



“Summary of article by Lotte Bailyn: Changing the Conditions of Work: Responding to Increasing Work Force Diversity and New Family Patterns” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. 326-329

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The Industrial Revolution ushered in a gendered division of labor, between specialists in bread winning and specialists in care taking. Although this is no longer held up publicly as the norm, women still retain primary responsibility for many caring activities in the home sphere.

More than half of all mothers with children under one are now in the paid labor force.... Today, less than 10 percent of families follow the pattern of a husband at work and a wife at home caring for the children.... [A study] has found that between two and three of every five employees are having problems managing the often conflicting demands of jobs and family life... Yet the structure of the workplace is still geared to the assumption that workers can commit all their energy and time to their employment. [188]

A potential crisis is brewing in the United States. As firms translate the need for global competitiveness into requirements for higher worker productivity, workers are under pressure to work longer and harder. The losers are the nation's children as well as other individuals (e.g., the elderly) and community organizations that have traditionally depended upon unpaid, caring labor, especially from women.

POLICY OPTIONS

A comparison with Sweden casts the U.S. situation into sharp relief. In both countries women have been encouraged to enter the formal labor force, but U.S. policies apparently assumed that this massive change would occur without causing or requiring any other adaptations. By contrast, the Swedish commitment to enabling women to have jobs was accompanied by a serious effort to change gender roles, primarily by urging men to increase their involvement with child care and other family responsibilities.

Rather than looking to the Scandinavian welfare model, U.S. policy-makers have tended to hold up Japan's example of a more participative and committed workforce -- without, however, recognizing the salience of the accompanying Japanese institutional norms, such as the support that non-working wives give to their husbands careers and families and the reciprocity of loyalty between firms and workers. Ignoring institutional context, U.S. policy has held up the ideal of "gender-neutrality," even in areas such as pregnancy leaves (by subsuming them under disability provisions) and custody decisions in divorce cases. Yet the consequences of pregnancy and motherhood, as well as of divorce, are far from gender-neutral.

Policies at the firm level have fallen into two categories. One is arrangements by employers that are designed to accommodate the family needs of workers: examples are on-site day-care or other provisions to assist workers in acquiring family services. In effect, this response attempts to ensure that employees will be able to give more time to work. This, however, is not really what is needed; instead the goal should be to allow workers to give more time to their families.

That is the goal of the second category of employer response, a category that includes flextime and flexplace, part-time and job-sharing opportunities, as well as various kinds of personal leaves. These are steps in the right direction, but they can have the wrong effect if they are introduced into an organization that continues to use visibility (how many hours an employee is on site) as a signal of its employees' commitment. Since women still feel responsible for various aspects of domestic work, they are more likely to make use of the flexible options listed above.

And as long as such a differential pattern of use exists, it can only *increase* the disadvantages that women already face in the workplace through the feminization of poverty, the wage gap, the glass ceiling. By itself flexibility superimposed on existing assumptions about the conditions of employment is not likely to change these basic facts. [192]

A number of deeply-ingrained practices of American management make women vulnerable to career depreciation if they grasp the two-edged sword of workplace flexibility. For example, they are likely to fail to get on the fast track in which "high-potential employees" are identified in the first seven to ten years of their career -- a period when women are most likely to be engaged in family concerns. As one example, a leading university instituted a personal leave provision for child care for its faculty (which would stop the tenure clock). After this had been on the books for fifteen years it was discovered that "no woman who took such a leave has ever subsequently been awarded tenure." [198]

PROPOSALS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Attempts to fix the system by imposing family policies without more general structural change poses the danger of reinforcing existing gender inequalities. The prevailing assumption is that jobs can be defined independent of the people who will fill them -- that employees can be made to fit a single, homogeneous style. The present system, indeed, "is designed to minimize the probability of special treatment for certain groups and is supported by the legal system for just that purpose." [195] However, equality in procedures does not necessarily produce a fair or equal outcome for employees in widely differing family situations.

It is essential for American employers to recognize that the workforce of the present and the future is different from that of the past. Changing demographic patterns create new kinds of diversity for which traditional management approaches are ill-prepared. Research is needed to inform employers of the family circumstances of today's workers. Such research should also illuminate the problems people meet in fitting current organizational requirements. "Identification of the demographic groups that find these requirements most difficult, and the

extent to which they are changing, would be a key indicator of where change is needed in order to help employees mesh their concerns with work and family." (198)

A variety of experiments and new approaches are already in place, upon which it may be possible to build the appropriate responses to the new needs. Both employers and employees may benefit from a redefinition of what a career is, facing the fact that it may not be a single long sweep from entry into the work-force until retirement. Instead, "'zero-based budgeting' in careers ... would involve planning for a particular career segment, perhaps of five to seven years, and then negotiating the level of commitment, the tasks, the compensation and evaluation procedures de novo for the next segment." (195)

An early management specialist, Douglas McGregor gave the name "Theory X" to the prevailing "scientific management" model of work; it is a hierarchical, distrusting approach that requires visible evidence of commitment (e.g., the hours that an employee is at his or her station), and that assumes continuity, linearity and homogeneity in career paths. For today's realities McGregor's alternative "Theory Y" may be more relevant than ever, as a management approach based on "a set of assumptions that people not only enjoy their work but are willing to take responsibility for it." (194) Work-family issues, in particular, must be central to any consideration of systemic change. This is appropriate not only for workers and their families, but also for the organizational flexibility and adaptability required in a rapidly changing environment.