Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 4 | Issue 3 Article 9

May-2003

Family Obligations or Cultural Contraints? Obstacles in the Path of Professional Women

Marie-Josée Legault

Stéphanie Chasserio

Recommended Citation

Legault, Marie-Josée and Chasserio, Stéphanie (2003). Family Obligations or Cultural Contraints? Obstacles in the Path of Professional Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3), 108-125.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss3/9

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2003 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Family Obligations Or Cultural Contraints? Obstacles In The Path Of Professional Women

By Marie-Josée Legault[i] and Stéphanie Chasserio[ii]

Introduction

This paper provides an account of our research on balancing private life and work among highly qualified information technology (IT) professionals. Most of them are engineers, but we also interviewed managers. The project was funded by the *Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture* [Quebec Fund for Research on Society and Culture] under its program called *Action concertée sur le travail en mutation* [Concerted Action on Changing Work].

Here we will be presenting a small part of our findings, those having to do with:

- First, the importance of how commitment is assessed in career advancement (the performance appraisal and promotion process),
- Second, the importance of working long hours and of "presenteeism" in assessing commitment,
- Third, the impact of the differences between men's and women's working hours on career advancement.

As we go along, we will discuss a number of studies on the issue that we found particularly interesting and compare our findings with theirs.

Method

We surveyed seven Canadian companies, based in Montreal, that hire professional women (engineers and managers), in four business sectors: five small loosely structured high-tech firms (information technology business services, optics-photonics) and two big bureaucracies in the traditional economy (corporate real-estate management services and insurance). Most of the companies had about a hundred employees at the time of the interviews. The number may have dropped since then, as there have been layoffs at some. The companies were contacted during the summer of 2000 and the interviews took place between January 2001 and April 2002. We conducted extensive interviews with women and men in the same positions: managers, computer analysts, programmer-analysts, project managers, systems analysts, systems architects, testing engineers, software designers, optical engineers, process engineers, operating engineers, optics-photonics researchers and IT engineers.

In each company, we interviewed one or two human resources managers, two to four supervisors and ten to twelve employees (equal numbers of women and men) working as engineers, researchers and IT specialists (mostly programmer-analysts). The semistructured interviews lasted one and a quarter to two and a half hours. They were held in a closed office at the workplace, and everyone interviewed received a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality signed by the research team members that quoted their commitment to the *Commission d'accès à l'information* [Quebec Access to Information

Commission]. The 88 in-depth interviews and the huge amount of qualitative data they contained were processed with the assistance of the NVIVO software application.

We asked people about their job contents and their job requirements, the rules of advancement that applied, human resources management practices, especially as they concerned helping to balance private life and work, and about their problems, strategies and professional decisions in this regard. With the data, we were able to make a useful comparison in building on work already done in the field, that is to say we compared men's and women's strategies for balancing work and private life as they relate to the corporate and professional cultures: formal and informal standards, prevailing idea of performance and commitment.

Career-Advancement Factors: The Last Findings And Ours

The importance of commitment in the performance appraisal

The performance appraisal is, of course, a crucial moment for career advancement because it is generally the key to promotion. In an appraisal, employees' commitment is naturally taken into account, whether they are engineers, professionals or managers. This is so common, in fact, that there are widely used, validated instruments for assessing commitment, such as the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) and its variants (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000). One of the scholarly classic definitions of commitment (Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979), which dominated research on the subject for some 30 years almost unquestioned (Guest, 1992), focussed on two main aspects:

(1) continuance commitment, or the desire to keep working for an organization, attachment or loyalty, and
(2) affective/attitudinal commitment, which is adherence to the employer's values and objectives and the resulting willingness to work.

The contemporary definition of commitment

Commitment is a primary appraisal factor, yet its definition has changed a great deal in recent years, firstly as a consequence of an effort from the researchers to ask the employees for their own definition. As a result of this methodological device, factors of important change in the definition of commitment, like the globalization of trade, were put to the fore (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001, p. 32; Stiles, Gratton, Hope-Haily & McGovern, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). For instance, as it becomes less likely in the current economy that employees will remain with their employers for a long time, their present productivity and contribution to the company are of greater concern (Guest, 1997, 1998; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000). Singh and Vinnicombe surveyed 37 managers and engineers of both sexes in high-tech (aerospace) companies specifically on the concept of commitment. The aspects of commitment that their subjects mentioned as priorities are similar to those expressed by our subjects:

– First, to 65% of respondents, was on-time task or objective delivery within budget and a willingness to "put yourself out, do some extra" (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000, pp. 238-240). The women placed more emphasis on the importance of putting themselves out at work, the struggle to juggle work and family, and the difficulty in fulfilling both roles well (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000, pp. 240 and 249). We will come

back to this later.

- Second came involvement in the organization and quality of work (59% of respondents), even if it is not "for life," devoting yourself loyally to the organization, making it a personal commitment, considering that you represent the organization in all your relations with the outside world: customers, shareholders, suppliers, partners and even neighbors.
- Third and fourth were being proactive, using initiative and doing your best for the organization, making the organization your top priority.
- Fifth (41% of respondents) came putting in the extra hours required for delivery. Half of the women mentioned this aspect whereas only a third of the men did. The authors explain this difference by pointing to the problems that overtime work causes women, problems that they go into at length: among other things, the women are unhappy that the amount of time spent at work is considered to be the primary indicator of commitment and they feel that the quality of work should be taken into account more. Many women disagree with using unlimited overtime as an indicator of commitment, when what it really indicates is availability (22% mentioned availability when talking about commitment). The comments of these subjects suggest that there are significant differences between the sexes in terms of their concept of commitment.
- A number of other aspects mentioned illustrate the new definition of commitment among engineers at high-tech companies, which focusses on performance that ensures the company's competitiveness on the market, even if the employee is only temporary: want to succeed, need to achieve (41%); dedication (38%); be ready to take on challenge, enthusiasm (35%); responsibility (32%); be concerned for people, find solutions, troubleshoot (30%); be creative, innovative, be professional, add value, be business-aware, customer-oriented, share information, get balance between work and outside, want to make a contribution (19%). These last characteristics go far beyond the affective/attitudinal commitment described by Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979) and attest to the new constraints of contemporary engineering (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000, p. 244).

Even in these last elements of the new definition of commitment, customer demands, the role of service, competition on the market, time and costs come up often—and wage-earning engineers start to sound like entrepreneurs (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000, pp. 247-248). That is, in our view, the most important contemporary change in the definition of commitment, with all the working time demands that come along. We will now present our data as for these working time demands.

Dedication at work or commitment? Time spent at work

Time spent at work appears to be a key factor in assessing commitment in all the companies. It should be pointed out that the engineers surveyed seemed to decide the maximum amount of time they want to spend at work, and bear the responsibility for setting the minimum in this regard. Since they are professionals, they are of course not obliged to clock in and out. Furthermore, in their milieu it is understood that there is no such thing as a normal workday or workweek; the whole idea, rather than being unknown, is scornfully dismissed. Employees are encouraged to put in "however long it takes" rather than a set amount of time. It is up to them to decide how long it takes, but their estimates are checked and assessed. Generally speaking, in all the companies, it is

felt that the most devoted employees are favored when it comes time for promotions. When asked about the ideal employee sought for the positions under study, both management and employees highlighted three main qualities:

- Ability to work as part of a team
- Independence
- A set of abilities and qualities, such as satisfying the customer above all, being aware that you represent the company in all relations with customers, meeting contract deadlines at any cost, not counting hours, coping with intense stress, proving commitment. We have put them together under one heading because they are all more typical of an entrepreneur than an employee, and the importance of this fact is confirmed in reading the literature on how engineering has changed in high-tech companies. Unlike employees, entrepreneurs do not count their hours at work. To be competitive, they must be at the customer's beck and call and make sure that the customer has every reason to stay with them.

On this last point, the data could not be more eloquent. Our subjects used expressions like "have a customer-driven approach," "be creative to remain competitive," "listen to users and/or customers," "be available 24 hours a day," "work 24 hours a day," "don't count your hours, give a lot without expecting anything in return," "everyone makes sacrifices together to do overtime," "available day and night," "always say yes, agree to do anything," "live up to your commitments" and "available at ridiculous hours." Our respondents, many of them raising or planning families, are commonly expected to work abroad for several months, provide continuous customer support (being available by telephone 24 hours a day) one week a month, or set up new systems on the weekend on top of their regular workload, whenever necessary.

Dedication, more than commitment, is expected of employees. In the run-up to delivery of a computer service, there is no limit on hours worked. Even after delivery—after software has been installed, for example—many employees provide support, sometimes in addition to doing their development work. In other words, they must remain available right after the software has been installed in case there are any problems using it. Everything has to be checked to make sure it is operating smoothly and they must remain on call day and night to deal with any problems that might arise. It is considered to be self-evident that the customer cannot wait.

Similarly, when asked about their concept of work and professional success, once again the profile of an entrepreneur emerges. The following terms come up often:

- Satisfy customers
- Be useful to customers and solve their problems
- Meet deadlines
- Keep within budget
- Produce quality work

Other dimensions of professional success come second:

- Enjoyment of work
- Feeling of being useful
- Constantly learning

– Success as a team
– Meeting boss's expectations

Our subjects and recent studies on the evolving concept of commitment among high-tech engineers agree on the importance of customer service in the new definition of commitment in a new economic climate. The customer-service attitude can be seen in various characteristics of the entrepreneur profile among professionals who, despite being employees, are concerned first and foremost with providing competitive service, no matter how many hours of work it takes.

Sex Differences In Working Hours

Worktime and gender

The sexual division of housework being what it is, this kind of professional commitment puts women at a disadvantage, as they are primarily responsible for childcare. Men and women alike must check their home life at the door and demonstrate their commitment to the company, but the sexual division of domestic labor favors men in this regard (Simpson, 1998). Over the past 25 years, women have constantly accounted for 70% of Canadian part-time labor; in 2000, in Canada, 28% of women were working part time (under 30 hours a week), compared with 10% of men. Forty-four percent of women between the ages of 25 and 54 say that they do so in order to take care of their children or elderly family members, or for other family-related reasons. In contrast, fewer than 10% of men give those reasons for working part time (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001, p. 37). The fact that women take care of children is one of the cultural obstacles in the path of professional women (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000, pp. 240-241), because too often organizations fail to recognize this unequal division of labor as being a problem or any of their concern.

Among our respondents, there are major differences between the sexes. Many more women than men:
– Have thought about switching to a part-time job as a way of balancing private life and work,
– Would like to work part time, often four days a week, as a way of balancing private life and work; their male colleagues do not feel the need,
– Have relinquished some of their professional responsibilities so that they can take care of family and personal responsibilities.

Reducing Working Hours or Compressing Workweek

We asked all our subjects whether they had ever thought about switching from full-time to part-time work or to a compressed workweek to cope with problems balancing private life and work. Men and women gave quite different answers. Here are the more detailed results.

Intention to reduce or compress hours, by sex

	Women	Men
Have considered reducing or compressing working hours	30/45	8/43
Work part time	4	0
Say it's impossible in their type of job	3	2

The demand for fewer hours (part time) or more days off (compressed workweek) comes from a significantly greater number of women than men.

Relinquishing Certain Professional Responsibilities to Take Care of Family and Personal Obligations

In looking at the women's problems balancing private life and work, we found interesting results in the answers to two questions on relinquishing certain family or personal responsibilities to spend more time at work, or on the contrary, relinquishing certain professional responsibilities to take care of family and personal obligations. Women who are also mothers lament the fact that they cannot give "enough time" to both their family and professional lives and feel guilty about it. Here are the details[1].

Answers to questions 19 and 20 given by mothers in sample

Children are affected by long work hours	16/29
and she feels guilty	7/16
Children not affected by long work hours	13/29
Feels she's made career sacrifices: put less into work, turned down projects or promotions, reduced hours, etc.	21/29
Content with career sacrifices: states what she's given up, her choice is clear and expressed as a priority, was well aware of what consequences would be and accepted them	14/21
Sacrifices seen as limiting chances of promotion	7/21
Under pressure to work more, feels she is not satisfying superiors or colleagues	5/21
Decided not to give up and feels she is always "running" to balance work and private life	8/29
Total respondents	29

Of the 16 childless women who responded to these questions, 11 said they had no

[1] Beware of the fact that each time you have more than one figure in a case, the second and followings are subsets of the group first defined.

trouble balancing private life and work, and worked a lot. Only 5 of them were struggling to maintain reasonable amounts of time for themselves and said they were under pressure to work more. Once again, in our sample, long hours seem to have become more of a problem to women when they had children. We can say that although it is mostly women who would like to reduce their work hours, to a lesser extent, some men would, too. This is in keeping with the Canadian statistical trend (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001), which shows that more women raise this problem, but there is an increase as well among men and younger people in general.

On the other hand, when it comes to balancing private life and working life, men, unlike women, do not lament the fact that they must relinquish or neglect some of their family and personal responsibilities to assume professional responsibilities. In fact, although the men and women in our sample had comparable work hours and numbers of children, the men were willing to set aside their personal lives. They had little to say on the matter, although the women had plenty. What men might "set aside," or sacrifice in the private sphere remains a rather abstract concept when contrasted with professional demands. Any inconvenience to the children is subordinate to the duty to work, which is seen as unavoidable.

Similarly, in the professional sphere, in contrast with the women, few men negotiate compromises with the aim of cutting their work hours, and they are small compromises: leaving before a meeting is over or not finishing a job before going home, for example. For most of them, it is quite obvious: work comes first.

After all, is not family the main problem…

When it comes to the problems they have balancing work and home life, men are generally critical of the fact that they cannot spend "enough time," "the time it takes" to "succeed" and are frustrated. The men's main problem is their wives, with whom they have to "negotiate," whom they have to "get to accept" the amount of time they spend at work. Wives are a problem in balancing work and private life for 12 of the 42 men who answered this question. They say that their wives are affected, and some (6/42) feel slightly guilty. Women do not mention a similar problem with a 'non easy-going' husband asking for more dedication to family. The women's problem is not getting their husbands to accept their long hours, but the hours themselves. In other words, women would like more time for their private lives, and men would like less pressure from their wives about devoting more time to their private lives. For example, the men expressed the clear-cut nature of their choice this way:

> It [sometimes] disappoints me, but it's not hard. I mean, that's what keeps bread on the table . . . So I say OK. It's disappointing, but I do it. (DH-16-12-21-8-01-19-3)

> I don't even think that it's a question of negotiating. It's a question of . . . it's my job. I know it's my family, too, except that [. . .] I work for my family's well-being, so I can't do anything that might jeopardize my job. (DH-19-12-4-7-01-19-3)

One man recalled that he had to work on Mother's Day, because his whole team was at

work. His wife found it "very, very, very hard" but he did not mention anything as for himself (DH-18-2-25-6-01-19-3).

Management Position On Reorganizing Work Hours

The prevalent consent of the immediate superior

The consent of the immediate superior (or project manager) is a crucial element in organizing working hours to balance work and home life in the information technology industry (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001; Marshall & Pardee, 1998). Authors generally talk about the importance of "the immediate supervisor's support" to women having trouble balancing their work and private life, but do not go very deeply in analyzing what comes down to a very strategic trade-off (Chasserio & Legault, 2003). Shortly, in fact, we find that no matter what official programs or policies management has in place, it is entirely up to immediate superiors to apply or refuse benefits at their sole discretion. They act in this respect with a full delegated authority. This is the model found in the rest of the industry as well, in which authority is decentralized and the hierarchy is flat rather than pyramidal (Duval & Jacot, 2000; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000) and which, it must be said, attributes little importance to a formalized human resources management. In this respect, it is probably not much different from the rest of the Canadian economy; four out of five companies say they consider this function to be unimportant (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001, p. 33). Yet, exercising this delegated authority demands human resources skills from project managers who are not formally expected to have any in order to fill their positions (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000).

Obstacles to arrangements about time or place of work

The companies in our sample had virtually no official policies or measures to reduce or organize working hours, or any other acknowledged measures to do so, such as on-site daycare, telecommuting, working at home or personal leave (with no reasons required). Generally speaking, cutting down working hours is frowned upon. One supervisor—a woman—even said:

> When I have people on a four-day week, I say to myself, they aren't [. . .] really keen [. . .] We have so much work, we push people. The projects aren't easy, and all that . . . And then we have people working four days a week. As they say, it doesn't fit. [. . .] It's allowed, and I'm happy for them, but from another point of view, you look at them, and maybe you don't feel like having them on your team, when you have a really urgent project . . . (ASF-3-3-11-7-01-19-3)

In rejecting these practices, they mention the requirements of specific jobs, and two requirements in particular:

- The customer's needs are not "part time," but constant; most of the companies in our sample provide services to businesses and thus work closely with preferred customers.
- Team members, or at least other employees whose work is interdependent, must constantly interact so that the work progresses. People freely say that "if one person is away, it slows down the rest of the team," that part time is not for executives or

professionals with rare qualifications, for example, because they may be needed at any time. This is consistent with Canadian statistics, which show that professionals and managers have more trouble balancing work and private life than do other occupational categories (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001).

In fact, only one of seven companies visited—a large bureaucracy in the comparison pool, in the insurance business—offers employees some freedom to organize their working hours: the opportunity to spread the 70 working hours of a two-week period over 9 days instead of 10, and take the tenth day off. They call it the 70-9 program. (A few others offer flextime with fixed core hours, allowing employees to arrive later or leave earlier, reorganizing their hours but not reducing them.)

The insurance company offers employees measures to help balance work and personal life, but this position is contradicted by the words and deeds of its representatives, including supervisors, who will not choose an employee on 70-9 for their team. Furthermore, the message from management is clear: supervisors (project managers) can refuse to allow 70-9 in teams they put together for each project, just as they can refuse flexible hours in some circumstances. The employees we spoke to, both men and women, are well aware of this. But it is the women who are unhappy; the men understand and adapt.

Working it out in practice

That does not mean, however, that nothing is done to help balance work and private life. On the contrary, consistently throughout the companies, unofficial arrangements are made, such as giving employees time off to make up for overtime, or allowing them to work occasionally at home. Generally speaking, hours are not cut, but reorganized so that the same number of hours are worked at different times. Worse yet, sometimes these arrangements are rewards (very partial) for very long unpaid extra hours worked during a rush. To exercise any of these options, including working flextime when management officially allows it, employees must in practice come to an unofficial agreement with their immediate superiors (project managers) and, in reality, in most organizations, they are only permitted to do so occasionally (Chasserio & Legault, 2003).

In similarly unofficial arrangements, some people work part time, if their immediate superiors authorize it for the duration of a given project. They have absolute discretionary power in this regard. In the companies we visited, no matter what the type of business, human resources departments have no requirements in this area; they generally have only an advisory capacity. Supervisors do not even have to consult the HR department, if there is one. For example, the HR department could not tell us what percentage of supervisors were against reorganization of hours.

As supervisors have total discretionary authority, women must develop a relationship of trust with them. The particular economic situation of knowledge-based and high-tech businesses means that there is a very high turnover in supervisory positions, which does not foster the development of trust that such a crucial arrangement relies upon.

Consequences Of Requesting Reorganization Of Hours On Career Advancement

Manifestations of dismissal of flextime

Not only is cutting back on working hours very much frowned upon, it also compromises career advancement; that is the general opinion throughout all the companies in our sample. Anyone who asks for a reorganization of hours or place of work (working at home) or for other measures to help balance work and family life is often considered to be less committed, and therefore less of a candidate for promotion. Cooper (1996, p. 15) was the first to use "presenteeism," to mean "being at work when you should be at home either because you are ill or because you are working such long hours that you are no longer effective." If we redefine the concept as "being at work as much as you can, no matter what your general condition is", presenteeism is still the most often used criterion to assess commitment. Throughout the companies in our sample, career advancement for the positions we were interested in is consistently associated with employee commitment, as assessed by management. Interestingly, the English word "commitment" is most often used by our French speaking interviewees. In the companies in our sample, many of which have fairly flat structures, being promoted generally means becoming a supervisor, a project manager, responsible for the most prestigious projects or a manager.

Among all our respondents, not only is cutting back hours a major obstacle to promotion, so is reorganizing hours, because it reduces employees' availability and thus their *commitment* as defined by these professionals. Yet in the companies we surveyed, we searched in vain for a formal, structured performance appraisal policy. Although people freely talk about obstacles to promotion, there is no policy to explicitly state the criteria. There is nothing formalized with regard to promotion factors, and no one knows how far work quality can go towards offsetting presenteeism in proving commitment.

The particular situation of women

As other studies of high-tech companies have reported, a woman who asks to reorganize her hours loses a great deal in visibility, networking and exposure to a variety of challenges (Simpson, 1997). Once again, both men and women in our sample say so, but it is the women who are unhappy with the idea, while men understand it and adapt to it (Marshall & Pardee, 1998). A number of gestures that are "neither mandatory in-role behaviors, nor directly or contractually compensated by formal reward systems," grouped under the heading "organizational citizenship behavior" (Organ, 1990), are named, mainly by women, as factors indicating commitment, partly because their high visibility makes them easier to use (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000). Many studies also show the importance of impression management, that is, using the most visible strategies to indicate commitment, rather than subtle strategies, if you want to get ahead (Newell & Dopson, 1996; Rosenfeldt, Giacolone & Riordan, 1995). For the same reasons, many researchers have reported on the fact that high-level managers generally consider that women managers are not committed enough to become executives, although they do not define their terms clearly (Devine, 1992; Evetts, 1993, 1994; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy & Liu, 1996; Wahl, 1995; Wajcman, 1996).

In our sample, one woman was able to cut back her hours from 40—all the way to 35, thanks to an *ad hoc* arrangement with her boss. This is how she describes it:

> And my boss [. . .] said: "What we'll do, in your appraisal, for commitment to the company and all that, we'll just put 'satisfactory.'" I went down a notch, you see. So instead of "very satisfactory," they gave me "satisfactory." That was the deal we made. [. . .] That meant a bit less of a raise, but they said, "We won't ask you to do your 40 hours [. . .] unless there's a rush." (MF-3-16-4-5-01-19-3)

In the case of the company with the 70-9 system and flextime, as we have seen, neither of those measures allows employees to really reduce their working hours, only to move them around. Despite that, the measures are not at all accepted and when it comes time for promotions, they are counted against anyone who makes use of them. Furthermore, pragmatically speaking, women who wish to work part time can only join projects if the supervisors allow the practice and their opportunities are thus limited. This is another factor leading to poor appraisals of commitment that work against them at promotion time, because women who wish to work fewer hours must give up on some of the more interesting projects when the supervisors do not allow part-timers.

It is a good bet that the most competitive supervisors will also tend to snag the most challenging projects and refuse to take on employees who do not share their competitiveness, starting with those who ask for reduced hours (Simpson, 1998). According to Simpson, that explains why women talk more about the problem than men, who, when asked, say they cope well with it, but few of whom mention it spontaneously. In her view, it is a silent, implicit war between professional men and women in traditionally male-dominated fields. [In blue-collar jobs, the strategies are different (Legault, 2001a, b, c).] Furthermore, the companies in our sample have two things in common that, according to the literature, work against women from the point of view of long hours and their influence on advancement (Simpson, 1998):

- As a result of the difficult economic situation, uncertainty for management and layoffs and job insecurity for employees, there is a tendency among employees to distinguish themselves by their presenteeism, which seems to be part of a survivor syndrome, since they want to help meet the employer's objective of "doing more with less," and thus keep their jobs, if not get promoted.
- As a result of the entrance of women into a traditionally male field, men have a greater tendency to exploit the advantage that their willingness to work long hours on top of the "regular workday" gives them to get an edge on women, not just those who have made a point of their need to balance work and family, but even childless women, who, according to some studies, are also critical of the long hours, Simpson has found.

Discussion

The importance of "project" work organization in the custom of long hours

In fact, long working hours are part and parcel of the work organization particular to IT departments, as both our study and earlier ones (Perlow, 1998, von Hellens, Nielsen & Trauth, 2001) show. Long hours are still a big part of any work organization involving projects with a fixed term of medium length, for which meeting a deadline is absolutely

essential. They are also said to be strongly associated with business services, a field in which there is fierce competition and a very firm customer demand for on-time delivery (Simpson, 1998). This trend has actually spread throughout the economy, for Canadian statistics show that:

> Recent changes in the structure of work and work time may be exacerbating work-family stresses. Production pressures and a growing need for round-the-clock services mean longer work hours for some [. . .] Long work hours and high-strain jobs [. . .] hamper employees' ability to harmonize work and family life (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001, Executive Summary).

As a form of work organization, projects are different in that they require production of a deliverable product or service on a certain date and at a price established by contract with a customer. Not only must the product be delivered to the customer at the agreed-upon time, with no accounting of the hours worked to reach this non-negotiable objective, but support after delivery must be provided to deal with unforeseen problems, hitches and bugs at installation. Employees must subsequently remain available for indeterminate periods that depend on the problems encountered.

Can we talk of the worker's acceptance?

Long hours are a generally accepted fact of life. What explains it? One of our hypotheses is the salary levels in the industry. In our sample, the pay for holders of the highest degrees is quite a bit better than the Quebec average, as the next table shows.

Average earnings by highest level of schooling, in our sample and in Quebec

	Number of respondents having answered that question (out of 88)	**Mean annual earnings in our sample**	**Mean annual earnings in Quebec for equivalent schooling**
High school leaving certificate (Grade 11)	2	45 000 $	22 258 $
College certificate	3	58 000 $	23 844 $
College diploma	20	55 000 $	
University certificate	10	54 000 $	
Undergraduate degree	31	62 000 $	40 446 $
Graduate degree	18	70 200 $	
Doctoral degree	4	82 500 $	

Source: Average earnings of the population 15 years and over in 1995 by highest level of schooling, 1996 Census, Nation series (www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Labour/labor50b.htm).

As one of the men interviewed said about his wife's reproaches and demands:
With what I'm making, you can't expect me to be home at five every evening! (CGSH-13-18-2-10-01-19-3)

Is it only a stubborn resistance to common sense?

But why is management so reluctant to reduce work hours when an unpaid day off does not cost anything? In reality, this measure costs nothing only at first glance. It costs because, first of all, a normal workweek in the companies we visited is not 35 hours: it is much more, at no additional cost to the employer, because overtime is not usually paid (although in rare cases it is paid at regular rates).

As contracts are made in an often competitive market, every aspect is of strategic importance. To respect the given deadline, overtime is often required, especially as the deadline looms. A feeling of urgency always hangs over computer work (Duval & Jacot, 2000), but also projects in general. There is a name for it: the *coke and pizza* culture (von Hellens, Nielsen & Trauth, 2001), referring to the long hours spent at the office finishing a project. To come in within budget, product costs must be kept down, with labor being the principal cost. In this regard, the unlimited workweek (with unpaid overtime) is a major asset.

If part-time work is the declared enemy, one reason is because it assumes the existence of a "normal" 35-hour workweek, which is scoffed at by people in the field who always work more than that, sometimes much more. Indeed, if average official working week in the organizations of our sample is 37,5 hours, we note that everyone works more: women work 3 hours more on average and men add 6.4 hours. We must recall that it's a mathematical mean, so these employees can sometimes have normal weeks and other times many overtime hours more.

Thus, asking to work part time allows employees to put a limit on their hours. Because they feel strongly enough about their time to give up a fifth of their salary, it is to be expected that they will not work 35 hours—if they did, they would be better off working a regular workweek for 100% of their pay. As a result, part-time employees do not just deprive the company of unpaid days off, but cost it much more in the form of free overtime that they announce they are unprepared to do.

This very practice of working hours with no official limit, inherent to the IT industry, is the primary obstacle to a balance between private life and professional life. Demands for reduced hours run up against it because the arrival of women on the scene and changes in values and way of life among some men require cultural changes that are much more profound than might at first be thought. And as such, this very finding gives us a second thought on the asserted contemporary transformation of the definition of the commitment, dealt with in the beginning of this article, that is supposed to have changed radically in the so-called "new economy".

Have the criteria of commitment really changed?

In a completely different direction than the previously asserted contemporary transformation of the definition of the commitment, indeed, other studies have shown that employees who demonstrate strong affective-attitudinal commitment, who are, in other words, likely to work hard, be available to the employer and adopt the employer's values and objectives, are very likely to be promoted (Shore, Barksdale & Shore, 1995; Allen, Russell & Rush, 1994). This is fairly inconsistent with our previously asserted transformation of the criteria for assessing commitment. Indeed, what we would now propose is that affective/attitudinal commitment, which is "adherence to the employer's values and objectives and the resulting willingness to work", is more important than ever, if only we redefine these values and objectives…

What we have found among our interviewees drive us to that conclusion:

- More women than men would like to limit their working hours,
- Working hours are, more than ever, regarded as an important indicator of employee commitment,
- Commitment is an important factor in promotions, which puts those who ask for reduced hours at a disadvantage.

Cultural grounds for dismissing flextime

The relative importance of various obstacles to the advancement of women in the professions or management in general, and in engineering in particular, is the subject of frequent heated debate. How significant is the problem of balancing work and private life in explaining women's low proportions in these fields? Opinions are divided, and earlier surveys have been unable to prove that this problem is the chief career barrier.

For example, increasing numbers of studies have concluded that when women leave the professions or management, it is not, contrary to popular opinion, primarily because of difficulty balancing work and private life, but rather the overall effect of the professional culture (Evetts, 1998; Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Maddock, 1999; Maddock & Parkin, 1993; Marshall 1994, 1991; Miller & Wheeler, 1992; Robinson & McIlwee, 1991), which comes on top of or is confounded with the corporate culture. Interestingly, it can be seen that barriers inherent to the professional and corporate culture are much more significant than the problems of balancing work and private life. A third of the women managers questioned by Rosin and Korabik (1990) were chiefly dissatisfied with their assignments (projects for which they were responsible), their positions, their feeling of belonging to the group and the inequities they noted, including inequities in opportunities for advancement.

These findings are confirmed by Selby (1998), who reports on the results of research presented at an international conference devoted to finding explanations for women's withdrawal from careers and graduate studies in science (despite the fact that there are just as many women as men undergraduates in science, if all disciplines, including health, are counted). The 300 conference participants blamed policies and practices stemming from a male culture that must be changed. Among other things, the importance of the position held in the hierarchy and promotion within the organization are based on poorly defined processes that depend primarily on informal networks. The

importance of the work atmosphere, performance appraisal criteria and compensation practices generally unfavorable to women were cited, as they reflect a hierarchical society organized according to the rules of white men. Of course, overall, problems balancing work and private life are acknowledged, but there is a tendency to dissociate them from cultural obstacles.

Yet some authors have noted that women engineers are more often single and childless (Jagacinski, 1987), which makes us wonder about the professional culture of the milieu and its willingness to accommodate parental constraints. Our preliminary findings suggest that it is neither useful nor necessary, when it comes to examining obstacles to women's career advancement, to distinguish between problems balancing work and private life and cultural barriers. The assessment criteria that influence promotion are inherent in the culture of the milieu and are also factors in problems balancing work and private life that may place women at a disadvantage. We have no data on the factors that lead women and men in our sample to quit their jobs and we can therefore not say anything about those factors, but we can talk about the obstacles that the high-tech culture strews in the path of women trying to get ahead.

Conclusion

We have summed up a debate that is taking place in the literature on women in the professions and management, in which two obstacles are vying for first place as career barriers: IT engineers culture and the need to balance work and family life. On our way to account for the data collected, we discovered the great importance of the "projects" work organization typical of information technology business services in the constitution of the particular culture relevant in the field of our study. And doing so, we also discovered that despite the recent affirmations of a great contemporary transformation in the definition and criteria of commitment, maybe the changes are not that great, after all, in that sticking to your employer's values and objectives still is basically the rule.

We feel that opposing these two obstacles - culture, need to balance work and family life - is pointless when talking about barriers to women's career advancement, as we find that many aspects of the culture militate against balancing work and private life. When women call them into question, for example, by asking to cut back their working hours (not necessarily to balance work and family, but often) the overriding importance of commitment, a criterion eminently tied to the culture, will block their promotion. Thus, as the culture from the outset opposes the demand for private time, it has the same effect as the need to balance work and private life in blocking women's promotion.

Bibliography

Allen, T. D., J. E. A. Russell & M. C. Rush (1994) "The effects of gender and leave of absence on attributions for high performance, perceived organizational commitment and allocation of organizational rewards", *Sex Roles*, vol. 31, p. 443-464

Chasserio, Stéphanie & Marie-Josée Legault (2003) "Le rôle stratégique du supérieur immédiat dans la négociation de l'aménagement des heures de travail », Manuscript in

preparation
Cooper, C. (1996) "Hot under the collar", The Times 'Higher Education Supplement', June 21st
Devine, F. (1992) "Gender segregation in the engineering and science professions: A case of continuity and change", *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 6, no 4, p. 557-575
Duval, Guillaume & Henri Jacot (2000) *Le travail dans la société d'information*, Paris, Éditions Liaisons
Evetts, Julia (1998) "Managing the technology but not the organization: Women and career in engineering", *Women in Management Review*, vol. 13, no 8, p. 283-290
Evetts, Julia (1994) "Career and motherhood in engineering: Cultural dilemmas and individualistic solutions", *Journal of Gender studies*, vol. 3, no 2, p. 177-185
Evetts, Julia (1993) "Women and management in engineering: The glass ceiling for women's careers", *Women in Management Review*, vol. 8, no 7, p. 19-25
Gale, A. & S. Cartwright (1995) "Women in project management: Entry into a male domain? A discussion on gender and organizational culture, part 1", *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, vol. 16, no 2, p. 3-8
Guest, D. E. (1998) "Beyond HRM: Commitment and the contract culture", in Sparrow, P. & Marchington, M. (eds), *Human Resource Management: The new agenda*, London, FT Pitman Publishing, p. 37-51
Guest, D. E. (1997) "Human resource management and performance: A review and research agenda", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 8, no 3, p. 263-276
Guest, D. E. (1992) "Employee commitment and control", in Hartley, J. F. & G. M. Stephenson (eds), *Employment Relations*, Oxford, Blackwells, p. 111-135
Jagacinski, Carolyn M. (1987) "Engineering Careers: Women in male dominated field", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 11, p. 97-110
Johnson, Karen L., Donna S. Lero & Jennifer A. Rooney (2001) *Work-Life Compendium 2001: 150 Canadian Statistics on Work, Family and Well-Being*, Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, University of Guelph, & Human Resources Development Canada
Legault, Marie-Josée (2001a) "Violence auprès des femmes dans les secteurs d'emploi non traditionnellement féminins et indemnisation", *Perspectives interdisciplinaires sur le travail et la santé* (PISTES), www.unites.uqam.ca/pistes (electronic journal), vol. 3, no 1
Legault, Marie-Josée (2001b) "La difficile intégration des femmes dans les emplois de production : réflexions et actions", Proceedings of the international colloquium *ZOOM sur les femmes et les métiers non traditionnels*, held in Montreal, 1999, November 11th – 17th, under the auspices of the Quebec department of education, p. 84-91
Legault, Marie-Josée (2001c) *Report on the integration of women in non-traditional sectors of employment. Summary of local success and failure factors. Final results of case studies*, 67 pages, March 2001
Maddock, Su (1999) *Challenging Women. Gender, Culture and Organization*, London, Sage
Maddock, Su & D. Parkin (1993) "Gender cultures: Women's choices and strategies at work", *Women in Management Review*, vol. 8, no 2, p. 3-10
Marshall, Judi (1994) "Why Women Leave Senior Management Jobs: My Research

Approach and Some Initial Findings', in M. Tantum (ed.), *Women in Management: The Second Wave*, London, Routledge

Marshall, Judi (1991) 'Senior Women Managers who Leave Employment", *Women in Management Review*, vol. 6, no 3, p. 4-10

Marshall, Nancy L. & Mav Pardee (1998) "Work and Family benefits at a High-tech Company: A Report on a Work and Family Survey", in Nancy Marshall (ed), *Work and family today: Recent research at the Center for research on women*, Wellesley, Center for research on women (Wellesley College)

Miller, J. G. & K. G. Wheeler (1992) "Unraveling the Mysteries of Gender Differences in Intentions to Leave the Organization", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 13, p. 465-478

Mowday, R. T., R. M. Steers, L. W. Porter (1979) "Measurement of organizational commitment", *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 8, no 3, p. 486-500

Newell, H. et S. Dopson (1996) "Muddle in the middle: Organizational restructuring and middle management careers", *Personnel Review*, vol. 25, no 4, p. 4-20

Organ, D. W. (1990) "The motivational basis of organizational citizenship behavior", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Greenwich, JAI Press, vol. 12, p. 43-72

Perlow, Leslie A. (1998) "Boundary control: the social ordering of work and family time in a high-tech corporation", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 43, p. 328-357

Robinson, J. Gregg et Judith S. McIlwee (1991) "Men, women and the culture of engineering", *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 32, no 3, p. 403-421

Rosenfeldt, P., R. A. Giacolone & C. A. Riordan (1995) *Impression Management in Organizations: Theory, Measurement, Practice*, London, Routledge

Rosin, H. M. & K. Korabik (1990) "Corporate Flight of Women Managers: Moving From Fiction to Fact", Santa Barbara, paper to the Western Academy of Management

Rousseau, D. M. (1995) *Psychological contracts in Organizations: Understanding Written and Unwritten Agreements*, Thousand Oaks, Sage

Schein, V. E., R. Mueller, T. Lituchy & J. Liu (1996) "Think manager – think male. A global phenomenon", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 17, no 1, p. 33-41

Selby, Cecily Cannan (1998) "Changing the Rules: Women in Science and Engineering", *Radcliffe Quarterly*, Fall, http:www.radcliffe.edu/quarterly/199803/page24.html

Shore, L. M., K. Barksdale & T. H. Shore (1995) "Managerial perceptions of employee commitment to the organization", *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 38, no 6, p. 1593-1615

Simpson, Ruth (1998) "Presenteeism, Power and Organizational Change: Long Hours as a Career Barrier and the Impact on the Working Lives of Women Managers", *British Journal of Management*, vol. 9, p. 537-550

Simpson, Ruth (1997) "Rationalisation, flexibility and the impact of presenteeism on the working lives of senior managers in the UK", 13th EGOs Colloquium, Budapest University of Economics, Hungary

Singh, Val & Susan Vinnicombe (2000) "What does 'commitment'really mean? Views of UK and Swedish engineering managers", *Personnel Review*, vol. 29, no 2, p. 228-258

Stiles, P., L. Gratton, V. Hope-Haily & P. McGovern (1997) "Performance management and the psychological contract", *Human Resource Management Journal*, vol. 7, no 1, p. 57-66

Von Hellens, Liisa A., Sue H. Nielsen & Eileen M. Trauth (2001) "Breaking and entering

the male domain. Women in the IT industry", in Mark Serva (ed.), *Proceedings of the 2001 Association for computing machinery – Special Interest group on computer personnel research (ACM-SIGCPR) Conference*, San Diego, p. 116-131

Wahl, A. (1995) *Men's Perceptions of Women and Management*, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden

Wajcman, J. (1996) "Desperately seeking differences: Is management style gendered?", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 34, no 3, p. 333-349

http://www.childcarecanada.org/research/complete/work_lifeComp.html

---

[i] Full Professor, Télé-université
Associate Professor, School of Management, Université du Québec à Montréal

[ii] Candidate, joint doctoral program in administration, School of Management, Université du Québec à Montréal
Research professional, Télé-université