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Issues in the Corporate Workplace

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Work force supply and demand has catapulted “women’s issues” to the forefront of the business agenda. These issues will continue to be the poor stepsisters of other corporate needs, however, unless they are recognized as broad-based work force issues of the 1990s. The dynamics of women’s entrance into the labor market have dramatically changed the structure of the family and consequently the needs of both men and women in the business community. The corporate challenge for the next decade will be to solve creatively the work/family puzzle and establish an environment that supports the full utilization of women in business.

Women’s issues have finally gained the attention of the business community, owing in large part to the increasing demand for a highly skilled professional work force and the decreasing availability of qualified individuals. A variety of subjects have been defined as “women’s issues,” ranging from affordable quality day care, flexible work schedules, parental leave, and pay equity to less tangible problems of career growth and derailment, balancing family and career pressures, and the differing expectations of women in business.

These topics have gained constant exposure in the media. They have been discussed in women’s magazines, daytime talk shows, psychological journals, scholarly publications, and newsmagazines. They have been identified, studied, analyzed, dissected, and defined seemingly to no avail, if the goal is a solution, which it clearly must be if we are to ensure a work force that will successfully carry business into the twenty-first century and beyond within a society that has the foresight to invest in its own future and the future of its children.

Demographics show that women are entering and will continue to enter the work force in increasing numbers. The demand for employment in New England is projected to increase by 450,000 new jobs by the year 2000. At the same time, the available work force

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will expand by only 130,000 people.¹ During the 1960s and 1970s women accounted for approximately 60 percent of the work force expansion² and are expected to comprise more than 65 percent in the 1990s.³ Estimates indicate that this trend will continue, and women will account for two thirds of the work force expansion over the next decade, with white males making up only 15 percent.⁴ Businesses will be forced to recruit aggressively and to install women at all levels of responsibility if they wish to expand or even maintain performance standards.

Companies that ignore this change will be incapable of moving forward effectively into the 1990s because they will be unable to attract and retain the men and women necessary to support their operations.

Creatively addressing workplace issues of the next decade will not be easily accomplished. In fact, it is a formidable task for two very different reasons. The first is the underlying belief that these concerns have an impact only on women. Most business leaders today have not recognized, much less accepted, the truth that these issues have a serious impact on women *and* men in business. Issues traditionally categorized as pertaining purely to women are much broader in scope and effect. The historic roles of men and women within the family, and consequently within society and business, have undergone drastic changes: dual-income families, which account for 50 percent of all families today,⁵ are projected to go as high as 75 percent in the year 2000.⁶

The second stumbling block is the belief that one clear-cut proven solution must be identified before any action can be taken. A single answer to the problems cannot and will not be found because it doesn't exist. There are a variety of issues in the workplace that require a variety of responses. They range from specific questions about who will mind the children and at what cost to complex problems encountered when men and women try to reverse the cumulative effects of a lifetime of socialization. However, the core issues are the full utilization of women in business and the effect of women's entry into the work force on the fabric of the family and society.

The solution must be a combination of programs tailored to fit the culture of the organization while addressing changing employee needs. Developing the most effective combination of programs is like solving a puzzle. It will no doubt entail trial and error but should consist of four integral and interrelated pieces: the recognition that business issues affect men and women alike; a combination of benefits designed to address basic employee needs and alleviate the burden imposed by time constraints; a culture that provides an environment of understanding and support; and an enlightened senior management that has mastered the art of cross-gender mentoring.

Business Issues Affect Men and Women

The first step in solving any problem is identifying and understanding its nature — a simple concept, but in this instance a difficult undertaking. The problem is that the majority of policymaking executives in business are products of a society that no longer exists; thus, they have difficulty accepting the fundamental changes affecting the current work force. Most top executives, like their predecessors, grew up in an age when men and women clearly fulfilled different functions. Men entered the work force to provide for themselves and their families; women remained at home to care for the house and children.

In the 1930s, when women found jobs to put bread on the table, and in the 1940s, when their participation was necessary to empower the military-industrial complex, it was assumed that as conditions returned to normal they would return gratefully to their place in

the home. For the most part, they did, but during the Depression and World War II women demonstrated their ability to manage multiple roles successfully.

In the traditional family of the 1950s and the 1960s, there was little cause to believe that the framework of society which had existed for the last hundred years would change in any substantial way over the next century. There was also little cause to doubt that one income would support the reasonable needs of a family.

A number of forces brought about the decisive changes that have occurred in society over the last two decades, but the most crucial factor has been economic. Most families can no longer expect to maintain a satisfactory style of life on one income. Consequently, women seek employment either to ensure their family's lifestyle or, in many instances, as the sole supporter of the family.

As more wives enter the work force, husbands are called upon to assume greater responsibility for maintaining the home and raising children. While economic realities play a major part in the changing roles of women and men, there is also a growing desire on the part of many men to participate in child rearing regardless of economics. Today a growing number of fathers regularly play an active part in childbirth, bonding, and nurturing, activities almost unheard of two decades ago.

Many executives still have 1950s families. Typically, they are men who need not concern themselves with the day-to-day responsibilities of running a home but are free to devote the majority of their energy to business. They don't worry about planning meals, picking up the laundry, cleaning house, arranging social functions, monitoring the children's education, and ensuring that their offspring get to baseball, ballet, the doctor, the dentist, school, day care, and safely home again.

Men and women in today's labor force are learning to share equally the burdens and rewards of economically and emotionally supporting and maintaining the family. Women are realizing great satisfaction in succeeding in the working world, and men are finding equal rewards in mastering the arts of cooking and reading bedtime stories to their children.

As a logical result of this shift in roles, the issues for yesterday's women have become those of many of today's men as well. The investment business makes in finding a solution will have an impact on a broad segment of the population, men and women alike. The knowledge that these are problems faced by a large proportion of the work force and not limited to young, working women enables the business community to justify the expense and resources necessary to develop solutions.

Benefit Programs

The second piece of the puzzle is designing work schedules and benefits to meet the basic needs of employees. The time and effort required to juggle the responsibilities of work and family and the availability of adequate and affordable day care are specific tangible problems that can be addressed in a variety of ways. There is no one correct program for all companies, but many avenues can be explored in developing an appropriate combination of programs and benefits to alleviate these burdens. When assessing the relative value of these programs, companies should evaluate expense, financial return, and parity as well as the "cultural fit."

Modified Work Schedules

Parental leave, flexible work schedules, and flextime allow employees to juggle the changing demands of their families and their jobs. Flexible work schedules, including job

sharing and working at home, enable employees to remain in the work force on a part-time basis. This minimizes the time they must spend away from work while raising a family.

The cost in management time and lost productivity of implementing parental leave and flexible work schedules is more than justified when compared with the spiraling costs of replacing parents who choose not to return to full-time employment immediately after childbirth. Consider that 54 percent of all new entrants into the work force in the next ten years will be women of childbearing age,⁷ 90 percent of whom will become pregnant during the course of their employment.⁸ Then consider the expense of recruiting and training replacements for 49 percent of these new entrants only to have the cycle begin again.

While flexible work schedules may not be a viable long-term option in a career path to upper management, they provide a vehicle for continued work force participation while raising a young family. Rather than stopping a career, they can provide a brief hiatus in the climb.

Another option is flextime, which allows people to alter work schedules as long as they meet the company's full-time requirements. This program gives employees the freedom to take care of personal business without requiring time off from work. It also decreases day-care costs by minimizing the time both parents must be away from the home. The cost of implementing flextime is usually limited to the additional supervision necessary to manage the program. The payback is seen in substantial reduction in absenteeism, in increased morale, and as an effective recruiting tool. Although it may not be appropriate for all positions, flextime can be designed in a number of different ways and tailored to fit specific business environments.⁹

Day-care Assistance Programs

Day-care assistance is one of the most controversial solutions available. The debate ranges from the types and cost of assistance to the more philosophical issues of business's role in the family and the equity of a benefit that serves a limited employee population.

Day-care assistance programs are expensive, but companies must weigh the cost of implementation against the cost of ignoring employee needs. It is expected that 655,000 new jobs will be created in New England by 1995,¹⁰ but only 188,000 eighteen-year-olds will enter the work force.¹¹ Research commissioned by the Massachusetts Office for Children shows that approximately 51,000 women would either enter the work force or increase their number of working hours if they had affordable day care.¹² Day-care assistance programs are effective recruitment tools, especially with the growing competition for labor, and have a substantial impact on employee retention.

There are a variety of assistance options to consider, the most common being information and referral. A typical program consists of general information about day-care alternatives and listings by geographic area of licensed day-care facilities. Information and referral services can be incorporated easily in full assistance programs that service the total employee population. While this is a valuable resource, the costs can be substantial, and most of the information is already available through a combination of local telephone listings, newspapers, and state agencies.

On-site day care and affiliation with specific day-care facilities are also costly, but the benefits are substantial for employees with children aged one to four years and companies with a localized work force. On the downside, the needs of employees with school-age children and employers with multiple locations are not well serviced. Consequently, this benefit reaches a limited population.

The tax-free dependent-care deduction included in Section 125 of the Internal Revenue Code was a broad-based benefit allowing employees to save up to 30 percent on dependent-care expenses based on their individual tax rate. This, coupled with the direct tax reduction for child-care benefits, provided a significant saving. However, legislation substantially weakened the benefit by reducing the allowable pretax deduction to \$5,000 per year and disallowing the direct reduction of taxes if dependent care is reimbursed on a pretax basis.¹³ Even with these limitations, there is a clear benefit to the employee, and the cost to businesses is limited to program management.

Voucher programs have the broadest appeal for employees and businesses, and assistance need not be limited to employees with preschool children. The full gamut of day-care options can be supported, and there is no cap to the number and locations of work sites serviced by the benefit. The costs of voucher programs are driven by the size of the subsidy and the utilization of the program. In addition, the subsidy amount can be linked to a sliding scale of base salary to target the benefit toward those with the greatest need. Finally, voucher programs allow families to make their own day-care choices and leave business out of the decision process.

While each day-care option serves a growing need in the workplace, the benefit is still limited to parents of young children. By incorporating day-care assistance into a flexible benefit plan, the equity issue is resolved. Flexible or cafeteria benefits programs enable employees to direct their benefit dollars to meet individual needs. Thus those with young children can channel a portion of their allotment to child care rather than other options, and those without children can direct the subsidy toward their greatest need.

The second part of the answer is a combination of benefits designed to fit the organization's culture while offering employees flexibility to meet individual needs. The challenge facing companies is identifying the issues that have the most dramatic influence on performance and productivity and therefore the greatest return on investment. Society is in the midst of change; companies that don't move quickly to meet these changes will be left without the fuel to continue operating effectively through the next decade.

Programs devised to address child care and work versus family tug-of-war are merely the beginning of a solution. While they will alleviate basic work force needs and attract the talent necessary to drive business into the future, they will do little to address the complex issues impeding realization of individual employee potential.

Corporate Culture

The third piece of the puzzle is establishing a corporate culture that can respond to the guilt and stress experienced by both men and women that results from the profound social transformation of the last two decades. The children of the 1950s and 1960s must come to grips with a lifestyle that is vastly different from the one in which they were raised. And business has a crucial investment in their success.

Society was far more rigid thirty years ago, when the model family was ruled by working fathers and their wives. Men were defined by their jobs as doctors, engineers, truck drivers, lawyers, soldiers, generals, and even presidents. Women were defined by their relationships as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and occasionally as nurses, teachers, secretaries, or waitresses. Any deviation from this stereotype was considered unusual.

This prototypical family was the focus of the first elementary school readers about Dick and Jane, the subject of successful television programming, and the wellspring of all that

was good and wholesome in America. Even individuals who did not experience this ideal in their own lives knew that it was the ultimate goal and the avenue to continued security.

For most this avenue is gone! In its place is a vastly different map of alternative lifestyles and competing demands. Today the “ideal” family of the 1950s accounts for fewer than 39 percent of families and will account for fewer than 25 percent by the next decade.¹⁴ The pervasive changes of the last twenty years have altered the framework of the family and, as a result, our own perceptions of self. The extensive transformation of the family has caused the redefinition of women’s roles, which in turn has driven the redefinition of men’s.

Women as breadwinners must forsake substantial time and energy previously focused on caring for home and family. In turn, men must devote far more time to the family at the expense of overriding devotion to the job; the stress and guilt incumbent in this role reversal is often overwhelming for both parties.

The guilt experienced by men and women may take different forms, but it arises from the same source — feelings of inadequacy and apprehension that they will fail in their attempt to juggle home and career. If they do not meet family needs, they are faced with the prospect of divorce and the emotional impairment of their children. If they do not meet job requirements, they will be unable to provide adequate financial support. These fears may seem exaggerated, but consider the statistics: 50 percent of marriages end in divorce;¹⁵ the media are awash with speculation about the adverse effect of working mothers on the emotional well-being of their children. But look at these hard facts on the rise in the cost of living within a twenty-year period.

In 1969 a family of four was considered to be in the middle class if its annual income fell between \$6,680 and \$18,704; 60 percent of the population fit into that category. In 1986, the same family needed an annual income of \$20,000 to \$55,999 to be counted among the middle class; the families that fell into that range had fallen to 53 percent of the population.¹⁶ Also, consider that guilt often exaggerates reality, but the perception is no less real for the individual.

The stress of changing roles for women and men springs from the same source. Both are expected to play a part for which they have not been trained or rehearsed. Girls and boys of the fifties and the sixties were socialized by their parents, peers, and heroes to fit the prevailing mold. Little girls were not inaugurated on the masculine playing fields of the Little League, and little boys who wanted to play with dolls had to wait for the advent of GI Joe in the early sixties.

While the stress and guilt experienced by men is no less real than that of women, the resulting impediment to women’s success in a business environment is far greater. The guilt of neglecting family responsibilities coupled with the stress of learning to behave appropriately in a “man’s world” is often demoralizing. These circumstances coupled with a continuing disparity in salary levels probably account for the increasing incidence of women leaving the corporate world to start up their own businesses.

The derailment of women as they ascend the management ladder is not surprising, considering the internal forces that come into play. As women move higher in management, they must devote increasing energy to work, and their ability to play like the boys becomes far more critical to success.

The derailment of men is not often discussed, but the number of men turning down promotions and transfers owing to family considerations or in deference to their wives’ careers has increased. Men’s increasing absorption with family draws time and attention away from the office and causes guilt for not meeting the expectations of the workplace.

While there are no superwomen or supermen, some people have achieved a degree of internal balance that enables them to succeed and thrive in dual roles. In the final analysis, attainment of this personal symmetry must be an individual endeavor. Companies searching for solutions to the third piece of the puzzle should recognize the individual nature of these concerns and the huge investment firms have in the outcome.

By enabling employees to achieve the balance necessary to succeed, business will reap the benefits of a work force empowered to achieve its full potential and loyal to the company that supports its success. To meet this end, the culture of a company is crucial to the solution.

Business, through education, can create an environment that understands and accepts the demands placed on employees. The educational/awareness process can take the form of structured training programs, less structured focus groups, or informal one-on-one discussion. To be effective, the education should be delivered in a format that fits comfortably with the company's culture and meets two critical objectives: the education of management about the nature of the problem and creating an environment that recognizes employee concerns as valid.

Heightened awareness of the work/family internal tug-of-war will enable management to assist employees in finding the personal balance necessary for success. This awareness does not come easily to today's executives because most have not had to live through these problems. Although they will never gain the knowledge born of experience, they can gain a better understanding of the issues by encouraging open discussion and listening without prejudice.

Cross-gender Mentoring

The fourth piece of the puzzle is critical to enlarging and developing the pool of potential business leaders. Mentoring is an informal process in which senior executives identify employees with potential to assume leadership roles in the future. Such fast-track candidates are groomed by the executives and receive increased personal attention and visibility from their involvement with senior management. An integral part of the grooming process is conducted in a social framework outside the business environment. For example, it is often conducted on the golf course, over drinks and dinner, or at the gym. By providing an opportunity to explore personal and business philosophy, these relationships are vital in building the "fit" necessary for successful management teams. However, the nature of the relationships serves to preclude women and draw men away from personal or family involvement.

Since most business leaders are men who were socialized in the 1950s, they are predisposed to choose up-and-coming executives from their own ranks. As a result, a preponderance of men have received the benefit of this consideration. Women must be identified and included in this "rite of passage," but it will succeed only if the forum is modified to suit the needs of our changing work force. In addition, as men's involvement in the family increases, their ability and desire to spend evenings and weekends with professional associates necessarily decreases. As a result, the established mentoring model appeals to a dwindling population. Without change to support the full utilization of women and the evolving needs of men, business will severely limit the pool from which it can draw talented future executives.

A more subtle problem with including women in the mentoring process is the difficulty that men and women have in developing close professional relationships. The encum-

branch of past socialization and sexual stereotyping stands in the way. Just as men view women as mothers, wives, and daughters, women have been trained to view themselves in supporting roles. Breaking out of the stereotype with boss or subordinates is equally difficult and necessary to success. Women will not be comfortable as executives as long as they and the men around them perceive their sexual roles as primary.

Companies can play an important role in breaking down sexual stereotypes by placing women in formal and informal management-development programs. To ensure success, deliberate inclusion of talented women on the fast track should begin with and be supported fully by senior management. If the tone is set firmly at the top of the corporate house, succeeding levels of management will be more willing to accept and support women throughout the structure. In addition, senior executives can legitimate male/female professional relationships by actively participating in them and refusing to tolerate overt or covert sexual innuendo.

The core issue then is the full utilization of women in business, an issue of clear, overriding concern to both the men and women of our business world, our society, and our time. Companies cannot afford to walk away from the issues; only their management can put together the pieces of the puzzle necessary for effective resolution.

History shows us that many of these issues will be resolved through the natural evolution of society. Today's children will probably not experience the same pressures that burden their parents because they are growing up in the social structure of the future. But there is no time to wait for society to catch up with itself. The next generation of executives must be culled from today's work force and groomed to lead business into the future. 🐼

Notes

1. According to the Division of Employment Security (DES), the 1989 level was 3,045,800. The projected figures of 450,000 new jobs and 130,000 new workers are from both DES and Data Resources Inc., an independent demographic/economic forecaster.
2. "Working Women in New England, 1988," *U.S. Department of Labor News*, June 15, 1989.
3. *Ibid.*
4. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Projections for 1995*, Bulletin 2197, March 1984.
5. Andrew J. Cherlin, ed., *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1988).
6. *Ibid.*
7. D. M. Blau and P. K. Robins, "Fertility, Employment, and Child Care Costs: A Dynamic Analysis." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, San Francisco, April 1986.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Alternative Work Patterns," in U.S. Department of Labor, *Facts on U.S. Working Women*, Women's Bureau Fact Sheet No. 86-3, August 1986.
10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Projections for 1995*.
11. "1987 Civilian Labor Forces Participation Rates, Unemployment Rates, Employment/Population Ratios for Women (16+), U.S. and by State," Professor Andrew Sum, Northeastern Center for Labor Market Studies.

12. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Office of Human Resources, *Partnerships for Day Care: Final Report of the Governor's Day Care Partnership Initiative*, June 1987.
13. For further discussion of this topic, see Mary Jane Gibson's article in this volume.
14. "Women Almost Half of Region's Work Force," *Boston Globe*, June 16, 1989.
15. Cherlin, *The Changing American Family*.
16. *Family Economics Review* 2, 1 (1989): 20.

*It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is
our preaching.*

— Saint Francis of Assisi