

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Cross-Generational Perspectives on Work-Life Balance and its Impact on Women's Opportunities for Leadership in the Workplace**

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**This qualitative study focuses on how women of three different generations, Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers, view the concept of work-life balance and what relationship these views have to their attainment of workplace leadership positions. Work-life balance was defined differently across the three generations, but the generational lines faded as most women reported struggling with finding a balance. Some women conveyed choosing not to pursue high-level leadership positions as the personal cost was too high. Those who had obtained high-level leadership positions shared what types of support were most effective in helping them juggle personal and professional obligations. A general theory became apparent; the answer for women may not be balancing, but rather integrating work-life commitments.**

**Keywords:** cross-generational, work-life balance, women, leadership, workplace

### **Introduction**

“Work-life balance is the term used to describe those practices at the workplace that acknowledge and aim to support the needs of employees in achieving a balance between the demands of their family (life) and work lives” (Jyothi & Jyothi, 2012, p. 35). Today’s workforce is comprised of three generations working side by side – Generation Y (born between 1981-2000), Generation X (born between 1965-1989) and Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964). Each generation brings distinctly different sets of values, expectations, attitudes, and motivational factors to their work (Klun, 2008).

### **Generational Descriptions**

Baby Boomers are comprised of the post-World War II babies. They are also known as the generation who “questioned authority.” Boomers have enjoyed unprecedented employment and educational opportunities in most countries. They value creativity—while their parents were conformists, this generation searched to break the mold. They love adventure and are risk-takers. Boomers tend to evaluate achievement in

terms of personal fulfillment. This generation was the first generation to discover that lifetime employment no longer existed—so job security is not everything to them, job satisfaction is more important. With women now firmly implanted in the workforce, Boomers have been forced to re-evaluate the role of work in their personal lives. Because Boomers invented new forms of families, they also incurred new stresses. Boomers were the first generation to divorce at a higher rate than the two previous generations (Hammill, 2005).

Generation X was the first generation to grow up in the new family systems created by the Boomers, so this group tends to be comprised of independent individuals. The Xers also adapted the Boomers “question authority” attitude quickly—much to the dismay of their Boomer parents. They are determined to be involved, responsible and in control. Because Xers grew up watching television, they tend to have a more cynical view of the world and they focus on the here and now. They are risk takers, but they take calculated risks and are not

intimidated by authority. They are problem solvers, tend to be goal oriented, and demand flexibility (Hammill, 2005). The Gen Yers (also known as Millennials) are the first generation to grow up with the internet—they do not remember a time when it didn't exist. Many Millennials are both technologically savvy and dependent upon it. They are over stimulated and become easily bored. This generation understands they will change jobs at least once every five years. As such, titles do not mean much—they believe respect should be earned based on the job, not the title. Millennials are goal-oriented and are team players. However, they are extremely independent and feel empowered. They will question workplace regulations and leave one organization to go to another if they are not satisfied. They have also embraced technology which allows them to talk and do business when they want to do it, as well as have relationships all over the world (Hammill, 2005).

### **Work-Life Balance**

"In the highly competitive global scenario, society and organizations are filled with conflicting commitment and responsibilities. Hence, work-life balance has become an important issue at the workplace" (Kanwar, Singh & Kodwani, 2009, p. 3). Kanwar, Singh and Kodwani note that work-life balance facilitates job satisfaction and promotes a healthy balance between family and work life, while effectively reducing organizational costs and enhancing employee performance. Interestingly, they also identified that burnout by those who struggle to attain work-life balance is a common thread that hinders attainment of that very goal.

"Seeking out a more balanced life is not a women's issue; balance would be better for us all" (Slaughter, 2012, p. 100). However, few can argue against the point that women carry most of the burden of caring for children, grandchildren and parents, while also juggling household tasks and responsibilities at work. "Generally speaking, in the United States, women's career development is still more subject to the family needs than men's" (Zhao, 2011, p. 725). Women, more than men, see such options as part time work, child care availability, and work flexibility, as ways to improve their work life balance (Doble & Supriya, 2010). Guillaume and Pochic (2009) stated there are three options for a man and woman who share a home life together and hold top management positions to achieve work-life balance:

They can try to lead two symmetrical careers at once, trying to move together and showing their commitment by putting in long hours at work (double-career model); they can manage their two careers alternatively (alternate model, knowing that women are more likely to accept a momentary disruption of their career for their husband's benefit); or they can again opt for work-life reconciliation knowing that their career will suffer (a family-oriented model) (p. 32).

Furthermore, some individuals question whether it is even possible for work-life balance to be attained in today's socioeconomic state:

I still strongly believe that women can "have it all" (and that men can too). I believe that we can "have it all at the same time." But not today, not with the way America's economy and society are currently structured. Millions of working women face difficult life circumstances. Some are single mothers; many struggle to find any job; others support husbands who cannot find jobs. Many cope with a work life in which good day care is either unavailable or very expensive; school schedules do not match work schedules; and schools themselves are failing to educate their children. Many of these women are worrying not about having it all, but rather about holding on to what they do have (Slaughter, 2012, p. 86).

Emslie and Hunt (2009) concluded that work-life balance choices are constrained by socioeconomic resources and cultural norms and noted that "while the middle-class independent women had the freedom to reduce their working hours in order to enhance their work-life balance, this option was not open to those with more limited resources" (p. 168).

Women have broken down barriers and paved new paths, all the while pursuing the elusive work-life balance, but have they successfully achieved the equilibrium needed to balance the demands of their personal and professional lives? Slaughter (2012) gives insight as to why she believes women haven't found the balance they need:

Although women, as a group, have made substantial gains in wages, educational attainment, and prestige over the past three decades, the economists Justin Wolfers & Betsey Stevenson suggests that women are less happy today than their predecessors were in 1972, both in absolute terms and relative to men. The best hope for improving the lot of all women, and for closing what Wolfers & Stevenson call a "new gender gap"—measured by well-being rather than wages—is to close the leadership gap: to elect a woman president and 50 women senators; to ensure that women are equally represented in the ranks of corporate executives and judicial leaders. Only when women wield power in sufficient numbers will we create a society that genuinely works for all women. That will be a society that works for everyone (p. 89).

While Slaughter focuses on closing the leadership gap, Sandberg (2013) alludes to a leadership gap forming as a result of women holding themselves back, versus being held back by their counterparts:

When it comes to integrating career and family, planning too far in advance can close doors rather than open them. I've seen this happen over and over. Women rarely make one decision to leave the workforce. Instead, they make a lot of small decisions along the way, making accommodations and sacrifices that they believe will be

required to have a family. Of all the ways women hold themselves back; perhaps, the most pervasive is that they leave before they leave (p. 93).

Theoretically, work-life balance is straightforwardly attainable by simply allocating equal time between work-related tasks and activities related to other areas of an individual's life. Jyothi and Jyothi (2012), however, state that a positive work-life balance involves achievement and enjoyment and should not be understood as simply an equal balance or scheduling equal number of hours for each one's work and personal activities. From theory to reality, the concept becomes much more complex as contextual circumstances change the landscape and alter the work-life dynamic. For example, previous discussions of work-life balance for women typically revolved around balancing work demands with those of raising children. Today, however, just as many women mention the demands of caring for aging parents. Emslie and Hunt (2009) report on this further:

Women found it difficult to combine roles such as employee, partner, mother, friend and daughter, and spontaneously used metaphors of juggling and balance to express these difficulties (for example, 'can't keep all the balls in the air', 'juggling match', need 'more of a balance'). Many discussed caring for grandchildren or assisting elderly parents with household tasks. Maureen and Heather spoke about making difficult choices between spending time with aging parents or with their children (p. 159).

In addition to often having more care-taking demands placed on them, women also are learning how to navigate an increasingly technologically driven world. "Recent advances in technology have for example resulted in an almost seamless interface between work and family" (Brough & Kalliath, 2009, p. 581). "While mobile technologies undoubtedly facilitate flexibility and free people from restricted hours and physical locations, they also blur boundaries of work and personal time" (Sarker, Sarker & Ahuja, 2012, p. 145). Currie and Eveline (2011) also describe a fading divide between work-life domains: "There has been a shift from thinking of these domains as separate and distinct realms to thinking of them as on a continuum" (p. 534). They further detail this invasion and intrusion of e-technologies into homes as "a blessing and a curse" that is of benefit to work, but comes at a cost to family life (p. 533). Thurston (2012) suggests that technology is such a threat to work-life balance that there is no place anyone can go to get away from work, further emphasizing this by stating that even the restroom holds no solace. Conversely, Cousins and Varshney (2009) challenge concerns that technology is disrupting work-life balance and propose that it may simply be representative of new ways of working and living. Technology may, in fact, assist with work-life balance as the "ubiquity of computing resources is increasing and work activities infiltrate the home with ease and spontaneity, and employees can carry out family activities at work effortlessly" (p. 117).

### **Work-Life Balance Across Generations**

Technology in particular has given way to a broader gap between older and younger generations. Gen Xers and Millennials view workplace boundaries much differently than baby boomers. They are much more inclined to value efficiency over face time, as they want their results managed but not their flexibility. They want to be able to use technology to help them do their jobs and also provide work-life balance" (Sonier, 2012, p. 22).

What constitutes work-life balance, however, changes at various stages of people's careers and different factors become important to individuals as they age (Jyothi & Jyothi, 2012). "The negotiation of work and life is mediated by generational attitudes and understandings of the workplace" (Favero & Heath, 2012, p. 351). Klum (2008) concurs noting that:

Baby boomers may have pioneered the concept of work-life balance as an important component of their satisfaction with work, but younger workers from Generation X (born 1960–1980) and Generation Y (born 1980–2000) place even higher value on meshing family needs with the demands of their jobs (p. 1).

Sonier (2012), however, asserts that Baby Boomers are often considered die hard workaholics who have long sneered at the idea of a work-life balance. As such, it is not surprising that a tension surfaces in the workplace with the addition of Gen X and Y workers who seek improved accommodations to better balance work and life (Favero & Heath, 2012). Nevertheless, Sonier reports a clear consensus among generations:

The data strongly suggests that all generations are now working longer hours and are making significant work-life sacrifices. A recent survey by the Society of Human Resource Management finds that among all generations, 89% of American workers say work-life balance is now a problem (p. 20).

### **Women and Leadership**

Many women sacrifice job advancement opportunities if they do not perceive they can balance work and other obligations (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). This is especially true if they deem the personal cost to be too high (Gerdes, 2010). Employers can no longer ignore the significant impact that non-work demands have on employee performance, commitment and job satisfaction. As Jyothi and Jyothi (2012) share "It is not enough for organizations to implement family-friendly practices such as flextime and extended parental leave, to reduce employees' work-life conflicts. It is more important to have a supportive culture that encourages employee utilization of work-life benefits" (p. 36). Schueller-Weidekamm and Kautzky-Willer (2012) concur noting that:

Women are still disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions. Women still face a trade-off between career positions that are associated with power and influence and emotional responsibilities and family life. Long-term career planning is partly hindered by family

planning, which affects successful career development (p. 248).

Without strong organizational support, some women find it is easier to simply leave the workforce (Zhao & Shang, 2011). Organizations with supportive cultures that retain women who assume leadership roles, however, can look forward to a financial advantage. Desvaux, Devillard-Hoelling and Meaney (2008) found that firms which had three or more women in senior management had higher scores on all dimensions that related directly to financial performance than did firms with no women at the top.

Although there is significant research on both work-life balance and generational differences, there is little research examining both generational differences and work-life balance among women. Favero and Heath (2012) noted this lack of research and recommended that future research attend to questions such as “How do women from different generations work differently or the same as they progress through the life cycle?” (pg. 351), and “How does conflict with work and life change among generational cohorts as they age?” (p. 351). McNamara, Pitt-Catsaouphes, Matz-Costa, Brown and Valcour (2012) also support a need for additional “gender-focused analysis of satisfaction with work–family balance focusing on differences within genders, rather than between genders” (p. 293). Furthermore, there is little information on how generational differences and the pursuit of work-life balance impact women’s opportunities for leadership.

This study attempts to shed light on some of these issues by using a qualitative research examination of the following questions: (a) Do women from each of the three different generations experience work-life conflict?; (b) Are there differences in the way the generations balance their professional and personal life?; (c) How do they and their places of employment address potential work-life balance issues and provide support?; (d) Does organizational support help women move into organizational leadership positions?; and (e) How willing are women in the workplace to help each other.

Qualitative research techniques are particularly beneficial when the researcher seeks to understand the world from the perspective of those being studied (Pratt, 2009) and allows participants to communicate details that address the context from which they speak.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A total of 161 women fully completed the study questionnaire with 79% self-identifying their ethnicity as White, 68% reporting they were married and 63% indicating they had at least one child. Seventy six% of the participants were employed full-time in a variety of settings ranging from Education to HealthCare and Consulting to

Telecommunications with 63% indicating they currently held a managerial or leadership position in their organization. Forty % of those surveyed held at least a Bachelor’s degree.

Generational breakdown of the participants was: a) Baby Boomers (born from 1946-1964) = 54; b) Generation X (born from 1965-1980) = 69; and c) Generation Y (born from 1981-2000) = 38.

### **Instrument**

The author-designed questionnaire created for this study was based on an interview protocol used as a course assignment in a Women’s Leadership MBA course taught by one of the authors. The study instrument contained various demographic questions, one optional question for women to make any comment(s) they chose and the following five primary questions:

1. Has there been a time in your life when your personal and professional goals clashed or were not in balance? If so, please elaborate.
2. Do you see any differences between the way you balance your work and personal life from women in your family or workplace who are from different generations than you? If so, please elaborate.
3. How supportive have organizations for which you have worked been regarding your responsibilities and commitments outside of work? Please explain your response.
4. What impact does the above described level of organizational support have on the ability of women to move into organizational leadership positions?
5. Do women in your workplace help each other and have you noticed any change in the willingness of women to help each other over the span of your professional life? Please explain your response.

### **Procedure**

Once Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the researchers’ university, the authors invited colleagues, family members, personal friends, and professional contacts to respond to the questionnaire. All participants were asked to forward the survey to other females they thought might like to participate. In addition, a link to the survey was also posted on various professional organizations’ websites from whom the authors obtained permission. Data was collected over a three month period in the fall of 2012 with results maintained in Qualtrics, a web-based research surveying software program.

Responses were grouped according to generation. At the halfway point of data collection, the authors began to read through the participants’ answers using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) and Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) constant comparative analysis techniques. Responses were then analyzed again at the conclusion of the study. Credibility was established through the use of triangulation between the three authors.

Through the use of open coding (Boyatzis, 1998), the initial general framework, key word analysis, and extraction of phrases and contextual comments was determined. Next, emerging categories and over-arching themes were identified. Then, axial coding techniques were used to build a hierarchy of codes, categories and themes. Finally, selective coding was employed to generate key statements that resulted in a general theory.

### Results

In examining the responses to each of the five primary research questions, some general themes emerged. Specific findings follow.

#### **Question 1. Has there been a time in your life when your personal and professional goals clashed or were not in balance?**

Generation Y women mentioned clashes such as: "Working an inconsistent, 50+ hour a week schedule didn't allow me the time to pursue personal interests, such as joining an intramural sports league and joining a Toastmasters Club" and

Yes. My first job out of college was incredibly demanding and provided no opportunity for a healthy work-life balance. As a newlywed, my home life was very important to me. However, getting a good start to my career was also important.

Generation X and Baby Boomer participants frequently mentioned clashes regarding having and raising children (when they were younger) and helping with aging parents. Quotes from some of the participants which reflect these themes include "Yes - when my children were young and required my being available to pick them up after school. This conflict required my having to leave my job" and

Yes, when I had an opportunity to accept a high paying, high profile, right up my alley kind of job, one of my parents became terminally ill. I chose my parent over the job. Some people did not understand that decision, but I have no regrets.

#### **Question 2. Do you see any differences between the way you balance your work and personal life from women in your family or workplace who are from different generations than you?**

Generation Y women often noted that one difference between them and older working generations is technology. As one woman stated:

I think the generations in the past were more effective in balancing work and personal life. I feel this imbalance has been partly due to technology. Women today bring work home due to the internet and email. I feel this causes more of a grey line and therefore, the work/family lines to cross more often.

Generation X women, however, stated a difference between them and their older female relatives was that their relatives did

not have to work and thus balance was easier to obtain. For example, this woman shared:

Oh yeah...completely. Older generations of women don't seem to bother trying to have a career if they don't have too. The man is the breadwinner. The woman is the homemaker. Case closed. I am sure they look at my generation and shake their heads. I know my mother says, "I don't know how you do it all."

Some Baby Boomers made negative comments about the work ethic of younger generations. For example, one woman stated "Younger generations don't live to work. Baby Boomers live to work. We created the 80-hour week and feel guilty if we take time off." Other Baby Boomers, however, wanted to share their life wisdom and encouraged younger women to give up on being "superwomen."

#### **Question 3. How supportive have organizations for which you have worked been regarding your responsibilities and commitments outside of work?**

No generational differences surfaced for this question. Most participants said "yes" their organizations were supportive or it depended on where they were working. For example, one participant said:

I find it varies on a boss-by-boss basis. My female bosses with families and young children, and are familiar with having to juggle many different roles, are generally more flexible. Male bosses, bosses with older children, or bosses without children are less forgiving and more demanding of my time outside of work. In my experience, they tend to believe that I'm available to work outside of standard work hours or on my vacation, and are more resentful when I take sick or vacation days.

Some women, such as this one, mentioned quitting jobs that did not provide the support they needed:

Some have been more responsive than others. In my current position, things have been very flexible; however, when I had a purely administrative job the demands placed on me were great. The needs of the business typically came first particularly in our busiest times. Once I quite a job as a Director of Education because my daughter got sick and I needed to be with her more. The demands of the job did not allow this so I resigned.

#### **Question 4. What impact does the above described level of organizational support have on the ability of women to move into organizational leadership positions?**

Again, there were no generational differences on the responses to this question. Many respondents said something similar to this woman "It's vital. Without that support, many women are forced to choose, which shouldn't have to happen. Some women choose the career, some their families, either choice can have significant consequences."

Moving into leadership positions was also very situational to the industry in which the woman worked. Those who listed

working in an Education sector, for example, were pleased with the opportunities to obtain leadership positions. Several women, however, noted that working in a male dominated industry made it more difficult to obtain a leadership position. As one woman said “My location within this organization is led by white males. We have 300 employees at this site. We have four women in second tier leadership roles but none at the highest level. I don't see a woman being offered a top tier leadership role here.”

**Question 5. Do women in your workplace help each other and have you noticed any change in the willingness of women to help each other over the span of your professional life?**

As with the above two questions, there were no generational differences on the answers to this question. Support was very situational with women from all generations noting that their biggest supporters or “enemies” might be women. As one woman put it:

I'd say "it depends." I've had some amazingly helpful women in my life and some amazingly nasty, stab you in the back to get ahead kind of women. Some women are really competitive against other women. I guess there are only so many good positions and if they help you there goes one!

Other women, such as this one, stated that being supported by women inspired her to help others:

I have had several female mentors in my career, especially at my current company. Earlier in my career, I felt there was more backstabbing behavior. I haven't really experienced that lately. I try to act as a mentor and role model to other women in my workplace, letting them know that I work hard to achieve a level of work/life balance and that I state that as a priority with my boss. I think it helps them to know that it's an option and not one that will necessarily result in limitations on your growth potential.

Key statements that emerged from the above data were: a) Work-Life balance is an issue for all women, regardless of generation; b) Caregiving is the primary source of concern for women; c) Each generation had a somewhat negative view of how women from other generations balanced work and life commitments; and d) Many women chose not to pursue leadership positions at their workplace if they felt they could not have a healthy work-life balance. A general theory emerged from the data – women are attempting to integrate, rather than balance their multiple roles and commitments.

### **Discussion**

The results of this research study indicate that the answer to Research Question 1 (Has there been a time in your life when your personal and professional goals clashed and were not in balance?) is clearly “yes”. Gen Yers mentioned a hobby, vacation, church or volunteer commitment as being important in their personal lives and sometimes clashing with their professional lives. It is interesting to note that not one Gen.

Xer or Baby Boomer mentioned those things; all of their balance issues had to do with caregiving.

Our finding of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers being the primary caregivers supports existing research. For example, Leman (1987), in her survey of almost 200 women, was not surprised to find that children were the number one stressor for working women. In a more recent study by Hewlett (2007) over 90 % of women leaving the work place, said they were primarily responsible for child raising and domestic chores. Similarly, Guillaume and Pochic (2009) found that Gen X and Baby Boomers tended to sacrifice work to meet the needs of their families.

Our findings on this research question also supports the work of Jyothi and Jyothi (2012) who concluded that demands from family appear to increase over the years as the Gen Xers and especially Baby Boomers start to care for aging parents. Also, due to the current economy, some Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are providing for adult children who could not find jobs upon their graduation from college or lost their jobs due to the economy. Another interesting finding of the current study was that these two groups rarely mentioned husbands or their role in helping with work/life balance issues.

Based upon our experience as educators, we believe it is possible that the Gen Yers may not have faced these family conflicts as much due to their age. Many of the Gen Yers we teach are just starting their careers and have yet to marry, have children or aging parents for which they care.

Regarding Research Question 2 (Do you see any differences between the way you balance your work and personal life from women in your family or workplace who are from different generations than you?), all generations, but especially the Gen. Xers, commented that their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other family members did not have to work or left a career to stay at home. Across the generations, women mentioned that balance had more to do with profession or field than generations. One person said the big difference is not generational, but whether or not people are parents.

Many of the Baby Boomers and some Gen Xers had negative comments about the work ethic of younger generations and seemed to think that the younger generations don't work as hard as them and favor doing family and fun things over their jobs. These comments seem to support Sonier's (2012) research that found Baby Boomers were company loyalists who expect their work to spill over into their personal lives. Younger generations, however, prefer more of a separation between work and play. In Hannay's and Fretwell's (2011) study, for example, they found that leisure is very important to Generation Y and stated “The veterans and the baby boomers were content to see work as the driving force in their lives. Gen X and Gen Y increasingly demand more work-life balance in the workplace” (pg. 4).

Our study, however, found that it was the Gen Yers who thought the older women stuck to a 9-5 schedule, didn't put in extra time, and did not have a problem of work-life balance like they did because of technology. These younger study participants said work is easier with technology and companies are more willing for women to work from home. However, they also feel the same technology can be a burden. Compared to Baby Boomers or Gen Xers, Gen Yers spend 50% more time than other generations online (Hellrigel & Slocum, 2009). Twenty six% of professional women in another study felt they had to be connected to work all day, every day (Barsh, Cranston & Lewis, 2009). The Gen Yers in this study believed the boundaries between work and the rest of their lives were blurred, which was what Sarker, Sarker and Ahuja (2012) found regarding technology. As noted earlier, Currie and Eveline (2011) stated that the invasion and intrusion of e-technologies into homes is "a blessing and a curse" that is of benefit to work, but comes at a cost to family life (p.533).

For the Gen Yers in our study, it does not appear that technology is the missing link that brings women closer to achieving work-life balance but the catalyst that further deteriorates their work-life balance as they frantically try to do it all. A few Baby Boomers mentioned wanting to help the Gen Yers understand that they can't be "superwomen" and that it is not worth it in the long run to pursue money, advancements, and titles if the personal costs are too high.

For Research Question 3 (How supportive have organizations for which you have worked been regarding your responsibilities and commitments outside of work?), the results indicated the women across all generations perceived they did have some organizational support. All respondents stated that the amount of support they had all depended upon where they worked. We did not find enough evidence to support the notion that organizations are adapting and changing work environments to support both men and women in balancing their lives.

According to a survey conducted in *Working Mother* (Owens, 2010), many women felt that having an employer with flexible policies helped them to become successful at both work and home. Women are more successful in their job if their company affords them the opportunity to have a flexible work-life schedule. Until organizational structures adapt to meet the needs of both men and women, women will struggle with the complex issues of work and family obligations regardless of the generation. If traditional roles prevail at work and home, women will always find it difficult to penetrate the highest levels of leadership. It still appears there is work to do in this arena.

Regarding Research Question 4 (What impact does the above described level of organizational support have on the ability of women to move into organizational leadership positions?) we found no generational differences. Several of the women

mentioned that it is still a man's world and whether they could move into organizational leadership roles depended upon the profession. For example, those females who identified "education" seemed to be happy with their leadership opportunities. While others who indicated they were in more male-dominated professions shared that their chances of being promoted were slim.

Some Gen Xers shared that they had decided to stop trying to climb the corporate ladder as they perceived it wasn't worth the effort or that they could not make a difference. These insights support Sching's (2009) study that found one of the main reasons women did not seek leadership positions was the growing demands of the workplace conflicting with the demands of their family. Not pursuing leadership positions may also be due to the fact that women are often held to a higher standard of competence than men and have had to demonstrate superior performance to get promoted (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Additionally, our finding supports Gerdes (2010) discovery that women may not assume leadership positions if they have to suffer too much in their personal lives. Women, particularly those in law, may not be getting into top leadership positions in the workplace because they accept more than their share of responsibilities when it comes to caring for their children and taking care of the house (Sandberg, 2013). Women also give up on taking on more challenging work because of premature work-life balance uncertainties. Other researchers concur noting that long-term career planning is partly hindered by family planning, which affects successful career development (Aguiluz, 2011; Cummins, 2012). In Roebuck's and Smith's (2011) study of executive-level female leaders, one senior leader stated "The most critical problem a female leader faces is the balancing of family, career, and community service" (p. 59) and

Women have a lot on their plate to balance. The stress and workload of high positions forces many women to choose carefully without creating overload. For women, there are other ways to get satisfaction. Women may decide to take themselves out of the running [for top positions] by working part time, working for a small organization, or not working at all [to create balance] (p. 59).

Finally, for Research Question 5 (Do women in your workplace help each other and have you noticed any change in the willingness of women to help each other over the span of your professional life?) we encountered a mixed response of both "yes" and "no" that seemed to be situational. The "yes" responses support the findings of Smith, Roebuck, and Maendler's (2013) study that found younger aged women frequently answered 'yes' to the question of women supporting each other, while women in the older age brackets tended to use clarifying terms such as 'depends.' The "no" responses in this study continues to support the work of other research that suggests women in top leadership positions may resort to undermining tactics instead of supporting other women who

follow in their footsteps (Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Rodgers-Healy, 2003; Roebuck & Smith, 2011). It appears some progress may be occurring but obviously women are still not as willing to help each other as men do and continue to view other women as competition instead of individuals they should mentor and help climb the corporate ladder. We did not deduct any industry or generational differences in the responses to this question. It was interesting to note that most negative responses on this question came from the Gen Y group.

### Implications

Organizational leaders should employ creative thinking to develop strategies that will allow both men and women to be successful in the work place. Barsh and Yee (2011) noted true cultural and organizational change must occur that is systemic and intentional if organizations truly desire to help women advance in leadership positions. Such change involves listening to what matters from the women who are in the organizations. Barsh and Yee (2011) explained that one reason women choose to stay at a current position rather than be promoted is that they feel their work needs to matter and to make a difference. Senior level positions are often perceived to be political or lonely. Women value their relationships with their colleagues and don't want to forfeit the joy they derive from that. As Gerdes (2010) learned in her study of senior academic women, over half her respondents sought personal fulfillment through their work. Leadership positions, which prevent women from being able to pursue that which matters most to them will not retain or attract women. Clearly many women choose not to pursue higher-level leadership positions after the mid-management level because they perceive the personal sacrifice to their personal lives is too great. Organizations should focus on workplace strategies designed to help women move into leadership positions as these two participants from this study so eloquently state.

Quote 1: Frankly, I think this world is in great need of strong leadership. Regardless if you are a man or a woman, if you have excellent leadership skills, you can make anything possible. I don't think I have any special gifts or talents. I am not smarter than my colleagues. I do not have a better network. I think that I had great managers that showed me how to be a good manager. I am grateful for my leadership skills. I think that is why I was able to be so successful so quickly and that upper management was willing to figure out ways to keep me happy. I do think that even in a female dominated industry, you will see that the vast majority of senior management is men. I really feel that is simply the choice of today's women. I stopped the climb to upper management because I saw that everybody in the next level up was divorced, separated and extremely unhappy. The job became their whole life. Once I realized that, I understood that it is more important for me to find balance and to be happy. I believe the reason why you do not see women at that level is because it is too demanding and will not allow for a balanced lifestyle. I believe men

are more willing to climb the ladder out of tradition for the title, and women do not need the title to feel successful. Quote 2: If women know there is support for both their career goals and the ability to manage their life, they are more likely to stay with a company and continue to grow and develop within that same organization. Women who lack organizational support are more likely to look elsewhere. Women need to know that it is possible to both strive for career goals and support their families at the same time.

In the 2009 Shriver Report entitled, "A Woman's Nation Changes Everything," the authors stated that the fabric of the American work model has changed enormously with women seeking higher education and entering the work place. The authors argued that while the family structure has changed, organizations and work structures have not. For example, many business practices are still modelled after the past where a married family with kids had a stay-at-home mother and sole breadwinner father. Clearly, that is not the current reality of most homes in the United States. Therefore, organizations need to revisit some of these 'traditional' ways of doing business and get creative with solutions that help both the employer and employee. Some solutions include flexibility in the work schedules, job sharing, day care solutions, after school programs, and overnight care for working moms (Hannay, 2012; Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Another challenge organizations need to face is that expectations clash between the generations as shared by one of our study's participants: "The older generations at my firm expect longer hours and the younger generation expects more flexible working environments and schedules. It is actually an issue." Educational training regarding the differences between the generations should be considered in order to raise awareness of the differences but also how the generations can complement each other.

Looking specifically at institutions of higher learning, they should assist the younger generations by providing more courses that focus on coping strategies, goal setting, and integration of roles to help them understand the challenges of work-life balance. The wellness model (Hettler, 1984) suggested there are six dimensions that should be in balance, which are occupational, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, physical, and social. When the term work/life is used, we imply that five of the dimensions are dumped into *life*. It is easy to see how it is impossible to achieve balance and why individuals, both men and women, struggle trying to achieve it.

It seems clear that women should start to support and help each other more. Since all generations experience the same challenges, women should reach out more to other women around them for advice and support (Evans, 2003). Women should not be afraid to ask for help from family, friends, and co-workers when it is appropriate. Women should focus more



on building relationship and expanding their network as those strategies will help them be successful in their careers and life in general (Wolf, 2011).

In addition, women should be mindful of technology. While technology can free women to spend time outside of the workplace, it can also be a stone around their necks. Therefore, women should set necessary boundaries between the workplace and home. Everyone, especially Gen Yers, should also be aware of when it is appropriate to communicate with technology and when there are better options such as the face-to-face interaction preferred by Baby Boomers.

### **Limitations of Study**

As is true of all research studies, our study is limited by the following conditions. First, all three authors are women who fall into the typical demographic of the majority of the study participants. It is possible we imposed on the data and drew upon our own experiences to come up with the themes, study statements and general theory. Second, the findings may not be transferable to the general population. The sample in this study is primarily white and well educated (see participant demographics in Methods section). Finally, the questions in the survey might be leading or poorly worded resulting in different interpretations by respondents.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Any one of the five questions posed in this study could be a stand-alone study. By focusing on just one question, researchers could increase their sample size and learn whether or not the same concepts emerge. A related opportunity for further research would be to repeat the study with men to see if the same issues/concepts arise. Or, researchers could undertake a cross-cultural study to compare the results across countries and genders.

Another interesting study might be to cross tabulate the results to look at intersection between demographic data such as ethnicity, type of industry and level of education and responses given. The current study just looked at the answers across the three generations.

Finally, many participants provided their names for future contact. To expand the current study, follow up interviews or focus groups could be undertaken to determine if the key statements and general theory noted in this study held true or resonated with them.

### **Conclusion**

Women account for a majority of university graduates in Europe, the US and OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries. By 2020, it is anticipated that women will account for more than 70 % of college graduates in seven countries: Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Iceland, New Zealand, the UK, and the Netherlands (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). The low representation of women in executive

leadership is a missed opportunity. “In today’s sagging global economy, organizations that mentor and support women moving up the organizational ladder could well be one of the best survival strategies that an organization could undertake” (p. 3), say authors Howard and Wellins (2009). “Isn’t it time organizations stopped blocking the development and progress of the kind of talent that could fortify the executive suite?” (Howard & Wellins, 2009, p. 29).

Work/life balance is a challenge for all women. Whether they are Baby Boomers, Gen X, or Gen Y, they face competing demands from work and commitments outside of the office. Five findings emerged from this study. First, women across the generations agree they had experienced situations where their professional and personal goals clashed. Second, there are differences between the generations in how each generation perceives the other generation regarding work-life balance, which can cause workplace conflict. Third, all generations agreed that they had some support from their organizations. Fourth, no generational differences were found in perceptions regarding the ability of women to move into organizational leadership positions. However, similar feelings and thoughts revolved around the concept of this still being a man’s world and that for a woman to move into a leadership position, she would need to make personal sacrifices in relationship to her family and personal life. Fifth, no generational differences were found regarding whether women help other women move into leadership positions. All three generations still perceive that some women in current leadership positions do not support and mentor other women to help them advance within their organizations.

While generational differences do exist, one key trend is universal. The women in this study do struggle finding a work/life balance that meshes with their lifestyle. Bone (2010) presents the notion of “fit” instead of “balance” because of the implication that individual women will make choices that are healthy for them and tailored to their unique situations. Other researchers, such as Barsh, Cranston and Lewis (2009) recommend that women let go and realize work/life balance may not exist. Instead they recommend women consider work and home commitments in a new light. Could that new light be called the integration of work and life instead of work-life balance? Golder (2013), a role integration coach and author thinks so. She strives to help women integrate multiple roles without sacrificing their success, health or peace of mind. One of the women leaders interviewed for Golder’s book stated: “You can have it all, just not every day” (p. 50). Golder recommends women know their passion and purpose so they can make wise choices each day regarding how to live a fulfilled life instead of worrying about work-life balance. So is integration the key to work-life balance? That seems to be the question to ponder.

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