

# Bookend generations offer new hope for America

**Commentary by Ellen Galinsky**

Ellen Galinsky is president of the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today's changing workplace, changing family and changing community.

It is rare to go to a business meeting these days without the conversation quickly turning to generational issues. Most of the talk, however, is about younger employees.

Business leaders sense that something is different about the new entrants to their organizations and some of them have confirmed their suspicions with internal employee surveys. They say that younger employees want meaning in their work and they want to—in fact, expect to—work for companies with a social commitment to such causes as preserving the environment and improving education.

Business leaders also note that younger employees expect workplace flexibility. As “digital natives,” they have grown up with the idea of being connected to the Internet and doing work anytime, anyplace; and they don't see why they shouldn't work that way in their jobs. The CEO of Ernst & Young, Jim Turley, articulates what I hear:

*There are all sorts of stereotypes of Gen Y. Some people think that they're lazy. Frankly, I think that's a myth. We've done a lot of research, and what we're understanding is they're actually very committed to working hard, but they want to do so with a great deal more flexibility than perhaps I demanded or wanted when I was their age. Also, I think this generation is extraordinarily focused on the external: on doing the right things for the world.*

Studies from the Families and Work Institute validate business leaders' observations—even among those still in high school! When asked about their “must haves” in jobs in the future, a nationally representative group of high school students puts finding jobs that are personally meaningful and jobs that allow time for personal and family activities at the very top of its list.

Rather than saying “grow up,” or “if you can't work our way, we don't want to hire you,” it's striking that a significant number of business leaders are listening and responding to the values of their entry-level employees. Jim Turley sees these changes in young people as positive and says that his colleagues, from “the oldest, crustiest partners on down through the organization,” actually understand how important responding to generational change is to business success. They, and numerous other companies, are providing increasing opportunities for meaningful work and workplace flexibility, including flex careers, where one can move in and out of the labor force over one's life cycle.

Employers seem less aware that the “bookend” generation—those 44 to 70 years old—want and expect the same things, meaningful work and flexibility, as they move toward their later careers. This confluence is not surprising. These later careerists are often the parents of the Millennial Generation.

What is surprising to me is that many business leaders have yet to act on the hopes and expectations of their older employees with as much urgency as they have responded to those of their younger counterparts.

In 2003, the Families and Work Institute studied 10 multinational companies and their top 200 executives (100 male and 100 female in each company). Conducted with Catalyst and Boston College, our study, *Leaders in a Global Economy*, found that 44 percent of these top executives planned to leave their companies within the next five years. Of these, almost three in 10 (29%) did not plan to retire but wanted to pursue a different career. The response to that finding did not elicit the urgency I expected from business leaders. It was, instead, “Five years is a long way off.”

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Some business leaders are, of course, more concerned, especially if they are from sectors already experiencing worker shortages—for example, health care, education, and those industries that rely on skilled engineers and scientists—or if they themselves are envisioning new lives in encore careers.

Thus, the new findings from the *MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey* are coming at *exactly* the right time. That there are now between 6 to 9.5 percent of those 44 to 70 who are already engaged in encore careers—working at least 15 hours per week for pay or a

stipend in jobs focused on serving the social good—is tipping the scale. That 45 percent of individuals in the same age category are interested in encore careers will tip the scales even more.

It is especially important to me that those interested in encore careers include blue-collar (14%) as well as white-collar and professional employees. Like the younger generation, these future encore careerists want to continue to learn, be productive and challenged, and use their skills and experience to help others—all in jobs that allow them flexibility.

There is clearly a long road to travel to realize the hopes and desires of those who want encore careers. As a society, we must:

- Change the public mindset so that the notion of flex careers over the life cycle moves from rhetoric to reality.
- Make policy changes to provide health care for late careerists and end financial penalties for those continuing to work after retiring from midlife careers.

Others must make changes, too.

- Business leaders must respond to the desire for flexibility voiced by both younger employees and older ones and must use creative workplace initiatives to help employees at all points in their careers make key transitions.
- Organizations need to step up to help employees find a match between their interests and available and meaningful opportunities.
- Nonprofit organizations must prepare to work with this new group of employees.

A new study from the Families and Work Institute, the *2008 National Study of Employers*, offers some hopeful information for the encore generation. In this nationally representative study of employers with 50 or more employees, nonprofits were consistently more likely than for-profits to provide workplace flexibility, caregiving leaves, child and elder care assistance, and health care benefits. As a sector, nonprofits can be good places to work!

This is a political season where there is a great deal of talk about change—is it real, is it possible? The hopes and desires of the bookend generations, of younger and older workers alike, announce loudly that change is desired, and that workplace flexibility tops the list. Flexibility for employees in their early, mid, and late careers will allow all of us to truly be involved with our work, our families, our communities, and our world. It's a promise for America's future that is imminently possible, one that must be realized. ■

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