

Work and Family

When An Employee Gets a Divorce

Paula Santonocito

Research indicates that anywhere from 33 to 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, so when management learns an employee is divorcing the inclination may be to shrug it off as another statistic.

Yet, for the employee, the dissolution of a marriage can be traumatic—not to mention time consuming.

Impact on Employees

Divorce is frequently cited as among the most stressful life events. In fact, it usually appears in top 10 sources of stress lists as second only to death of a spouse. Indeed, the psychological impact of divorce can be so great that individuals often react to the death of marriage in much the same way they react to the death of a loved one.

Because it can have such an impact on an individual, divorce also has the potential to impact the various aspects of a person's life, including work. Divorce can result in increased absenteeism, and more time at work spent dealing with issues related to divorce.

Although a company may not be able to simplify the process for every employee, by providing support an employer can help eliminate stress caused by confusion and lack of direction.

Providing Assistance

As companies come to understand the importance of work/life benefits, more are providing a variety of services aimed at addressing what were previously considered personal issues. Often this support is offered through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

What's more, employees appear to be taking advantage of these services, particularly when faced with a life-altering circumstance like the dissolution of a marriage. "Divorce is a pretty common reason for using an EAP," says Monica Oss, president of Open Minds, a research and consulting firm specializing in the behavioral health field.

Oss tells *HRWire* that EAPs typically provide a number of different services, including family counseling, conflict resolution, and support for children who are acting out. Counseling that includes both parents and children is frequently requested, Oss says, indicating that it is sometimes underestimated how often services for children will be used.

In addition to relying on EAPs for divorce, employees also use program services to try to save their marriages. Oss says this makes it difficult to label program utilization as strictly related to divorce.

“One of the interesting statistics is that in tighter economic times the rate of divorce goes down and the amount of conflict goes up, so the utilization between marriage and divorce counseling is hard to untangle,” she says. “Marriage and family problems and problems related to children is the highest utilization.”

Counseling and More

Tom Warburton, director of marketing for ValueOptions, a leading provider of managed behavioral health and Employee Assistance Program services, also finds employees are using EAPs for help with marital and related family issues. “I think employee assistance program are taking a very prominent position in the workplace to help employees through situations like divorce,” he says.

But, like Oss, Warburton says identifying EAP usage as divorce-related isn’t clear cut. There is the core issue of depression and stress for which people seek help during a divorce, he says. In addition, he cites many different ancillary results of divorce for which people seek assistance. These include legal and financial advice, as well as concierge services that are used to arrange for things like daycare.

Warburton points out that where a person potentially had a partner to share in the day-to-day, now he or she may be taking care of tasks alone and therefore seek assistance.

Services Have Evolved

Although EAPs are not new, the way services are delivered has changed. “Employees now have more of a 24-7 access point,” says Warburton. Access to information includes telephonic coaching, online chatting with a coach, and the ability to read and download information online.

What hasn’t changed, though, is what has been a problem with EAPs in the past. “There’s still a certain stigma attached to behavioral health care,” Warburton says. Even when people are going through a major life event like a divorce, they can be reluctant to admit they need help—until they get to a point where they’re really losing control, he explains.

As such, Warburton indicates more effort is needed on the part of EAP providers and employers to communicate with and educate employees. “The goal is improve access to care and to break down these stigma barriers,” he says.

By becoming proactive, instead of reactive, more people can be helped, he tells *HRWire*. “Taking care of the employee is number one, and by doing so the employer is going to be taken care of,” Warburton says.

Caryn Lennon, founder and CEO of Divorce Education Associates, a consulting and educational services firm, agrees that communication is essential. However, she cautions that communication must be appropriate.

An attorney with 27 years experience in law and mediation, Lennon says there are more options for people than hiring lawyers and going to court. “That’s the old way of doing things,” she says. “The worst thing an employer can say to an employee considering divorce is go to a lawyer. That sends them down a path to litigation. It can be costly, time consuming, and destructive—and it causes problems in the workplace.”

Instead, Lennon advocates that an employee become informed about alternatives like mediation and that an employer provide assistance in presenting those alternatives, through an EAP and/or other resources.

Importance of Information

Companies faced with divorce need to understand how to deal with the issue, Lennon says, because like it or not, people bring their problems to the workplace instead of leaving them at home. A person going through a divorce is someone who has significant legal issues, significant financial issues, and significant emotional issues, she says.

According to Lennon, employees who are involved with attorneys may actually compound the problems of divorce. She tells *HRWire* that she knows of situations where people who go to lawyers are getting bills of \$1,000, \$2,000, or even \$3,000 per month. In one situation, the amount a person spent on attorney’s fees in one year was more than her actual salary.

Given the high legal costs associated with divorce, employees are then put in a position where they’re borrowing to pay bills. Lennon says employees have also stolen to pay legal fees. Employee theft, absenteeism, and being distracted on the job because of financial stress are all reasons for companies to provide appropriate information and support.

Importance of Understanding

Lennon formerly served as a legal advisor to the World Bank, counseling employees with regard to personal legal problems. About 30 percent of the time, the employees she spoke with were going through a divorce, she says.

What Lennon found was that divorce is very difficult for employees. “People going through a divorce didn’t just have legal problems, but financial and emotional problems as well,” she says.

Lennon also found that women are more likely to reach out for help than men, and are more open to talking about their problems. Men, on the other hand, are generally more worried about financial issues. “It’s a very scary proposition for men to go through divorce because they’re often more aware of the financial issues,” she says.

For the human resource or management professional faced with a staff member who is going through a divorce, Lennon has some recommendations. “Listen. Don’t be too quick to make a suggestion or offer advice. Sometimes people need to vent and be heard first,” she says.

Then, she recommends suggesting that the person read books or attend seminars. She says employers should also have a list of community resources available. She also advocates telling employees about mediation, and how it might be the best option.

Divorce and Corporate Culture

In addition, Lennon recommends communication of a different sort. "I think one of the key things management needs to communicate to employees is the idea that infidelity is not going to be tolerated in the workplace," she says.

According to Lennon, at some organizations, disregard for marriage is a significant issue. "There are workplaces where infidelity is just rampant," she says.

Like other issues that impact corporate culture, Lennon tells *HRWire* management's outlook in this regard is key. A company is opening itself up for problems when it creates an impression at the top level that infidelity is acceptable, or when it has a culture that fosters or ignores an attitude, she says.

The Bottom Line

Regardless of how a company addresses the issue of divorce and provides support for employees, experts agree it is an organization's best interest to do so.

Divorce doesn't only impact individuals going through the process. It also takes a financial toll on the companies for whom they work. Lennon tells *HRWire* it is estimated that divorce costs employers \$11 billion per year.

Endnotes

Contact: Monica Oss, president, Open Minds, 717/334-1329, monicaoss@openminds.com; Tom Warburton, director of marketing, ValueOptions, 757/459-5215; thomas.warburton@valueoptions.com; Caryn Lennon, J.D., CEO, Divorce Education Associates, 520/742-3159, csl@cslennon.com.

Online: Divorce Education Associates, information about the mediation process, <http://www.divorceeducation.info/pages/919274/index.htm>; The Divorce Resource Network, created by Caryn Lennon as an information resource, <http://www.divorceresourcenetwork.com/index.html>.