



## WORKPLACE 'FAMILY' CAN BE CHALLENGING

BY ELEANOR BLOXHAM

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," Leo Tolstoy writes in *Anna Karenina*.

Well aware of the human desire for belonging, employers can use the hook of happy families to entice job applicants, often for low pay.

In March, a look at ads using the family lure included one for Giant Eagle cashiers that read: "At Giant Eagle Inc., we're more than just food, fuel, and convenience. We're one giant family of diverse and talented Team Members."

Another job opportunity explained that everyone at the company begins as a bookseller and asked, "Are you ready to join the Half Price Books family?"

Cheryl's Cookies chose lofty rhetoric, entreating would-be appliers: "Here at Cheryl's Cookies customers get to know us by name, fellow associates become fast friends... join our Team and Welcome to the Cheryl's Family. Never did work taste so sweet."

Such Norman Rockwell scenes can create a saccharine frosting that contrasts with the reality of more difficult-to-swallow slices of family life. And business, apparently, is not immune to exploiting Rockwell-like imagery to attract new hires.

Is it false advertising?

In March, Giant Eagle's rating by employees on Glassdoor was 3.5 out of 5 (being best) with starting salaries for cashiers reported at \$10/hour. At Half Price Books, the Glassdoor rating was 3.1 with starting pay for booksellers at \$11/hour. And Cheryl's Cookies garnered a 3.7 with starting pay as low as \$8/hour for a hostess.

These are hardly allowances sufficient to live on, raise a family of one's own, or achieve a measure of financial, food, or housing security. Fight for \$15, anyone?

At times, workplaces, to their detriment, mimic outmoded models of family life far too literally.

Unlike the fluidity in real happy families today, male heads of large corporations persist, with male heirs in sales and operational executive positions, and a high-level woman (or two) in a supporting role, managing an internal staff function like human resources, legal, or finance, for example.

The Anna Karenina principle, a term employed by UCLA geography professor Jared Diamond in *Guns,*

*Germes, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, suggests there can be numerous causes of failure in multifaceted endeavors, and narrow paths to success that require doing many things right.

In a paper called "The Anna Karenina principle: A concept for the explanation of success in science," Lutz Bornmann, of the Max Planck Society, and Werner Marx, of the Max Planck Institute for Solid State Research, argue that happy families share similar criteria, namely, "good health of all family members, acceptable financial security, and mutual affection." And the authors propose similar prerequisites are needed for the work of science and research to thrive, including grant funding, publication, and citation.

Scarcity of money and opportunities for recognition can impede progress in many spheres. Certainly, most workers would agree that for them, pay, future prospects, and acknowledgement are among the many critical elements key to happiness at work.



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