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Building and Sustaining Home Management Competency

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Introduction

The domains of work and home are often dichotomized to the point of full separation in the minds and practical efforts of many workers today. As women have taken their place in equal numbers in the workforces of most industrialized economies they have developed competencies and strengths that result in their respective areas of paid employment. After years of success in education and increased parity in the workplace they seem to exhibit greater professional confidence than previous generations.

In hundreds of informal conversations with U.S. women working full or part-time outside the home as well as those who have taken on the role of full time homemaker, through HomeAdvantage Plus we have found that the majority of these women feel incompetent in managing the work of their homes. For many the professional confidence they developed in the outside work domain evaporates when they shift their attention to the home. Consequently, though well-educated and professionally experienced, they feel relatively ill-prepared for managing their homes and family lives.

This apparent disparity in competency between the work and home domains leads us to wonder how healthy home life can be sustained when there are real or perceived skill gaps in homemaking. We examine the value of professional skill transference for improving home management. From the perspective of organizational psychology we focus on the nature of the human resource competencies involved in household work. When the knowledge and skills common to outside professional work are applied to the home, we can more effectively create an environment that is truly sustainable from the human resources perspective.

We start by examining the nature of human resource sustainability in terms of the knowledge and skills needed for household management. We then propose that many of these competencies are already found in homemakers within their roles in the workplace and therefore predict that competency in homemaking can benefit from a transfer of knowledge, skills and abilities already existent in the workplace. To frame this suggestion, we offer a brief background on knowledge transfer theory. We then examine the specific challenges for transferring skills and competencies from work to home which include stress, the fundamental differences in the nature of the work (outside vs. inside the home) and the current social value placed on the work of the home. We explore the positive impact that enhancing competencies can make for sustaining human resources in the household environment.

Sustainable Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

Sustainable development is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the “utilization and development of natural resources in ways which are compatible with the maintenance of these resources, and with the conservation of the environment, for future generations.” Sustainability is typically discussed in terms of how economic, political, and social practices protect our resources, primarily our ecological resources (Environmental Sustainability Index, 2005). Approaches that foster sustainability extend from broad, macro initiatives with regard to how entire nations use the natural environment to micro conservation practices at the community, home and individual levels.

Sustainable living in the home is more than a collection of ecologically friendly practices and materials. Environmental psychologists assert that when addressing questions of sustainability,

attention must be given to the context and the motivation of those involved (Gifford, 2009). We propose that for a lifestyle to be truly sustainable we should consider not just the physical resources but also the human resources that contribute to creating the home environment. The development of an ecologically sustainable environment at the household level is rooted in the motivation and ability of those who create that home to effectively maintain both the tangible and intangible resources of the family. The human energies of the women and men who create the home need to be sustained as much as the ecological and financial resources they use to support their families.

We propose that attention to environmental sustainability at the household level will wane when the interpersonal dynamics, human energy and skills involved in maintaining a home are depleted. Without the knowledge and skills to care for their homes on a daily basis, homemakers face daily stress that is likely to distract them from implementing the ecologically sustainable practices so often emphasized. To our knowledge, no researchers have directly addressed the sustainable value of knowledge, skill and competency but we can learn from parallels in the organizational management literature.

The field of leadership has taken the concept of sustainability and applied it to the nature of human behavior in organizations (Hyatt, Schmieder-Ramirez, & Madjidi, 2010; Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize, 2006). Sustainable leaders are those who provide leadership continuity in pursuing organizational goals over time. They are leaders who take “responsible action”. Hyatt, Schmieder-Ramirez, & Madjidi (2010) asked respected leaders to identify the specific qualities that comprise “responsible action” and consequently sustainable leadership. Using the Delphi method, four qualities of responsible action emerged. Sustainable leaders get results; execute strategies with attention to detail and alignment with vision and goals; they are decisive and have a work ethic that is developed through years of practice.

Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize (2006) examine the nature of sustainable leaders from physiological and psychological perspectives. The stress associated with the leadership role can adversely impact the ability to sustain effective leadership behaviors. Engaging in the psychosocial activities of coaching and teaching others serves to enhance the leader’s sense of competence and effectiveness in a role (Ibarra, 1995). Boyatzis et al. (2006) conclude that leadership effectiveness is sustained when the leader actively engages and coaches others towards behaviors that will achieve common organizational goals.

Although sustainable organizational leaders act in settings much larger than the household, we surmise that this type of leadership research can serve as a model for examining the characteristics that make home management skills sustainable. Homemakers are the leaders of their own households: we might predict that sustainable homemakers would engage in some of the same behaviors that work for their organizational counterparts. Given that household management competencies have not been consistently defined, we recommend constructing a comparable study to elicit detailed definitions of the competencies needed for sustainable home management.

Knowledge, Skills & Competencies Needed for Professional Housework

We asserted at the outset that many well-educated, successful workers today feel incompetent in homemaking. Part of this sense of incompetence may come from the view they have of the work involved in caring for a home. It is seen as something completely distinct from other aspects of life; something that either comes naturally or does not and therefore cannot be easily learned.

In fact, caring for a home is work that integrates the same three critical skill and knowledge sets common to many domains of work: conceptual, human and technical skills (Katz, 1974). The

last of these, the applied technical skills, can seem the most intimidating precisely because there is some expectation that they should come naturally and that is not always the case. We see abundant popular books and media sources touting cooking, cleaning, home design and laundry advice aimed at quick fixes to address gaps in these skills at a baseline rather than a professional level. What these quick tips often fail to recognize is that a sustainable approach to applying human resources in the home are found in the conceptual and human skills recognized as important in the work domain but often overlooked as an area for development and learning in the home.

In his 2008 *Journal of Management Development* editorial, Boyatzis maintained that the competencies needed for effective management and leadership in the 21st century need to be developed with a focused learning effort. A competency is a capability; an ability that needs to be learned, developed and refined. Improving levels of competency also requires increasing experience and effort (Boyatzis, 2008). Nearly all organizations and individuals do not question the learning commitment needed to develop competencies in the work domain yet most do not recognize that a comparable learning effort is needed to develop the knowledge and skills needed for sustainable home management.

We propose that the most fundamental management skills—planning, organizing, leading, and controlling—are all necessary for effective home management. In practice these include specific applications of time management, delegation and multi-tasking. The interpersonal abilities of communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence and flexibility all need to be applied consistently at home if we seek more sustainable environments at the micro level of the family. Given the vital importance of the home environment to healthy families and societies we should more closely examine the nature of the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable home management and fosters ways to develop those competencies in homemakers.

Knowledge Transfer

As presented above, there are many skills and abilities in the workplace that are also essential to homemaking. Given the large number of homemakers who are also employed outside the home, we propose that there is an opportunity to ease the stress of the home management learning curve by engaging in knowledge transfer from work to the home domain.

Organizational development practitioners refer to knowledge transfer as "the process through which one unit, for example a group, department, or division of an organization, is affected by the experience of another" (Argote & Ingram, 2000). An effective knowledge transfer of best practices across groups in an organization can be challenging to achieve due to the established practices in each group, the lack of incentive to change and the perceived differences in the nature of the work in each area. Skill transfer from the work to the home domain can pose similar problems.

The type of knowledge transferred will also influence how well that knowledge can be transferred and how well it will be retained. Explicit knowledge is more easily transferred than tacit knowledge wherein tacit knowledge is understood to be more intuitive and experiential (Levin & Cross, 2004). To determine how well home management knowledge can be transferred we need to strive for a more refined understanding of the nature of the knowledge, identifying the distinctions between the explicit and tacit knowledge elements. Knowing the types of knowledge we are transferring we can establish educational and mentoring approaches that will foster more effective knowledge transfer. Levin & Cross (2004) found that competence-based trust was particularly important for successful tacit knowledge exchange. That is, the knowledge receiver must have a high level of respect and trust for the competence of the mentor.

Knowledge transfer is influenced by the properties of the individual or group affected by the process, the relationship between the parties involved in the knowledge transfer and the nature of the knowledge itself. Knowledge transfer occurs when the experience from one domain influences the other. There are three mechanisms that can explain how effectively knowledge can be transferred—one's ability to engage in analogical reasoning; one's experience, which can influence future ability and finally, the rewards or incentives that serve as the motivation to pursue the effort of knowledge transfer (Argote, McEvily & Reagans 2003). Each of these needs to be addressed when seeking ways to transfer knowledge from the workplace to the home.

The last section of this paper looks particularly at elements of home care that can influence the individual's motivation for knowledge transfer. Over the last 150 years, the nature of the workplace has shifted from the agrarian and trade model in which the work and home domains were closely bound together to the industrial model characterized by clear separations between the work and home domains (Moen & Han, 2001). Though today's information economy workplace is becoming increasingly fluid, we still see traditional boundaries between work and family that can hinder knowledge transfer between domains. We can attempt to address the first two knowledge transfer properties by looking at knowledge transfer as a learning process—helping individuals to see the common knowledge and skill elements for both work and home and learning how to apply those skills across domains.

Human resources development approaches address these types of learning opportunities with combinations of peer modeling and positive reinforcement. Supervisory training emphasizes the importance of individual coaching as a form of positive reinforcement for learning new skills. Bandura's theory of abstract modeling asserts that the observation of one or several models of behavior is taken by the learner and adapted into a creative form of performance. "It is the advanced capacity for symbolization that enables humans to learn much of their behavior by observation." (Bandura, 1977, p. 25). One might learn information from observation that is then cognitively processed and later acted on in a different way that is more advantageous. Modeling behaviors in a workplace setting are designed to provide examples to imitate which then may be used by the learners to develop even more effective behavioral approaches. This may be the most desirable learning method when the skill to be learned is subject to multiple situational or interpersonal variables as in the cross-domain application of learning, from work to home.

Management practitioners encourage coaching as a method of positive reinforcement in the learning process. A limited experimental study on coaching effectiveness showed that those who were coached (vs. no coaching at all) reported a significantly higher level of outcome expectancy and self-efficacy beliefs (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2006). Bandura also asserted that learning is a constant process that does not require reinforcement concluding that "observational learning requires neither overt responding nor reinforcement" (Bandura, 1977). This leads us to question the necessity of external coaching reinforcement in the learning process.

While modeling and reinforcement work effectively in an organizational setting, we need to further explore how cross-domain learning can be fostered when there is no apparent modeling or reinforcement mechanism in the home environment. The HomeAdvantage educational design offers practical education in home management with the goal of helping people gain professionalism in their approach to the work of the home that will result in the application of skills from one domain to another. This model can be more systematically tested to determine how well mentoring and coaching can serve as effective learning approaches leading to sustainable knowledge transfer and consequent skill development.

Challenges to Transferring Skills from Work to Home—Professionalizing Housework

In the industrialized world there are three specific challenges for transferring skills and competencies from work to home. These include stress, the fundamental differences in the nature of the work and the current social value placed on the work of the home. These challenges can become practical obstacles to implementing learning approaches aimed at professionalizing housework.

Stress is a salient factor influencing human effectiveness in any domain. Typical work-related stressors stem from role incongruence, task control, social interactions and physical qualities. Various combinations of these can challenge an individual's ability to manage the work of the home. The sense of skill incompetence described above can contribute to one's feeling of role incongruence resulting in the stress of feeling that one's abilities do not match the expectations or requirements of caring for the home. Similarly, lack of practical knowledge can contribute to a perceived lack of control over the task at hand. The natural demands or expectations of family members may serve as a social stressor while the constraints posed by limited material or financial resources can add other levels of stress that threaten the sustainability of the human resources in the home environment.

In the previous section we noted that motivation and incentive is a property of successful knowledge transfer (Argote, McEvily & Reagans 2003). The nature of work at home in contrast to paid employment also frames our understanding and approach to household work. Time also plays a key role in an attempt to recognize the stress of caring for the home. The more time-sensitive or urgent the task, the greater is the stress involved.

Consider the nature of paid work tasks—typically our paid work is linear, project oriented or based on discretely identified goals. No previous literature has been found that supports this premise, but a practical observation of work highlights distinctions in the nature of paid work tasks and household tasks. In the workplace our tasks consistently have an end in sight. Perhaps that end is a finite ending to a project or accomplishment or that end is the end of the necessary working hours. With that end, either in terms of time or accomplishment comes varying forms of approval and a satisfying sense of completion.

Contrast this description of paid work outside the home with many household tasks—the stuff of daily living is typically cyclical, not linear. Eating, sleeping, clothing ourselves and our families—many of the tasks related to household work are repeated day after day. In the home setting, care for these most basic needs cannot be fully outsourced to others. The care for these repeated tasks knows no scheduled time limit. Along with the repeated nature of these tasks comes the time sensitive need to get the task done—meal preparation must be done daily, children need to be picked up at school at a certain time day after day, eventually the laundry must be done so that we have clean clothing to wear. The time-sensitive nature of this kind of work brings with it an increased level of stress.

The cyclical nature of household work also does not lend itself to accolades and the sense of project accomplishment found in the workplace. The typical forms of workplace motivation—financial compensation and praise—are not found in the household setting. The many home-related responsibilities that fill the day are significant and yet often go unacknowledged and certainly seem less glamorous than the accomplishment of a project on the job. This lack of external positive reinforcement means that the human energy needed to sustain the work of the home over time

must arise from other sources, motivations more aligned with the basic, holistic needs of the family than the economic motivators of the workplace.

Social perceptions of household work can also challenge the success of transference of skills from work to home. Our economies place significant emphasis on public, paid professional accomplishment. The work of homemaking is now seen in some social settings as a “necessary evil”, something to be finished as quickly as possible. It can also be mistakenly viewed as a type of work that should be “natural” and not something deserving of true education and knowledge building. A full analysis of the nature of housework and a clear explanation of the many competencies needed for effective home management will be an eye-opening first step to drawing research and educational attention to this important domain of human sustainability.

Conclusion

This paper points to at least three next steps towards improved education for professionalizing housework leading to sustainable human resources within the household. First, a more in-depth analysis of the knowledge and competencies of housework today needs to be undertaken. This analysis should highlight the commonalities and distinctions between paid professional work and household labor. Next, after identifying and articulating the nature of homemaking competencies, accessible educational approaches can be consistently implemented. These should begin by building on the existing knowledge applied to other domains and seeking ways to transfer that knowledge from the outside work to the home domain.

Individuals will likely be more motivated to engage in competency development when they understand the true value and impact of household work. Viewing this work from the perspective of sustainable human resources and its consequences for individual and family happiness can serve as a valuable motivator prompting homemakers to look at increasing their professional preparation for developing the many competencies inherent in housework. When the motivation for knowledge transfer is present we can begin to test the most effective approaches for educating for home management. Taking into account the types of knowledge needed and drawing on organizational learning theory we can craft creative educational approaches that can help individuals transfer knowledge and skills used in their work lives to their home management efforts.

Effective housework involves real skill sets, not wholly dissimilar to those employed in the workplace. Education and coaching in the transference of management, interpersonal and practical skills in the home environment encourages people to recognize the professional nature of household work thereby raising the perceived value of that work. Just as we must learn and develop expertise in other domains of life, effective home management requires a certain level of individual education and growth. Recognizing and labeling the challenges inherent in professionalizing housework is a critical step in the human resource development needed for more sustainable living in the home.

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