

Lotte Bailyn: Thought Leader Interview

For more than 50 years, the MIT professor has challenged companies and policymakers to redefine the rules of work and family.

By **Laura W. Geller** (senior editor *StrategyBusiness*) (laura.geller@us.pwc.com or @lwgeller) **8/2015**

Lotte Bailyn wrote [*Breaking the Mold: Men, Women, and Time in the New Corporate World*](#) (Free Press, 1993) to warn executives that their obsession with time as a measure of commitment, and by extension competence, was creating a situation that would be unsustainable for the modern workforce in the long run. “Private life and public life can no longer be seen as conceptually separate,” she noted in the introduction. “Too much is at stake: the equanimity of employees, the welfare of families and communities, and even the long-run viability of American companies.... Appropriate responses to this situation go to the heart of the way that work is organized and rewarded.” The book, far ahead of its time, didn’t garner much notice — although it did come out the same year that the U.S. Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, still the only federal law protecting the jobs of new parents or people caring for seriously ill relatives. (It provides unpaid leave, and covers only 60 percent of the workforce.)

More than 20 years later, business has been fundamentally revolutionized by globalization, technology, and demographic changes. But the tensions persist, and companies are now recognizing them as a factor holding back productivity and competitiveness. Many businesses have implemented well-meaning policies designed to offer employees the opportunity to manage their personal and professional commitments. Human resources teams have added bereavement leave, compassionate leave, adoption leave, personal days, mental health days, and a host of other options to their menus. But like the meditation and relaxation rooms increasingly available at large offices, they often go unused. Employees fear that taking advantage of these benefits will have negative consequences for their compensation or advancement.

Bailyn believes that even the most progressive policies fail to address the core issues and assumptions that underlie how people and organizations interact. Our society is still compartmentalizing “work” and “life,” looking for a way to even the scales, when we should be rethinking the perspective that values time as the ultimate capital. In systems based on such a mind-set, success comes to those who seem to be working the hardest, because they are always accessible. People cling to an outmoded view that work should be done by specific people at specific times, as determined by managers and company leaders.

For much of the last half century, Bailyn has argued for a different approach. Work is completed most effectively, she says, when people are empowered to come together and figure out how to manage that work collectively, taking into account both the organization’s needs and one another’s needs outside the office. “The goal,” she wrote in the 2006 revised edition of her book, “is to break the mold of traditional assumptions; the hope is that the needs of organizations and employees can be brought into constructive harmony” ...

S+B: [What were some of your earliest observations that the compartmentalization of work and life as separate spheres was negatively impacting work?]

BAILYN: By the time I started working on the book, consulting companies had started to help organizations with things like child-care referral, to enable more women to enter and stay in the workforce. In fact, some progressive companies had multiple family policies on the books.

However, not very many people were taking advantage of them, particularly not men, and not even all women. And it wasn't helping women move up within organizations.

The premise of *Breaking the Mold* was that such policies weren't helping either the employees or their companies because the policies were fighting against basic assumptions and the practices that resulted from them. At Xerox, we were able to test this hypothesis. When we started the project, we saw how difficult it was to bring the domains of family and work together. As we interviewed people about both aspects of their lives, they would often respond by saying, "Why are you asking us about our work? You're the work-family people." The connotation was, "Aren't you just here to help draft some family policies to help out these poor mothers, who can't be good workers?" At the time, that was how this topic was understood.

But organizations were changing rapidly. The days of a homogeneous workforce doing homogeneous work were quickly fading — replaced by more diversity and teamwork. Based on our interviews, in which we asked people what it was about their work that made their lives difficult, we could show how old assumptions and old practices weren't effective for this new way of working. Once you point out the dysfunctional practices, the possible solutions actually become obvious. But these practices are typically so ingrained in the everyday workings of the organization that people just assume this is the way things have to be to get the work done. It takes an explicit bringing together of work and personal issues to draw them out ...

S+B: Can you give us a few examples of these dysfunctional practices?

BAILYN: We worked with business units, pointing out how certain practices not only were making life difficult for employees, but also weren't working for the company. We tried to show company leaders they didn't have to worry that legitimizing people's personal lives would interfere with their work. In fact, when we started experimenting with different ways of working, we set out to try to change organizational practices and procedures in such a way that it wouldn't hurt productivity. But it turned out that it actually *helped* productivity.

For example, by throwing time at problems, managers were burning out their employees. By asking people to work such long hours, companies were also creating a sort of rigidity. But research has shown that creativity and innovation require time for reflection. Moreover, we know that if you constrain time, people work more intelligently. And from our own experience, we knew that if people work for 10 hours, they are never as productive as they are in the first two. It's not a linear relationship.

We also sought to identify the "heroes" in the organization. Typically, they were people who came to a meeting with a problem, and then came up with a solution to that problem. In other words, they were heroes even if they had created the problem in the first place. In this type of system, nobody received any kudos for *preventing* a problem. We could show that business units were getting into crisis mode, running from one problem to the next, because nobody wanted to take the time to plan and be proactive in a system where individual heroics were rewarded.

I once worked with an engineering group in which the manager told us that one of his employees was the glue of the group. The group would fall apart if he wasn't there. And yet the manager couldn't get this employee promoted, because the criteria for promotion didn't include skills like coordination and keeping operations running smoothly. Over the years, in various organizations, I saw a lot of that. Relational work was being undervalued, to the companies' detriment ...

S+B: Many companies now offer the flexible work arrangements you talked about in your books. But the number of people who take advantage of them remains limited.

BAILYN: Joan Williams, founding director of the [Center for Work–Life Law](#) at the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law, coined the term *flexibility stigma* to explain this phenomenon. Even though research (and practice) has shown that flexible arrangements work well both for people and for productivity, it goes against the basic assumptions that I’ve been describing. It also conflicts with many organizations’ view of their workers as a cost.

In addition, protections offered by public policy are totally uneven. For example, some states, such as California and Connecticut, guarantee most employees some sick leave [a California state law mandating paid sick leave took effect on July 1, 2015]. In other states, it’s the furthest thing from legislators’ minds. Some cities have passed sick leave laws, but they often face battles with state government — this is playing out in Philadelphia even as we speak.

On a national level, family policies in the U.S. are the weakest of any industrial country. The U.S. is a highly individualistic, achievement-oriented society where identity is tied up with occupational success — as evidenced by the “what do you do?” conversation starter. Our policies reflect a belief that families and children are an individual choice, and if you decide to have them, it’s your responsibility to take care of them. Of course, this way of thinking ignores how intertwined we all are. Children aren’t just an individual choice, they’re a social good: They are the future workforce, and your well-being as an older person will depend on their success. The fate of the economy and the fate of families are deeply connected.

At the moment, many groups are trying to improve public policy on these issues. The U.S. Department of Labor, for example, kicked off its [#LeadOnLeave campaign in September 2014](#) to encourage dialogue and experiments (through grants) on paid family leave — it’s a critically important initiative. But like flexible work arrangements, many of today’s efforts don’t get at the heart of the problem, which resides in the expectations for the way work is being accomplished. Moreover, even though there’s been more talk about paternity leave in recent years, most of the debate around work–family issues still centers on women. There’s a long way to go to make this a conversation about *everyone* ...

S+B: What should company leaders be doing differently?

BAILYN: For one thing, they need to think less about the amount of time committed, and individual input, and instead consider the kinds of tasks that have to be done and what’s needed to do them. They would then realize that they can bring together people with different needs to accomplish these different tasks. Companies have to understand that people’s lives are more than just their work — that there is a deep connection between what people can do economically and what they face in their personal lives. If we don’t allow that connection to influence the way we do the work, we’re going to hurt the company, people, and society in the long term. We’ll create a crisis of care.

Critically, senior leaders also need to realize that the way they reached the top might not be the only way to do it. And in fact, in light of changes both in the makeup of the workforce and in the way that work is done as a result of new technologies, globalization, and so on, the way they did it may very well no longer be the most effective way. Of course, it’s very hard for people who have gone through one system to think, “Maybe I didn’t have to do it like this.” Once you’ve made sacrifices, it’s not easy to turn around and say to someone else, “You can do it differently, and have a more integrated life.”

Finally, managers and company leaders need to think of themselves as role models. They have to stop modeling the old way of doing things, and start modeling a new, more learning-based existence. If the CEO says that workers can take time off any time they need it, but he or she is at the office or connected all day and night, such policies are not going to mean anything.

Middle managers are always the most resistant, because they feel they have the most to lose. But the reality is that they have many working years left, and should try to visualize a different way of working—one that is more effective and less stressful. Many companies are setting up wellness programs and promoting meditation, among other things. That’s fine. But what if, instead, you were able to eliminate some stress by rethinking the practices that are causing it in the first place?

S+B: Who is getting it right today?

BAILYN: One of the people on our Xerox research team, Leslie Perlow, is now a professor at the Harvard Business School. She wrote a book that’s made a big splash, called [Sleeping with Your Smartphone](#) [Harvard Business Review Press, 2012].

Leslie discovered that it wasn’t so much the long hours that bothered the people in her study, but rather the *unpredictable* hours. She conducted an experiment at a professional-services firm in which one night, from 6 p.m. to 9 a.m., each person on the team had to take time off. They would rotate; the dates were set up beforehand, and couldn’t be changed (at least not for work reasons). On the night off, the employee couldn’t have any connection with work whatsoever.

The group soon realized it would have to meet once a week to figure out how to make this possible for everybody. They had to team up, so that there was always another person available in case an urgent client need arose. In the process, they started talking more about how to deal with their clients, which they had never had time to do before. And they began to talk more about personal issues and personal needs ...

Elsewhere, some interesting and important work is being done at the [ThirdPath Institute](#), based in Philadelphia. It was founded by Jessica DeGroot, who is a Wharton MBA. She started with the concept of “shared care,” helping parents redesign their work lives so that both partners could support the family financially and care for their children. She’s since expanded to work with organizations that want to help people live what she calls integrated lives (the “third path”), and is growing a community of “integrated life advocates” who can share their stories and spread their influence within their companies and at the public policy level. The fact that an organization like ThirdPath exists is significant, because it’s making tools and resources available.

In addition, others are using the law to push for change. For example, Joan Williams’s Center for Work–Life Law pursues cases in which people have been discriminated against by their employers because of adjustments made as a result of family issues. It’s called [family responsibilities discrimination](#), or caregiver discrimination. These cases tend to be more successful than, say, tenure denial cases, which are usually based on some form of gender discrimination ...

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