Critical Career Junctures that Direct the Career Life-Cycle of Young Careerists

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I. Introduction

Today's workplace is a mosaic of different generations, each at a different point in the career life-cycle. At one end of the spectrum, recent college graduates are entering the workplace with dramatically different work perspectives than their older colleagues. They anticipate their careers will be a threshold through which to pursue personal passions, but this expectation often diminishes as they experience the reality of the job marketplace. These young careerists encounter tensions between career dreams and the reality of daily life, including the cost of living, lifestyle changes such as marriage, or major commitments such as purchasing a first home. In the middle of the multigenerational labor force are those seeking to move into managerial ranks. These workers are likely to experience parenthood for the first time, and many enter a second marriage, often involving blended families. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Baby Boomers are transitioning from mid-career to higher level management, while simultaneously caring for children and the increasing needs of elderly family members. Some of these older workers dramatically alter their career path to pursue career dreams previously dismissed in the face of critical life choices.

The term young careerist as it is used in this paper includes individuals of the Millennial and Generation X generations who are 21–35 years of age. These individuals are grappling with life choices that will affect their career paths and, potentially, the overall direction of their lives.[1] While this paper incorporates information covering the full range of those entering the workplace and taking over the upper ranks, it focuses on individuals seeking to build their careers. Three generational groups will be discussed in this paper:

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[1] Young careerists are the first segment of the emerging leaders category currently being studied by BPW Foundation. BPW Foundation is interested in issues that affect the Millennial generation and Gen X, which are poised to become leaders as the Baby Boomer generation ages. This paper focuses on the young careerist subset of emerging leaders, who encompass ages 21–35, because decisions made early in the career path can have long-term lasting effects on the full career life-cycle of workingwomen.

Generation	Age in 2008	Generation Range
Millennial (Gen Y)	19–26 years old	1982–2002
Generation X	27–43 years old	1965–1981
Baby Boomer	44–62 years old	1946–1964

While Baby Boomers, who hold the majority of high-level management positions, are clearly no longer young careerists, they are an integral component of this discussion. Millennial and Generation X young careerists work with—and often for—Baby Boomers, who came of age in a very different social and business climate, and therefore have different experiences, skills, expectations, values, perspectives and ways of communicating. For young careerists to hone their professional skills, optimize their experiences in their work environment and nurture their personal career advancement, they need to be aware of these generational differences. Young careerists should also recognize the divergent issues faced by different generations within the workplace; while young employees may be most concerned about personal work-life effectiveness and establishing a firm grounding for their careers, Baby Boomers are coping with a different set of issues, including caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents as well as children and preparing for retirement on top of the strain of their managerial responsibilities.

Understanding the impact of workers' choices made throughout the spectrum of their career is essential if our society is to successfully promote wage equity and workplace equality, thereby increasing women's lifetime earning potential and subsequently advancing the opportunities and improving the standard of life for women and their families. It is also important to examine the impact of generational and gender stereotypes on workers' decisions regarding career and life choices in order to understand the overarching impact upon workers' lives and their workplace environments.

Society typically assumes that the choices workers make to accommodate life needs are personally-dependent, free, and uninhibited. In reality, workers' decisions are often strongly shaped by the presence or absence of support in work environments as well as policies that influence options related to issues such as work hours, childcare and flexible leave. If workers feel limited by or forced out of their jobs, discussions about flexible work arrangements and human capital are nothing more than idle talk. Even in progressive policy discussions of equitable career opportunity advancement, women's stalled progress in the workforce is often blamed on their own work-life choices.

As this paper will demonstrate, the societal framework may purport to offer diverse options, freedoms, and paths, but in reality, women's work-life choices are often imbued with implicit limitations and ramifications. The discussion that follows will provide a framework through which to view the choices young careerists make along their career path, and the subsequent consequences these decisions have on individual lives, generations, workplaces, and society as a whole.

This analysis of critical life and career junctures will facilitate more informed policy discussions about how to ensure equity in the workplace, career advancement, wages and retirement security. Other countries such as Canada, with its twelve month partially paid maternity leave policy, and some European Union members, who provide subsidized day-care programs, recognize the impact that public policy can have on voluntary work practices. In the United States, recent discussions on Capitol Hill reveal that wage equity, job satisfaction, and the balance of career and family are important issues that will impact the development of public policy and workplace practices.

II. Characteristics of Generations in the Workplace

With the population living and therefore working longer, there have never been so many employees of different generational backgrounds working together. Millennials and Baby Boomers are the largest generations, and as they occupy two poles on the career spectrum, this means that a large number of young employees are eagerly searching for jobs and career advancement, while at the same time, large numbers of mature workers, who typically hold the highest positions in their organizations, are beginning to think about leaving the workforce for retirement. As Generation Xers begin to take over the managerial roles being vacated by Baby Boomers, and a flood of Millennials are filling entry-level positions, the diverse perspectives represented by these different generations may cause tension, conflict or confusion.

Conversely, the strong representation in the workplace of each of these three vibrant generations also provides the opportunity for an unprecedented exchange of ideas and expertise. Workers from each generation can learn from the perspectives and experiences of the others. As young careerists navigate the maze of workplace policies, the generational spectrum allows them to observe the far-reaching implications of work-life decisions, through observing the choices and consequences experienced by older colleagues, particularly their Baby Boomer generation supervisors and executives.

Millennials

Members of the Millennial generation, also called Generation Y, are at the beginning of their career life-cycle, typically either working towards post-graduate degrees or employed in first jobs in their field of choice. These young careerists tend to be well-educated, comfortable with technology and positive about their futures. This generation is also accepting of multiculturalism and exhibits a willingness to fight for social justice both within the workplace and the broader social sphere. The Millennial generation is predicted to be similar in size to the Baby Boomer generation, so their influence will be profoundly felt in the coming years.[1]

Young careerists of the Millennial generation have different perspectives, priorities, skills and work methods from previous generations because they have been raised in an environment where technology is a touchstone for gathering information and communicating with the world. As a result of accessing extensive information through technology, Millennials are less likely to rely on the wisdom of older colleagues to the same extent as young careerists of past generations.[2]

On the other hand, unlike prior generations, Millennials cultivate intimate relationships with their parents.[3] Because of these close relationships, young careerists watched their parents struggle in jobs vulnerable to management changes and economic instability. Therefore Millennials demand work settings that provide greater balance between work and life[4] and tend to be skeptical, unimpressed by authority, and selfreliant in their orientation to work.[5] Many young careerists may be forced to work for organizations that don't actually meet their standards for work-life effectiveness and workplace engagement, so these young employees will have to find ways to reconcile these issues in order to cultivate opportunities for ongoing career advancement.

Workplaces are recognizing that Millennials are motivated by different factors than employees of earlier generations, including the need for support, positive feedback, and working in a team environment. Furthermore, because Millennials were more involved in family discussions and decisions,[6] they harbor high expectations for engaging, challenging, and fulfilling work. Millennials may express dissatisfaction with the mundane nature of entry-level jobs, which can create friction with older colleagues who feel that they had to prove themselves to work their way up the corporate ladder. If organizations do not successfully nurture connections with young employees, integrating them into the workplace environment and nurturing positive interactions with older colleagues, young careerists may seek employment satisfaction elsewhere, which can impact their overall career advancement. Conversely, they may choose to remain within an unsatisfactory work environment but struggle to reconcile workplace expectations and realities and achieve their desired work-life balance.[7]

Young careerists are also entering into workplace environments that are in flux. Many employers are still designing work options based on a 1950s model of the American family, wherein the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the homemaker and caretaker. Some employers are beginning to develop more progressive workplace models, which acknowledge the diversity of workers' life and work needs. Yet currently young careerists must navigate the tensions, inconsistencies, and discrepancies of workplaces wherein employers are struggling to design work options that maximize and accommodate the needs of their multigenerational workforces.

Generation X

Generation Xers are firmly established in the middle of their career life-cycle. Promoted from entry-level jobs, they are now comfortable in mid-level positions even as they anticipate further career moves. At the same time they are taking other life responsibilities into consideration.

Generation Xers grew up in the late 1970s and early 1980s when women were entering the workplace in large numbers. The divorce rate also skyrocketed during this time, changing family dynamics and resulting in less quality family time. As a result, Generation Xers tend to focus on their own families and emphasize the need for work-life balance. According to a study on the dynamics of generational attachment to work versus family, 52 percent of Generation X are classified as family-centric, meaning that they place more importance on their families than their careers.[8] While 50 percent of Millennials are also family-centric, this shared commitment does not manifest itself identically within workplace environments because many Generation Xers eschew team projects, preferring to work alone. This may be a result of their relatively late exposure to community-based technology such as group chat rooms and instant messaging, when compared with Millennials, who thrive on team models in the workplace.

Despite their focus on family, Generation Xers remain committed to their careers. In fact, another study found that dual-centric employees, those who rated the importance of family and work equally, advanced the farthest in their careers. These findings indicate that serious involvement in other areas of life can actually benefit job performance.[9]

Until recently, it was assumed that primarily female workers sought family-friendly workplaces, but new studies[10] demonstrate that male Generation Xers also exhibit a strong desire for work-life balance to meet the demands of family and have the freedom to explore personal interests. For example, in 2007 fathers comprised 6 percent of PTA leaders, up from 4 percent in the preceding two years.[11] Such trends suggest that men as well as women seek careers in which they have the time and flexibility to be involved in outside activities related to their families and communities.

Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, find their careers affected by demands from two poles: raising children while also caring for aging parents. As a result, these workers are vulnerable to role strain, which often necessitates changes in their work lifestyle, particularly since these familial constraints come at a critical period in Baby Boomers' career life-cycles, as they are on the brink of moving from mid- to upper-level management.

Spillover from one domain to another saliently indicates how work is impacted by family responsibilities. Studies show that Baby Boomers who miss work to care for a sick child or due to family issues suffer the consequences of work spillover,[12] a concern which is particularly germane to women who want to be both ideal mothers and successful employees. Most workers cite that they are more stressed when family issues infringe upon the workplace than when work issues spill over into the personal realm. Workers see this encroachment as a threat to maintaining positive relations in the workplace, and they fear that it may reflect badly upon them as employees.[13] On the other hand, another study found that among spouses under the age of 50, having children correlates to less negative spillover from the work domain, perhaps indicating that familial responsibilities force workers to prevent job stresses from infiltrating other parts of their lives.[14]

Additionally, over the next two decades, an average of 10,000 Baby Boomers per day will reach retirement age.[15] As Baby Boomers begin to age out, they will face difficult choices about when to retire; these decisions are often directly tied to financial considerations as well as personal goals. This significant shift in the workplace will not only impact mature workers, but also their younger colleagues: both young careerists of Generation X who may be taking on the roles vacated by Baby Boomers, and Millennials who are entering a workplace that it is in flux, with many workers in upper-level management in the process of retiring.

III. Critical Junctures that Direct the Career Life-Cycle

During one's career life-cycle, a number of critical junctures shape the direction of one's career path. These four junctures will be explored in further depth in the following sections:

- Education
- Employment

- Gender Roles and Caregiving Status
- Generational Issues

Educational experiences mold one's career direction and first jobs form the entryway to a career path. Other external forces such as gender issues, generational differences and caregiving status further determine the topography of opportunities and experiences in the workplace, affecting the freedoms, successes and obstacles that young careerists encounter. Early decisions made by young careerists, such as the field of one's college degree or the decision to have children, can exert long-term effects on employment.

Education

During college, young careerists begin to consider how their choice of career will affect their later desire to have a family. To minimize work and family conflict, college-aged men and women may choose careers that are more flexible or family-friendly or, conversely, they may decide to postpone childbearing or have fewer children.[16] This conscious strategizing reflects the tension between career dreams and workplace realities.

These considerations are particularly important now, as the world of education has changed dramatically over the last 25 years. According to the latest statistics from the Department of Education, women's bachelor degrees outnumber men's: 57 percent of women graduate with a bachelor's degree versus 43 percent of men.[17] Yet higher enrollment rates of women at the undergraduate level has not translated into equal graduate enrollment rates, although some fields, such as law and medical schools, report an average 50 percent gender divide. The higher percentage of male graduate students reflects the transitions that influence women's decisions about schooling and employment. Graduate school coincides with the time when many women have children, and thus pursuing graduate studies tends to be more complicated for women than men.[18]

These complicated career-life decisions in turn cause women to perpetuate traditional, female-typified careers, such as elementary school teachers, nurses, waitresses, or administrative assistants, which will be explored further in the following section on Employment.

Level of educational attainment corresponds directly with job possibilities. For example, a study from the early 1990s demonstrated that among women ages 25–54, only 50 percent of those with less than four years of high school held jobs, whereas 74 percent of high school graduates were in the labor force, and 84 percent of women who graduated from college actively worked.[19]

Furthermore, because women continue to earn less on average than their male counterparts, their level of educational attainment is directly related to their poverty status. In 2003, the median annual earnings of a female high school graduate were more than 33 percent less than that of her male counterpart. The wage inequality was even more pronounced for a woman with more education: a woman with a bachelor's degree was almost 36 percent (approximately $18,133) less than that of a similarly qualified male colleague. A woman with a professional degree fared even worse, earning 44 percent (or $43,963) less than that of her male counterpart. A woman with a master's degree earned 32 percent (or $20,139) less than a man with the same educational background, while a woman with a doctoral degree earned 27% (or $21,208) less than a similarly qualified man.[20]

Employment

Young careerists of both genders are equally likely to be employed after attaining a bachelor's degree. Employment status and experiences are shaped in part by the general expectations of the employees. For example, Millennials indicate that they have limited loyalty for their entry-level jobs. When their expectations are not met, they believe it is acceptable to swiftly seek another position. A 2005 study of new lawyers found that 62 percent of female associates and 47 percent of male associates intended to stay with their firms for five years or less.[21] This is a dramatic shift, for in past generations new associates traditionally remained with the same firm for at least seven or eight years.

While young careerists may feel that they have greater control over their career choices and advancement, data from Canada demonstrates that two-thirds of women continue to work predominantly in traditional female professions, a proportion that has not significantly changed over the past 25 years.[22] Women are still over-represented in low-paying jobs; 44 percent of employed women work in technical, sales and administrative support jobs.[23] Men are much more likely (43 percent) to have higher paying blue-collar jobs in production, machine operation and repair than women (10 percent). Women are more likely to have white-collar jobs as professionals (23 percent versus 16 percent for men) and in administrative support (22 percent versus 8 percent for men).

Even when women and men work in the same fields, wage disparities are still rampant. Women in professional and related occupations earned almost 32 percent less than their male counterparts, while women in sales and office occupations earned over 24 percent less than similarly employed men. Female elementary and middle school teachers earned more than 10 percent less than male colleagues, despite constituting 81.7 percent of the field. Similarly, female registered nurses earned 8 percent less than their male colleagues, despite the fact that 91.6 percent of nurses are women. Female physicians and surgeons earned a marked 39 percent less than their male counterparts, while female college and university teachers earned 21 percent less than those who were male, and female lawyers earned over 22 percent less than their male peers in the field.[24]

A 2000 examination[25] of which industries are the best employers for women found that the representation of women is highest in the finance, insurance and real estate as well as in the service sectors. Financial, insurance and real estate markets also offer the highest hourly pay rates, with women earning $18.43 per hour on average. Women comprise 59 percent of executive, administrative, managerial, and professional specialty positions in the service sector, compared to 50 percent labor market average.

On the other hand, women are the most underrepresented in the sectors that are the most highly unionized: transportation, communication, utilities, manufacturing, mining and construction. While unionization does not guarantee career security and advancement, it can provide a greater degree of economic stability and support.

Furthermore, while women account for a higher percentage of administrative or managerial positions in the services sector, at $15.72 per hour on average, their wage is significantly lower than that of the more predominantly male-dominated industries, with transportation, communication and utilities rendering $17.93 per hour; manufacturing securing $16.79 per hour; and mining and construction earning $16.65 per hour.

Interestingly, while women have the least representation in the mining and construction sector, when they do work in this industry, they typically hold white-collar jobs. Women constitute 34 percent of executive, administrative, managerial and professional positions (versus 14 percent male employees), and 47 percent of technician, support, sales and administrative support roles (versus 2 percent male workers).

While many of the industries—such as construction, mining, and manufacturing—that have traditionally been male-dominated continue to maintain a pronounced gender divide, there is great potential for women to become involved in these areas. Women have already made their mark in the areas of finance, insurance, and real estate, which also offer the highest wages. Yet there is also opportunity for women to make a solid hourly wage in white collar positions in disproportionately male sectors, as evidenced above, as well as in burgeoning areas such as IT, wherein women currently hold only 26 percent of jobs.[26]

As young careerists are exploring career opportunities, making early career steps and gauging possibilities for future advancement, it is important for them to consider the traditional gender divisions and pay inequities within different industries. Female young careerists should educate themselves regarding the distribution, wages, opportunities, and statistics related to each sector, so that those who decide to go against the grain are prepared for the challenges they will likely confront.

Equipped with this knowledge, the women of younger generations can not only strengthen sectors (such as finance) that have already experienced pronounced growth in the percentage of female employees, but may also ambitiously pursue industries which continue to primarily draw male employees. When young careerists have an ambitious vision for more equitable gender representation throughout the industrial sectors, opportunities within these areas will become more widely available. Furthermore, when women *are* able to break through the glass ceiling, this individual success typically has a gradual net noticeable trickle-down effect for women in lower level positions in that same organization or sector.

While gender disparities are still prominent in different industries and career tracks, the overall occupational profile of employed women has diversified and improved since the late 1970s. In 2002, 39 percent of women had managerial or professional positions compared to only 24 percent in 1977. The number of men in managerial and professional positions, about 30 percent, has not changed over this period and ranges at about 30 percent.[27] Women have also expanded into technical fields that were traditionally dominated almost exclusively by men. Between 1986 and 2005, the percentage of technical writers who were female increased from 36 percent to 52 percent; women pharmacists increased from 30 percent to 48 percent; and female chemists increased from 11 percent to 35 percent. In 2005, women accounted for 30 percent of all lawyers, 32 percent of all physicians and surgeons, and 67 percent of all psychologists.[28] Notably, these positions all require higher education. Additionally, while women hold increasingly more managerial positions, this has failed to translate into similar growth within the upper levels of management.

Despite these limited or inconsistent growth patterns, a promising trend for female young careerists is emerging: salaries of full-time female employees in their 20s have surpassed the same-aged males in cities like Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis, Dallas and New York.[29] In New York City, these women earned 17 percent more than their male counterparts; in Dallas, this gap jumped to 20 percent.

On the other hand, The National Committee on Pay Equity reports while women's wages have risen in all states since 1989 (from 68.5 to 77 percent in 2006), the average full-time female employee does not make as much as the typical man in any state. Furthermore, over this same period, the wage disparity actually increased in Washington, DC, and progress in closing the gender wage gap has slowed considerably since 1990. While the gender wage ratio for annual earnings increased by 11.4 percentage points from 1980 to 1990, it increased by only 5.4 percentage points over the next 15 years.[30] The NCPE predicts that if the current rate of progress continues, it will take 50 years to close the wage gap nationwide.[31]

Gender Roles and Caregiver Status

Expectations, tensions and stereotypes surrounding gender issues, both perceived and real, strongly influence job performance and satisfaction. Stereotypes surrounding the role of women in the workforce and the conflicting responsibilities of work and family negatively affect a woman’s long-term viability in her job. While men also are impacted by gender stereotypes, these prejudices often manifest as reverse stereotypes, such as when men take on roles that have traditionally been occupied primarily by women, such as taking paternity leave. Thus sometimes critical choices made in the workplace are determined not by the employee but by the supervisor, based on conscious or unconscious biases.

The unconscious bias to preference men over women has been demonstrated in a number of studies, including one that shows that when women apply for a research grant, they must be 2.5 times more productive than men to be judged equally as competent. In the McKay study, respondents gave higher ratings on a five point scale to the comparable academic papers of a John T. McKay than those of a Joan T. McKay. In addition, since the implementation of blind orchestra auditions, in which candidates are evaluated from behind a screen, the percentage of women hired by the top five U.S. orchestras rose from less than 5 percent to 34 percent.[32]

Other studies further chart the unconscious bias against working women by analyzing negative assumptions about competence, progress and commitment.[33] Some researchers, such as Correll, suggest that making people aware of these ingrained biases may mitigate their effects, thereby reining in or eradicating gender bias in the workplace.[34] Currently, the work and life choices made by women have a much greater and farther-reaching impact on their careers and lives than those made by men. For example, the ongoing tendency of women to not negotiate salaries can have long-term effects. This propensity is linked to a vicious cycle of stereotypes, as demonstrated by a Carnegie Mellon study which found that while employers subtly penalize both men and women for salary negotiation, the negative effect for women was more than twice as great as that for men.[35]

Discrepancies in pay can negatively impact a woman's life-long earning potential, for when women begin at a lower salary than men, it negatively affects their earning potential throughout the entirety of their careers. Furthermore, Schnittker discovered that women who report the same income level as their male counterparts on average report better personal health.[36] This research suggests that work-life effectiveness measures would improve if women's salaries matched men's in comparable positions because pay equity could greatly reduce women's absenteeism.

While women have always made less to the dollar than men, numerous advocacy and research organizations that seek to confront this issue have emerged on the internet, including 9to5, Workplace Flexibility 2010, Institute for Women's Policy Research, Business and Professional Women/USA and MomsRising. This grassroots base has been instrumental in raising awareness about the recent Supreme Court decision that denied Lilly Ledbetter's suit of workplace discrimination, *Ledbetter, Lily v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.* Even though Ledbetter had worked for almost twenty years as a supervisor at a Goodyear tire plant, the Court concluded that she had learned about the pay discrepancy too late to file suit, despite the fact that she was paid 15 percent to 40 percent less than her male counterparts. MomsRising.org is working to spread a petition in support of Justice Ruth Ginsburg's dissenting challenge to the Court's decision.[37]

Furthermore, life decisions, such as whether and when to marry or have children, impact men's and women's careers differently. Women who marry before graduating are less likely to work after they obtain their bachelor's degree, whereas women who did not marry within four years of graduating are actually more likely than men to be employed. When career transitions deteriorate their economic stability, men often delay marriage until a time when they are more financially secure.[38]

Considered a watershed transition, parenthood is a critical juncture in many careers, often pushing dual-earner couples into the binary breadwinner/homemaker arrangement that became standard in the mid-20th century.[39] Employer support and employee control also take on more salience than ever before. For example, having children brings increased responsibilities but fewer societal and workplace supports. Additionally, a survey of single parents found that both men and women experience similar stresses and problems associated with being a lone caregiver; it also negatively affects their career satisfaction, success, prospects and security.[40] With the increasing numbers of single parents in the U.S., workplace policies must be put in place to offer support.

Striving to balance family and work can be overwhelming and may force workers, particularly women, to dramatically adjust work habits. When a female young careerist becomes a caregiver, her time at work decreases by more than two hours a day, from almost ten hours to seven and a half hours. The strain of balancing familial and work responsibilities is evident. For example, one-third of people who regret not having more children attribute this decision to the difficult equilibrium of raising children while still cultivating a successful career.[41]

There is also a strong negative correlation between parenthood and women working outside the home. Women who have children either before or within four years of graduating from college are less likely to be employed than their male counterparts.[42] Of women who worked full-time prior to having children, 43 percent report that they left jobs voluntarily at some point in their career to take care of their children. The incidence of labor force exiting is higher among women who work in small firms, have less challenging jobs or hold temporary positions.

While the additional support of a partner's income is still a major factor when women change jobs, it appears to be lessening in importance as women decide whether to leave the workforce to raise children.[43] On the other hand, men's working hours have on average risen sharply in recent years; consequently, women often cut back on their own work hours to fill a "parenting vacuum."[44] These decisions impact women's future employment as well as later retirement options.

While some industries offer these flexible work options, not every employee is eligible. There is an inherent tension within flexible work options, because many women-dominated jobs do not allow even the most basic workplace flexibility options, such as telecommuting, a compressed work week, or part-time work. For example, in 2005, 92 percent of registered nurses, 82 percent of all elementary and middle school teachers, and 98 percent of all preschool and kindergarten teachers were women.[45]

Academia serves as an example of a field in which there is potential for workplace flexibility policies, but these opportunities are often not made available or lead to repercussions from administrators or colleagues who are resentful of flexible work options. While some institutions offer paid maternity leave, many do not. To counteract these complications, some female professors try to time pregnancies to coincide with the summer schedule, but such planning is not always possible.[46] Furthermore, while some more flexible institutions do allow professors to stop the tenure clock from six months to a year, this benefit can cause resentment among other faculty; many new parents feel that taking advantage of this benefit will be detrimental to their career, particularly when it comes time for tenure review.

Similarly, recent studies have also indicated that women are frequently confronted with maternal profiling, which may limit mothers' job opportunities. Researchers created hypothetical female applicants to chart real world manifestations of prejudices against working women with and without children, and found that those without children were more than twice as likely as equally qualified mothers to be called for a second interview.[47] Women with children are 79 percent less likely to be hired and, if hired, are on average offered a starting salary $11,000 lower than non-mothers.

Fathers, by contrast, are offered higher salaries than comparable colleagues who do not have children. This type of subtle bias slowly erodes a woman's ability to command a commensurate salary and rise to the ranks of senior management. Another study found that managers and colleagues consistently consider working mothers less competent and committed, and hold them to higher standards of punctuality and performance.

Despite these prejudices, studies have shown that women are extremely committed to their jobs, particularly after returning from maternity leave. Women want to return to the workplace for the following reasons: 24 percent cite partner's income no longer sufficient for family; 38 percent cite household income no longer sufficient for family needs; 46 percent cite own independent source of income.[48] Furthermore, of the 60 percent of women who returned to work within the first year after childbirth, most took only three months of maternity leave. This study surmises that such work interruptions are too brief to justify lower wages and less advancement.[49]

While not all female young careerists confront the difficult decisions that surround having children and maintaining a career, it is important for all young employees to be aware of these issues, because it may affect their future decisions of whether or not to have children, when to start a family, or what decisions they will make to position them in different careers that may have greater opportunities for flexibility and work-life effectiveness. Furthermore, women who decide not to raise a family will still be affected through the work-life effectiveness success or challenges of their colleagues.

Additionally, an increasing number of Baby Boomers have been forced to leave their jobs to meet the demands of caring for an aging parent. Often referred to as the "pull" factor, 24 percent of women report leaving their jobs to care for elderly family members.[50] This creates not only a loss of income, but also compromises future pension and social security benefits. Studies show that caregivers are twice as likely to fall under the poverty line as non-caregivers.[51] As the population ages and elder care is a more pressing societal need, workers will feel strained to establish boundaries and harmony between work and life.

Many young careerists will not yet have to deal personally with the responsibilities of eldercare, but this additional responsibility for Baby Boomers can potentially place strain in a work environment. When Baby Boomer managers and executives feel torn between the demands of work, childcare, and eldercare, these diverse responsibilities may affect their attitudes and perspectives in the workplace. Colleagues and young employees may have to step up to provide additional assistance in the workplace.

It is clear that limited flexibility for caregivers can negatively affect an employee's career and standard of life, whether the worker is a Millennial young careerist or a Baby Boomer on the brink of retirement. Employers should attune themselves to the diverse needs of caregivers from the Millennial, Generation X, and Baby Boomer generations, for these issues will likely affect most workers at one time or another during their careers. Thus, workers are increasingly faced with a "Hobson's Choice"—two equally poor options from which to negotiate a successful career and financially secure future for themselves and their families.

Generational Issues

Understanding generational cultures may help observers parse out different consequences ascribed to different choices made by members of different generations in the workplace. Each generation exhibits distinct strengths and challenges, rendering the consequences of differing choices more extreme from generation to generation. The key is for each generation to be open-minded to support different perspectives, attitudes, preferences, and methods in the workplace, and to avoid judging colleagues from other generations.

Millennials

Millennials emphasize the equal importance of their careers and personal lives. One study found that the more college students observed their own mothers participating in the workforce during their own childhood, the less they anticipate work-life conflict in their own careers.[52]

Entrepreneurship is a key skill that Millennials bring to the workplace. Raised in an environment where they were told to pursue their passions, young careerists of the Millennial generation tend to be more confident and willing to take risks to pursue their interests entrepreneurially. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the self-employed category will grow 5 percent between 2004–2014, compared with 2 percent growth from 1994–2004. College campuses noticed this trend and have begun offering courses focusing on the skills necessary for successful entrepreneurship. Among two and four year colleges, 2006 data show that 80 percent of the 2,662 campuses in the report offer at least one such course.[53]

On the other hand, this trend may also be the result of Millennial young careerists' frustration and disillusionment with workplace environments that they find unduly boring, antiquated, inflexible or restrictive. In this way, Millennials' career choices may be based more on current job satisfaction than on an understanding of long-term implications.

Generation X

Generation Xers' critical career junctures relate predominantly to earnings and job status. Generation Xers believe in the power of investing in their personal development. Since they don't feel they can rely upon job security, these young careerists typically emphasize strengthening their own professional viability. Generation X young careerists tend to prefer involvement in workplace projects, being managed by results and output rather than process and having employers who are open to creativity and innovation.[54] Many of these attributes are shared among the young careerists of today's workplace, both those of the Millennial and X generations. Since Generation Xers are mid-career, they typically seek career options that will net better salaries and establish growth opportunities.

Yet Generation Xers also desire more flexibility to meet their family needs. While this demand for greater adaptation is echoed by young careerists of the Millennial generation, the motivations differ, for Millennials crave more time and freedom to pursue personal interests, as the majority do not yet have families of their own. Furthermore, because their Baby Boomer parents waited longer to start families, young careerists of Generation X may find themselves juggling not only the pressures of mid-career maneuvering and advancement and thriving families, but also the increasingly prevalent necessity of eldercare.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are experiencing both the mid-point of their careers and the mid-point of their lives. The dedication and passion they once had for their work may shift, particularly as outside demands from children and aging parents force them to re-ascribe the boundaries between work and life.

Multitasking to remain committed to both work and family, particularly after years of hard work to be promoted, eventually takes a toll, particularly on women, who are typically the primary caregivers, and who must also confront stereotypes and challenge barriers in the job field. Consequently, Baby Boomers sometimes return to their ideals, pursuing career dreams they had put on hold earlier. Baby Boomers seek new challenges, whether in their careers or communities, particularly through volunteer commitments.[55] In some cases, these decisions to focus on external involvements or to pursue a different career track may drop Baby Boomers back into entry-level positions and pay, despite their years of on-the-job experience.

To accommodate caregiving demands, many Baby Boomers may also move to an alternative work schedule. A study of part-time workers from 43 companies in the US and Canada found that in addition to reduced-load work arrangements, participants used other strategies to balance the demands of work and home, such as leaves of absence, career "self-plateauing," self-employment, telecommuting, or taking a career break for a period of time.[56] When Baby Boomers are confronted with greater caregiving demands, they may have less time to foster successful mentoring relationships with young careerists. Yet when employers offer these flexible options, enabling Baby Boomers to more successful balance the demands of work and home, they will be better equipped to continue nurturing successful, productive careers and also remain committed to strengthening the workplace community through activities such as mentoring.

These increasing options for Baby Boomers who are shouldering a greater range of responsibilities may also affect the roles and opportunities available to young careerists. Younger employees may need to step up to help address the workload of mature workers who are shifting to alternative workplace arrangements, such as leaves of absence or fewer hours. These changes can potentially offer diverse opportunities for young careerists to expand their skills, expertise and experiences, and to take on greater responsibilities within the workplace, thereby possibly opening up new opportunities.

IV. Conclusion: Are Young Careerists Opting Out or Being Pushed Out?

If workers feel forced out of their careers, discussions about flexible work arrangements and human capital are simply that—just talk. When politicians and organizations engage in discussions of pay equity or inequitable career advancement, women's stalled progress is often blamed on their own work-life choices, which are assumed to be made freely, without implicit ramifications or limitations, within a societal framework that supposedly embraces diverse options and freedoms. In reality, as this paper has demonstrated, this is simply not the case.

A provocative research study published by the Center for Work-Life Law in 2006 identifies the realities behind the media coverage of women "opting out":[57] first, because these women have held professional and managerial roles, they represent only 8 percent of women in America. Secondly, these stories pinpoint family life as the main reason women quit, whereas a recent study showed that 86 percent of women cite workplace constraints, such as inflexible jobs, as the primary reason.[58]

Companies often do not offer programs to support young families, such as subsidized day care or after school programs for young children. According to Jodi Heymann in her book *Forgotten Families*, most employers do very little to help working parents address the needs of children under age six. Subsidized federal funding equals less than the equivalent of two afternoons of after school childcare for school age children. Since companies provide limited support and the government's role is minimal, many workers are forced to stay at home with their children, at least in the short term.[59]

Research has shown that when employees do have access to flexible work policies where they can opt to reduce hours or move to non-traditional hours, such as an evening schedule when a spouse could be at home with the children, turnover is significantly reduced.[60] Yet while many corporations offer paid maternity leave, they typically require remaining workers to take over the workload. Mothers returning from leave are often greeted with resentment because their colleagues have not been compensated with promotions or raises for the additional work.

About one third of employed women (35 percent) report that their office culture penalizes employees who take advantage of flexible work policies. This same survey also reports that 48 percent of men felt that job sharing is an illegitimate practice.[61] These findings suggest that even in careers where caregiving alternatives are available, the majority of workers who need flexibility are unable to utilize it without negatively affecting their careers.

When flexible policies fail to meet their needs, employees will speak with their feet. According to "The Hidden Brain Drain Study," 17 percent of women left their jobs because of "push" factors: their positions were not satisfactory or fulfilling, or they did not feel supported by their workplace environment.[62]

Young careerists are at a crossroads. Being forced out of the workplace limits their future ability to provide for themselves and their families, particularly given the high rates of divorce and elder family care. Each generation has different needs in the workplace coinciding with where they are in their career life-cycle. Research suggests that workplaces are not addressing these specific needs, offering only a "one size fits all" approach in the form of work-life effectiveness initiatives.

Workplaces must equip themselves with policies and programs that will both attract and retain highly skilled young careerists, accommodating their different roles as individuals and caregivers outside the workplace. In addition, American public policy must shift to acknowledge and advocate for these changes, facilitating wide-spread recognition of these biases, limitations, and systemic problems, thereby pressuring organizations to actively bring about change.

V. Discussion Questions

I. How would you describe the career track of young careerists—workers ages 21–35—around you? What kind of choices do you observe young careerists making related to personal needs? How would you describe how these choices have affected their career mobility? What types of programs or policies are in place to support these choices? What is missing?

II. Within the young careerist segment there are two vibrant generational groups: Millennials (beginning their career) and Generation X (moving into middle management). Which group do you belong to? How would you describe the interactions you experience within and between generations? How could these interactions be more cohesive, collaborative, and beneficial for all?

III. Each generation has different levels of caregiving responsibility. What supporting policies and practices are in your workplace to support caregiving needs? How well does your workplace meet each generation's needs? What is missing?

IV. Retention is the key to solidifying the investment made in highly qualified employees, and is particularly important as Baby Boomers retire, taking their skills and experience with them. As Generation Xers are not numerous enough to fill the positions vacated by Baby Boomers, and Millennials will be entering the workforce with a unique work ethic and strong demands for balance, what plans does your organization have in place to retain workers? How is retention viewed in your organization? Are rates regularly reviewed? Does it have senior managers' attention?

V. Diversity departments have been set up to help organizations support and advance women and minorities. To be successful, these departments must slow the tide of implicit bias that can negatively affect the progress, performance, and advancement of women and minorities. How would you describe the diversity programs in your organization? How would you describe their impact on the advancement of women and minorities? What is being done about the wage gaps that exist between men and women? Is there a stigma attached to the choices women and minority young careerists are making to improve their work-life effectiveness? If so, what is being done about the negative impact?

VI. Mentoring is an effective tool to retain skilled young careerists and help women and minorities connect to the internal network of an organization. How do you see young careerists benefiting from mentoring programs? How would you describe the mentoring programs in your workplace? Is there a formal program? If informal, are minority groups and women getting access to senior managers? How would you describe mentoring across generational lines? What, if any, improvements to your program would you recommend?

VI. Research Recommendations

To gain a better understanding of the issues young careerists face, consider some of the following further research options:

I. Conduct case studies with companies that have a high percentage of young careerists in order to ascertain which methods and policies work and which don't. Studies should also highlight which approaches allow both men and women to flourish in the workplace. Observe the impact of diversity programs in changing women's opportunity for advancement and reduction of wage gaps, such as programs designed to combat bias and wage discrepancy in the workplace.

II. Hold a roundtable discussion with targeted companies to identify challenges with diversity programs and retention strategies for young careerists.

III. Develop an issue paper of best practices that support young careerists, addressing initiatives that enhance women's advancement, earning potential, and the reduction of negative gender bias. BPW Foundation's 2008 publication, *Successful Workplaces Digest*, can serve as a model.

VII. Endnotes

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VIII. Editorial Acknowledgements

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