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Egg-freezing is latest talking point in Valley diversity debate

Hannah Kuchler in San Francisco and Emma Jacobs in London [Author alerts](#)

Free lunch, free laundry and now free egg-freezing. Apple and Facebook have added oocyte cryopreservation – or freezing of women’s eggs – to the long list of benefits offered by the two Silicon Valley technology companies.

The revelation this week that the two companies will pay tens of thousands of dollars towards the cost of putting female employees’ fertility on ice is just the latest talking point in a heated debate about the lack of women working in Silicon Valley.

It also came a week after Satya Nadella, [Microsoft](#) chief executive, generated a firestorm of criticism when he told an event for female software engineers that women should not ask for a raise – only to backtrack furiously within hours.

Apple intends to extend benefits to include the freezing of eggs at the start of next year, and points out that it already supports many other options for women, including adoption assistance.

Facebook, meanwhile, added egg-freezing to its list of “surrogacy benefits” when employees began asking for them at the start of the year. The company also offers four months paid maternity and paternity leave and a \$4,000 “baby cash” gift for each child born or adopted.

Was the latest move by two of the world’s biggest companies a way of using technology to exert added pressure on women to delay child rearing to focus on their career or an extra perk from good employers?

Silicon Valley’s diversity problem

Technology companies remain male dominated. After coming under pressure to release statistics about their ethnic and gender make-up, most revealed that they have about 30 per cent female employees, with roughly 15 per cent in the often higher paid and higher prestige technical roles.

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook and author of *Lean In*, which described the challenge of making motherhood and career work, has spoken of the need for companies to become more diverse.

Vivek Wadhwa, a lecturer at Stanford University and co-author of *Innovating Women*, a recent book on the challenges faced by women in tech, has been scathing of the technology industry’s lack of women in senior positions. He believes the egg-freezing offer shows the “dysfunctional nature of Silicon Valley”.

Mr Wadhwa believes this is reflected in the types of benefits technology companies have traditionally offered and their approach to recruiting and retaining staff. “All the benefits are guys-orientated,” he says. “The games rooms, all the food you can eat, it is all male bonding rituals that are not geared towards women and families. The assumption is you are young and male and they will do whatever they can do to keep you happy there.”

Others believe the companies are could send out a signal that career success and motherhood are not compatible.

Jennifer Sabatini Fraone, associate director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family, calls the offer a “mixed bag”.

She believes it is a positive step that companies are capitalising on the latest technology to create more choices for women. “Some women want to prioritise their careers and see this as a generous offer and might help to attract talented workers,” she says.

But she worries that it reinforces the feeling that women have to make a choice between career and family. Instead, tech companies should also work harder to change their corporate culture so that individuals are supported to have a life they can enjoy outside of work.

“I don’t want women to feel they are compelled to put off a family in order to have a career,” she says.

Society is changing

Freezing eggs was once used mainly by young female cancer patients trying to preserve their fertility before undergoing chemotherapy.

Increasingly, however, it is being used for “social reasons”, delaying families for work or because we are living longer.

Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice at London Business School, sees egg-freezing as a rational response to the fact that we are now expected to live longer. “If you extend life, everything gets elongated. We will work longer,” she says. “The only thing that doesn’t change is women’s fertility.”

In a perfect world, she suggests, women would be able to postpone their child-rearing until their career is established. Women who come out of the workforce to have a family for extended periods, she points out, find it hard to revive their careers.

The number of women looking to freeze their eggs has risen in the last couple of years, according to Lynn Westphal, associate professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Stanford University Medical Center.

For many – especially in the US tech industry – paying for the procedure is simply an extension of the methods women already have when they plan for having a child.

Brigitte Adams, a 42-year-old marketing executive who founded eggsurance.com, a site which celebrates the process, compares the technology to the invention of the pill – only a lot more expensive.

She had her eggs frozen when she was 38 and is thinking about using them soon – even though she probably has only about a 20 per cent chance of having a child. “That 20 per cent chance is more than if I had done nothing,” she says.

TD Lowe, founder of EnovationNation, a start-up based in Palo Alto, says she would like to offer her employees the option – and have it herself.

“I don’t want to feel pressured to race to get married now. I would love to have the alternative to do it on my own timeline,” she says.

Employer-employee relationship

The debate also hinges on how people view their employers’ involvement in their personal lives.

Max Levchin, co-founder of PayPal who launched fertility app Glow, which taps into the increasing willingness of consumers to track their health data, says companies are already heavily involved in people’s family lives. He points to the provision of maternity leave, for example.

“Would you want to work for a company if they expected you to be back at your desk in two weeks?” he said.

Glow sells its service to Silicon Valley companies including digital organising app Evernote and to Eventbrite, an online ticket marketplace. This entails a 10-month programme, during which a woman’s data are monitored with the intention of maximising the possibility of becoming pregnant. The service is paid for by the company but employers do not know which employees are taking advantage of it until they have completed the course and the bill lands. This is a mechanism for preventing a company from, say, denying a promotion to a woman because she is trying to have a baby.

Allyson Stewart-Allen, chief executive at International Marketing Partners, advises European companies on how to expand to the US. She detects a difference between the reaction of Americans and Europeans to the egg-freezing perk. This is largely rooted in differences between healthcare systems and job security.

In the US, where health insurance is typically provided by the employer and a key tool for recruiting and retaining staff, this relationship often differs from attitudes in countries with a strong welfare state and national health system, such as the UK.

“For young American women, a long-term benefit like this might feel like a proxy for job security. Any health offerings are significant incentives due to the huge cost of healthcare in the US.”

Silicon Valley employees are far more likely to have faith in the relatively new technology of egg-freezing. “People who work for technology companies see technology as progress. Egg-freezing is just another form of technology,” Ms Stewart-Allen adds.

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