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Working as a single parent in an SME: balancing work expectations and family life

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Case summary

This real-life case explores the resignation of Julia Schneider, a single parent employee, which reveals deeper tensions between work expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and organisational practices at Valent Hausverwaltung, a resource-constrained small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) in Germany. While the company takes pride in its responsiveness and dedication to client service, its informal work arrangements and constant availability expectations create a managerial dilemma: how to sustain service reliability and operational efficiency while accommodating employees with primary caregiving responsibilities. Moving beyond an individual situation, the case illustrates how work–life balance is translated in SMEs, where informal practices often substitute for formal policies. It highlights issues of fairness and inclusion, while emphasising the agency and constraints of small firms in shaping everyday work practices. The case invites learners to analyse an urgent managerial dilemma involving job design and work expectations in relation to employee work–life balance.

1. A reliable business meets a quiet crisis

Valent Hausverwaltung (further in the text as Valent) had built its reputation on one promise: someone always picks up the phone. This commitment ensured that no question went unanswered and no concern was overlooked, fostering trust and reliability among those they served. For a

small, respected property management firm in Germany with fewer than ten employees, reliability was its competitive advantage. Clients trusted Valent to handle tenant communication, rent collection, maintenance coordination, and regulatory compliance – often at short notice and outside standard working hours. Lean and efficient, the company prided itself on responsiveness and personal service. Over time, this commitment to being ‘always on’ shaped not only how Valent worked, but also what it expected from its employees.

Yet beneath this success, a challenge had begun to surface. Several employees with primarily caregiving responsibilities, particularly single parents, were struggling to keep pace with the demands of the job. While the company described its working hours as flexible, in practice, they were highly unpredictable. Late-night tenant complaints, emergency plumbing issues, and last-minute viewings were part of daily operations. Declining late client calls or rescheduling meetings for family reasons was technically acceptable, yet often accompanied by subtle signals of inconvenience or disappointment, reinforcing expectations of constant availability.

At Valent, flexibility existed informally rather than by design. Without any formal HR structures and collective discussions, employees were expected to ‘make it work’ when unexpected client issues arose, and those who stayed late or responded outside working hours were often praised for their commitment. Staff care-related constraints were typically discussed privately and treated as individual circumstances, rather than as signals that work expectations themselves might need to be reconsidered.

For employees without reliable caregiving support, meeting these expectations required constant negotiation between professional responsibility and family obligations. This issue became evident when Julia Schneider,¹ a dedicated employee who had been with Valent for six years, submitted her resignation. She spoke calmly to her manager, though her eyes revealed her exhaustion – fatigue was unmistakable. ‘It’s not the work,’ she told her manager. ‘I just can’t be in two places at once anymore.’

Her decision surprised the team. Julia Schneider managed several of the company’s key accounts and was highly valued by clients for her reliability and problem-solving skills. At the time Julia joined Valent, her caregiving responsibilities were manageable within the company’s work expectations; however, over the following years, she became the primary

caregiver for her child, which increased the intensity and unpredictability of these responsibilities.

Her departure triggered the first serious internal discussion about working conditions that had long been framed as individual challenges rather than organisational ones. For the first time, Joe Weber,¹ the company's founder and manager, recognised that what had been framed as personal challenges were organisational issues arising from constant availability expectations that pushed employee caregivers out of the firm.

2. Caught between rules and real life

Joe, the company's founder and manager of Valent, often remarked, 'I built this business with two phones and no weekends.' The phrase reflected more than personal dedication and entrepreneurial devotion. It captured a way of working shaped by long hours, constant availability, and a belief that reliability was earned through sacrifice. These values resonated strongly with traditions often associated with German small businesses, where discipline, professionalism, and high service standards were deeply ingrained.

Yet both the workforce and the broader social context had changed. Labour shortages, an ageing population, and a declining birth rate were reshaping employment relations across Germany and the wider European labour market. Existing labour shortages were further expected to intensify by rapid population ageing, as the working-age population was expected to shrink by about 9 per cent over the next decade (OECD, 2025). At the same time, across Europe, the expectations around work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities were becoming more visible, particularly in small firms where informal practices often substituted for formal policies (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012). For Valent, these shifts raised difficult questions about how much flexibility could be offered to employees with primary caregiving responsibilities, such as adjusted working hours, reduced availability outside standard times, or task reallocation, without affecting client service or overburdening other team members.

National data showed that this problem was not unique to Valent. In 2023, Germany's Ministry for Family Affairs reported that the country had approximately 1.7 million single parents, around 90 per cent of whom were women, and that single-parent households faced disproportionate employment stress, heightened risks of poverty (Hertie School, 2023,

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June 14; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2023). While these figures underscored the structural challenges faced by single mothers, they also obscured a smaller but significant group: single fathers, who accounted for roughly 10 per cent of single parents and often encountered similar constraints, yet received far less attention in workplace discussions.

At Valent, the issue was not framed explicitly in gendered terms. Instead, it revolved around care responsibilities and the realities of being the primary caregiver without reliable backup. Some employees privately noted that debates over flexibility tended to focus on mothers, while others worried that acknowledging caregiving needs more broadly might open the door to claims of unfairness. 'If we start making exceptions,' one colleague asked during an informal conversation, 'how do we explain that to the rest of the team when clients still expect the same response times?'

European policy developments added another layer of complexity. Over the past decade, the European Union has introduced initiatives such as the EU Work–Life Balance Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and funding programmes including EU4Health and the European Social Fund Plus to support working parents and caregivers (European Commission, 2017; European Commission, 2019; European Commission, 2021). At the EU level, work–life balance was increasingly viewed not only as a labour market issue, but also as a public health concern. The EU4Health programme emphasised the importance of healthy working conditions, mental well-being, and the prevention of work-related stress and burnout, particularly for workers with caregiving responsibilities (European Commission, 2023). However, while these policy frameworks formally applied to organisations of all sizes, implementing them often required established HR processes and administrative capacity. Small enterprises such as Valent may not have had these resources and therefore relied more on informal arrangements when applying work–life balance principles in daily operations.

3. From insight to decision: the dilemma

Joe, Valent's manager, openly reflected on the gap between policy commitments to work–life balance and the everyday realities of implementing flexibility during recent cross-sector discussions on inclusive work practices (DEI4SME Hackathon, 2024). These conversations highlighted a recurring issue: in many small firms, like Valent, flexibility was

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acknowledged in principle but rarely translated into predictable working hours, support during childcare emergencies, or consistent managerial backing. As a result, employee resignations might have signalled not individual failure, but a broader misalignment between work expectations and the realities of the caregiving workforce.

For Valent, these insights sharpened an already pressing concern. The company's business model relied on high responsiveness, client trust, and a small team managing multiple responsibilities. At the same time, the departure of experienced employees made clear that existing ways of working were becoming increasingly difficult to sustain for those with caregiving responsibilities, i.e., single mothers, single fathers, or other primary caregivers.

Through discussions within his professional network, Joe realised that similar challenges were emerging across other small firms. A broader pattern became visible: many workplace expectations remained shaped by outdated 'ideal worker' assumptions, such as constant availability and the absence of care obligations. What resonated most was not blame, but recognition. Managers and business owners acknowledged their own fatigue and the personal costs of continually 'going the extra mile.' The issue was no longer only about supporting caregivers, but about questioning work norms that affected the entire workforce.

These reflections increased Valent's awareness of the problem, but they did not offer a ready solution. Julia's resignation, following six years of employment, made visible how changing caregiving responsibilities could disrupt an employment relationship that had once worked well for both sides. At the same time, limited resources and the nature of the business constrained the company's options. Valent, therefore, faced a critical managerial decision: whether – and how – it could rethink job design and work expectations to better support employees with caregiving responsibilities, as well as the well-being of everyone in the firm, without undermining client service, perceptions of fairness within the team, or the core values on which the business had been built.

Questions for reflection

1. Describe how Valent operates as a service business. What are the key features of its way of working, and how do these features both

- enable and constrain employees' ability to achieve work–life balance, particularly those with primary caregiving responsibilities?
2. Which everyday expectations, cultural norms, or management practices at Valent shaped how work was organised and evaluated? How might these practices have limited the company's ability to recognise the need for more flexible working arrangements for employees with caregiving responsibilities, and how can this situation be interpreted through the lens of organisational justice?
 3. How can Julia's employment journey – from joining Valent to leaving the firm – be understood through changes in fit between the employee and the organisation over time?
 4. In the context of Valent, to what extent can a resource-constrained SME adapt jobs and work practices to employees' changing life circumstances without undermining business viability?
 5. Why do EU work–life balance policies, despite formal legal compliance, sometimes fail to translate into everyday inclusive practices at the organisational level?

Note

1. This teaching case is based on a real-life situation. In accordance with confidentiality requirements, all names have been changed, and certain elements have been fictionalised for teaching purposes.

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