the time with my child? When I looked at it from that perspective, it was very clear exactly what the decision would be.

Ashish: Interesting, so you have that very sort of strong personal drive for a number of reasons to make sure it happened and that you had that at that time. So, what sort of discussions and decision making processes did you and your partner go through in kind of coming up with the plan around the parental leave plan and who does what and then what were the considerations in that for you?

Eric: One of the main considerations was what my wife wanted to do, so did she want to take all 12 months off? because she may have wanted to do that just to maximize her time with our son, so she thought about it and there oh maybe she could ease into going back to work, so transition back into work slowly yeah before the 12 months, so she needed to have conversations with her employer as well just to see if that could happen.

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Ashish: and were they supportive of that?

Eric: They were very supportive, so for her workplace, there's quite a few women who've had kids already so they were very supportive of flexible arrangements actually, so I think our circumstance, we're very fortunate because both of our employers are very flexible and very supportive of our families and once we decided that that was what was going to happen, she needed to think about how many days she'd go back and when to do it and following that, I could go back to my employer and go back to Swiss Re and discuss what our options were.

Ashish: Yeah, I mean to me it seems like from an employer's perspective, it's a bit of a win-win isn't it? because it means that they're getting their employees back sooner, they're managing to maintain touch points and to maintain their kind of training and their interaction and keep their skill sets current by having them involved in the workplace sooner. I would have thought that's a real win for them.

Eric: That's right and I think it's a great retention tool as well, I mean everyone's cutting costs so a lot of the time it's difficult to pay people more but you know if you have good benefits and flexible options like this, it really helps to retain staff.

Ashish: How long have you been doing this now and how's the experience been for you being left alone to have all the responsibility?

Eric: I was always quite a hands-on dad anyway, so it's not like I was stuck holding the baby not knowing what to do on the first day of leave, but it's an eye-opener, because at work you're kind of using your mind, but not necessarily your body as much, because you're sitting down, whereas it's quite the opposite with being on parental leave, your mind is kind of idle but it's a very physical kind of job, wrangling a baby or just pushing the pram for kilometres on end.

Ashish: I guess you're engaging your mind in a different way right like the challenges? Your day-to-day challenges are just different. I imagine there's a lot of thinking that goes into your day and how you structure it.

Eric: Yeah, I mean there's a lot of planning so there's things that you need to do, you need to plan in advance, a bit of problem-solving if the baby is just crying and you have to try and figure out what's wrong, a big difference also is that socially, you're quite isolated, you're at home with the baby and there's no adult conversation and the thing I noticed is, I take him to a music activity for half an hour. It's a group of ten babies and the other babies that are taken by their mums and I find that the other mums kind of bond together and talk together a lot more. I think some of them already know each other from a mothers group etc, whereas for me, I don't really have that connection and there's a bit of a distance.

Ashish: So, in that scenario being the reverse of the stereotype, you were almost the outsider in a way?

Eric: Yeah, for sure. There's definitely that kind of feeling about it. It's not like they exclude me deliberately, it's just all right at least for me. I'm very aware of being the only dad there.

Ashish: What have you enjoyed the most about this experience?

Eric: Definitely just spending time with my son. It's just watching him grow. A lot of people say it that they grow up so quickly and it's so true. Every moment, every time they do something, it could be the last time they do it, because they move into a different phase. They're constantly changing or they might stand up for the first time, which he's just done in the last couple of days and being there means you get to capture that moment. I think that's definitely the main benefit, developing a closer bond with my son and the other thing is it means my wife can go back and continue her career more quickly.

Ashish: Which is a huge benefit isn't it? It's well known, that that's one of the challenges for gender equality in the workplace is the time that women end up having to take off relative to men because of having children, (I assume) you would be a strong proponent and encourage all the males out there to go and do this, is that fair?

Eric: Yeah, what I'd probably say definitely consider it as an option. Every family circumstance is different, so it depends, it's just like our thought process, you know maybe the wife may want to stay at home or maybe depending on the type of work they do or the options they have in terms of the employment. Maybe it might not work, but if it's an option, definitely go for it.

Ashish: Yeah, so what would be... for the benefit of our listeners who haven't gone through this processing like myself, what are the potential limitations for people making that decision?

Eric: One part of it is what women face anyway when they have kids, which is you're taking some time off your career essentially, so how will it affect your career? Will it mean that your employer might or not necessarily your employer, but the people you work with might think that you're not as committed to the job. I've got to say for me personally, I've been lucky in that I don't feel that way in my workplace, but I can understand if there's those considerations and sometimes just because culturally, it hasn't happened, it's just not even considered, because in the past that's not how our dads did, it's not how grandparents did it, so it's not front of mind.

Ashish: Yeah, there's that kind of ingrained, unconscious bias about how you make those decisions.

Eric: Yeah, exactly like if it's never been done before, perhaps some people just don't even consider it an option.

Ashish: Yeah, I was doing some research in background to this and looked up some stats and found that in Australia, apparently in terms of the government paid parental leave, the male-female split there is 1% men take-up and it's slightly higher where the employer, in your case the employer also goes above and beyond the government scheme to fund paid parental leave.

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It goes up to 10% in that instance and interestingly, continuing on that theme of research because I'm an actuary after all, found some stats from an OECD study which showed that in Iceland, when they took away some of the financial disincentives that exist for males to take the parental leave, the take-up rate went up from 2.5% to over 30% over a few years, so what are your thoughts on that and what do you think could be done about that either from a public policy perspective or a workplace perspective?

Eric: A good place to start would be to have a policy which allows fathers to take the leave and paid parental leave, so not be sort of specific to mum's and dad's etc so just have the option if you're going to be looking after the child then you can take off a period of leave. I guess even where that exists, sometimes people may not feel comfortable in taking it and that's where probably the employer can actively just promote the fact that it's there and it's there to be taken, so for example with my workplace, a colleague of mine who had already taken parental leave and myself just before my son was born, we were asked to just give a few minutes talk to everyone to tell them about our personal circumstances and why we were taking parental leave just to promote dads doing it. I didn't end up doing it because my wife's waters' broke that morning, but that kind of thing, I think encourages others.

Ashish: So clearly there's a courageous culture of making sure people are aware it's there and championing the cause and championing those sorts of stories or at least creating a culture of normalcy around it.

Eric: Exactly and for me, seeing other people taking it helped me and just being available to talk about it and to discuss it with everyone and as you say, it's having that culture of normalcy.

Ashish: That's been a really interesting conversation. The takeaways for me are about having the policies in place. That's a key enabler I think, but it's just an enabler. I think the most important thing on done on top of that is having a culture, both a workplace culture but also a broader societal culture where people are encouraged and are comfortable to make the right decision and the right decision by them and that they're not constrained by a lack of support for what they want to do.

Eric: Yeah and in particular for the employer to give that support as well and to create that culture where it's accepted.

Ashish: That's right, so it's the policies. It's that support, particularly from the employer and then it's the personal connection. I think increasingly it sounds like there's evidence that these things actually lead to better outcomes for individuals in their careers and also for their personal lives, so I think that's really important.

Eric: I agree and I think it's sort of baby steps as well so it's not like overnight we'll have 50% of dads taking it off, but if we chip away at it I think the situation will improve.

Ashish: From a diversity and inclusion perspective, that's one of the key tenets and one of the key goals. So, thanks Eric for your time. It's been a really interesting conversation some really interesting takeaways and hopefully listeners have gotten some encouragement out of

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that and also gotten some encouragement to be supportive of this in their workplaces and to take some of these experiences into their consideration when they're thinking about this and in their futures. Thanks Eric.

Eric: Thanks Ash.

Ashish: Well thanks listeners, we hope you enjoyed the discussion. Please do get in touch with us if you have any comments, questions or suggestions for future podcasts on the Diversity and Inclusion CareerView podcast series. I'm Ashish, bye for now.