

May 2002

Women – having it all

Social attitudes have changed since I was married towards the end of the 1970s. At the time my wife had a promising management job in the health service. She earned far more than I did.

It did not matter much to me that she was the main breadwinner but I knew I would have to improve my earnings because my wife wanted children - we both did. At some stage after starting a family she stepped off the career ladder to devote more time to the children. When all the children had started school she thought about re-entering her career but there was no way back at her former level.

As Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder of the National Parenting Association in New York, notes in April's Harvard Business Review, there are plenty of jumping-off points in a career but far fewer re-entry points, particularly for professional women who would like a break in order to start a family.

The result today is that many women in their twenties and early thirties are choosing career over family in the belief they can delay child-rearing to a stage where their careers have become more established. But this decision to nurture the career rather than children is rebounding for thousands of women executives, according to Ms Hewlett, who says that in the US today a third of professional women in the 41 to 55 age bracket are childless.

Many are childless not by choice but because of what one manager, quoted by Ms Hewlett, calls a "creeping non-choice". They put off finding a partner and having children for so long that childbearing passes them by.

Ms Hewlett surveyed more than a thousand high-achieving women . She expected the childless careerists to be positive about their choices but found that many were experiencing a sense of loss and regret, wishing they had found time for families.

Now a younger generation of women executives, she writes, are entering the jobs market, planning on "having it all ". One 29-year-old woman she interviewed believed she could wait another 14 or 15 years before she had a baby. In the meantime she planned to get an MBA; and planned to have a family after the age of 40, in the mistaken belief that "this new reproductive technology guarantees that you can have a baby until 45".

Hewlett has highlighted both a serious social development and, potentially, an economic issue given the number of highly qualified professional women who do decide to have families, then find there is no way back into their high-flying careers.

Long working hours in the US have exacerbated the problem, leaving few opportunities for women to carve out the time they need for raising a family. The high achievers in Ms Hewlett's study called for more "work/life" policies such as time banks of paid parenting leave, restructured retirement plans that eliminate penalties for career interruptions, longer-term career breaks guaranteeing a job to return to and reduced working hours.

The problem with some of these policies is that they tend to underpin an obsession with advancement and salary increases. Where is the real balance? Why does the

career escalator become all-consuming? Why is "having it all" so important?

It is not just women who are dissatisfied with the growing demands of their jobs. A report published this week by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council* revealed a big increase in job dissatisfaction and stress across the UK workforce between 1992 and 2000.

The report blames longer working hours, particularly among professional men, for much of the increase. "The disgruntled manager has joined the disgruntled manual worker, at least in complaints about the long hours culture," says Robert Taylor, the report's author.

But people appear to be doing little to change the way they work. Mr Taylor has highlighted the robustness of full-time continuous working in the UK labour market. Job tenure has risen, fewer people are working from home, many people still look for promotion prospects and few workers feel insecure about their jobs, says the research.

"There is much greater continuity than change in our world of work," says Mr Taylor. Yet elsewhere in the study he points to a significant shift in the use of information technology and argues that "Britain, like other advanced and increasingly post-industrial societies, is going through a period of profound transformation at work". These findings of significant internal change on the one hand and the enduring pattern of the full-time job on the other indicate that social pressure for change could be building inside the job market.

The increase in dissatisfaction and a decrease in workplace loyalty suggests that many people are feeling trapped in their jobs. If this is the case, people may need to confront their discontent. Juliet Schor, an employment academic, found in research she carried out in the US seven years ago that a third of those questioned in a nationwide poll would have accepted a 20 per cent reduction in their household income in return for fewer hours. Would they do so today?

At the same time she noted that expectations tended to increase with income, creating habitual spending and a strengthening work-spend-work cycle that became difficult to break. Is this what has happened to high-achieving professional women in the US? Have they become addicted to their careers? At the same time, is this what is happening across the UK workplace? Have people become so attached to their careers that they will work ever longer hours, growing ever more dissatisfied, in order to feed a habit?

This might explain the apparent paradox in the findings of the ESRC study. People are not happy about the increasing demands of the workplace. But they are prepared to endure the pain in order to increase wealth and status. They may like the idea of alternative forms of working but they consider the financial penalties and retraining implications in abandoning their full time jobs simply too onerous.

When women experience these sentiments at the very stage when they would otherwise be contemplating motherhood, we could be looking at a far more serious and ultimately destructive trend.

**Britain's World of Work - Myths and Realities by Robert Taylor, www.esrc.ac.uk*

