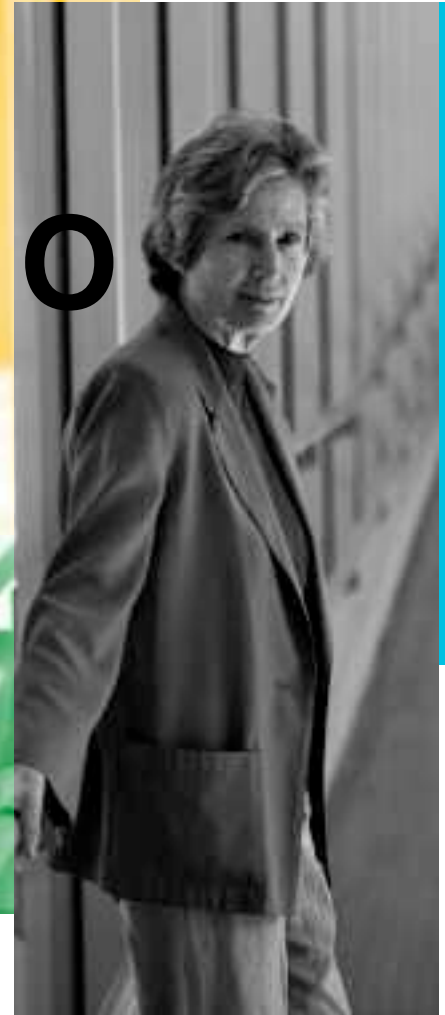


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F P O

Breaking the mold

Family as a complicating issue

Lotte Bailyn's research centers on technical and managerial professionals and the organizational rules that define the contours of their lives. Her recent work calls attention to the need for change in these rules, in order to take into account the changing nature of the professional workforce—including the influx of women and the consequent lifestyle changes for both sexes. The following piece is largely excerpted from the second edition of Bailyn's book, *Breaking the Mold: Redesigning Work for Productive and Satisfying Lives* (Cornell University Press, 2006, used with permission).

What is the price that organizations, employees, and society pay for getting stuck in the 1960s? In 1960, fewer than one in five married mothers with children under six was in the workforce; at the beginning of the 21st century, more than three in five are. Yet, organizational rules and practices have not changed to reflect this difference. Many companies today can't seem to get away from the expectation of primary and continuous involvement with work from all employees. It is obvious that this will have a negative impact on families over time; less obvious is that it also adversely affects the fate of companies and society.

The notion that professional success can only be reached by putting in long hours and plenty of “face time,” without a need for flexibility, is prevalent. Companies actually suffer from such traditional expectations—through employee stress and attrition or the loss to top management of the services of significant parts of the workforce. Also, families, and society at large, suffer from insufficient care for children, elders, and communities. Consider the need for parental involvement in schools and the need of community institutions for support.

Company solutions

Since it is difficult for families by themselves to find a satisfactory solution, the issue, at least in this country, seems to devolve on employing organizations, which try to respond with family policies and benefits. The Xerox Corporation, for instance, has what it calls “life cycle assistance,” which provides \$10,000 worth of benefits to be used at any point in an employee's career. IBM offers a personal leave program of three years, during

at the same time enhancing the effectiveness of their work. But the pull of existing cultural assumptions and norms about ideal workers makes it difficult to sustain and diffuse these successes. Moreover, different countries have different social infrastructures to address family needs, and they are at different places concerning family roles and gender equity. For example, the United States differs from the Netherlands and Sweden both ideologically and institutionally.

None of this is easy. The cultural assumption of keeping work and private life separate is deeply embedded in our thinking.

which time employees receive company-paid benefits and are assured of a job on returning.

Such responses are helpful, but they are still based on the assumption that family concerns can be treated peripherally, outside of the primary goals of the organization. They do not provide employees with better control over their varied responsibilities; nor do they provide them with more nonwork time. Even leave policies can have negative consequences, so long as organizations continue to reward employees on the basis of the amount of visible time spent at work.

None of this is easy. The cultural assumption of keeping work and private life separate is deeply embedded in our thinking. A series of experiments, supported by the Ford Foundation, and reported in the book, has shown that it is possible to change work practices in such a way as to help employees lead integrated lives while

The U.S. response

The U.S. approach is based on three cultural assumptions. The first is that families and children are in the private domain. The choice to have children is entirely personal, and therefore their custody is exclusively the concern of each individual family. Second, the care of children and elders is rightfully the province of women. And finally, in an individualistic, achieving society, nurturance and care are undervalued. Career and employment are key to identity and success.

Given this set of assumptions, as well as the fact that a majority of American women (even those with very young children) are now in the workforce, the United

States is facing what some have called a “crisis of care.” Women are welcome and indeed desired in influential positions so long as they follow the rules established for men with traditional family support. Under these conditions, family and community suffer.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when compared to Canada, the United Kingdom, and most West European and Scandinavian countries, the United States has the highest poverty rate among families and children, the highest mortality rate among young children, the lowest eighth-grade achievement scores in science and math, the most TV watching among 11-year-olds, the highest rate of teenage pregnancies and abortions, and, among parents of children at home, the highest percentage wishing they had more time with family.

The U.S. situation is summarized in Figure 1, which shows that in the United States only one boundary—between male and female work roles—is becoming permeable.

The Dutch response

In the Netherlands, a different pattern has emerged to deal with work-family issues. While women’s participation in the workforce has been steadily increasing, we still see a rather traditional distribution of work between men and women. Families manage on one-and-a-half incomes, with women typically working half-time.

What is important here is the support by both government and unions of fully valued part-time jobs with equivalent pay and benefits. The government actively encourages employers to help their employees with child care—which is different from most other European countries. Most government supports in the Netherlands (e.g., subsidies for all children, equality of social security, some financial advantages for “traditional families”) safeguard the choice of women not to work full-time.

This is a modified breadwinner model, and yet the Dutch government, at least in stated policy if not in practice, is concerned about women’s rights to work equality. The government takes an active role in the dialogue around these issues and is trying to instill an ideology of shared work and shared care. How this will turn out is still unknown. As Figure 2 shows, only one boundary has become permeable in the Netherlands—the boundary for women between paid work and home.

The Swedish response

As opposed to the United States, where the effort has been to allow women to meet male work demands, and to the Netherlands, where the emphasis has been on providing good part-time jobs for mothers, the Swedish effort has been focused on equalizing gender roles. On an ideological level, there is a social consensus in Sweden that women should have jobs, and that fathers should be involved in

Figure 1:

The United States

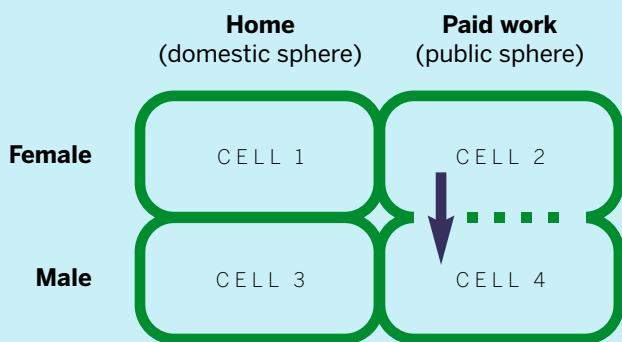
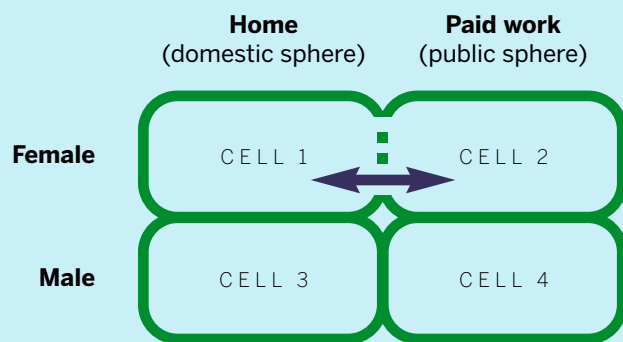


Figure 2:

The Netherlands



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childcare. And there is legislation to support both these aims. For example, there are tax incentives for families where both parents work.

Further, the care of families is seen as within the responsibilities of the state. Children, in particular, are considered a public good, and their proper care is viewed as essential for the continuing success of the society. This has meant not only an elaborate state-supported child care system, but also support for parents to stay home with infants. Parental leave, which is available to both parents (though not at the same time), is reimbursed at 80 percent salary for 12 months. Also, parents of young children have the right to

work only six hours a day, and there is ample leave for time off when a child is sick.

Thus, the Swedish government has mandated a comprehensive set of family policies and has tried hard to change social attitudes. Swedish men find it more ideologically appropriate to spend time at home, and Swedish women have an easier time combining the conflicting demands of work and family.

Still, the Swedish response has its share of problems. Women are seldom found in top business roles, their pay is still less than men's in equivalent positions, and occupational segregation by sex is higher

than in the United States and other countries in Europe. Figure 3 depicts how Sweden is working at three boundaries, and how, despite much social change, the boundary between men and women in the public sphere is still firm.

A foundation for looking ahead

So what is the answer? These national differences indicate the complexity of adapting deeply ingrained assumptions, expectations, and procedures to changing circumstances. Even a change in underlying values and introducing supportive national policy, as the Swedish example shows, is important but not sufficient. A change in the organization of work—a redesign based on current realities and national priorities—is also necessary.

For too long, it has been assumed that long hours necessarily equate with productivity, and people have been judged by the number of hours they are visibly at work. And with new technologies, we run the risk of changing to a 24/7 workplace, just when we should be using these technical advances to help us to better control our lives.

Given current circumstances, we have to work at all fronts. Each of the boundaries—between male and female roles and between economic and domestic responsibilities—will have to be made more permeable. Otherwise, we will not be able to serve the needs of organizations, their employees, or, in the long run, society as a whole. ●●●

Figure 3:

Sweden

