

Conversations with the Experts

A Historical Perspective on Work-Family: Where We Came From, What We've Achieved, Where We Need To Go



Susan Seitel

Bio: Susan Seitel is [WFC Resources](#) president and founder. One of the nation's leading pioneers in the field, she has been helping companies, organizations and governments transform their culture since 1984. She writes the company's publications - the *Work-Life Newsbrief & Trend Report*, and the *Manager's Quarterly* - has authored several special reports and publications on a variety of subjects, and most recently published *The Eleven Essential Steps to Designing a Successful Work-Life Program*. Susan was a founding board member of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress.

An Interview with Susan Seitel

by Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: When did you first become involved with the work-family or work-life field? At that time, what was the work-family landscape? How about the predominant work-family issues?

Seitel: I started back in 1990 tracking work-life on paper every month for our *Work-Life Newsbrief*. We've saved online every article I've ever written, so to get ready for this interview, I went back into our archives to check out a little history. The review reminded me that in the beginning, there was only one work-family issue then, and that was childcare. The country was in shock that so many women were going to work, and people were just starting to wake up to what that meant: Mothers were working, and there was no one home to care for the kids. And if workplaces wanted mothers to be focused workers, they began to see they'd better do something about it. In those early days, about 100 companies opened day-care centers, and every time one opened, we wrote about it.

I'd say it was the mid- to late 1980s when companies started thinking about providing for their workers who had other family issues. There was a consortium in 1989 in New York that included HBO, Colgate, Con Edison, Time, and Ernst & Young—they started an emergency backup care service for employees. That year, IBM also started the Fund for Dependent Care Initiatives, which included elder care (IBM has always been a leader in this field, and still is.) Hallmark started a family resource center in 1989 and even began to talk about flexible hours, but that was very rare.

Another issue that just began to be important in those early days was health care. The average cost of health care in 1990 was \$3,217 per employee. It sounds pretty good to us now, but companies were horrified; costs had gone up 45% in just 2 years.

Casey: What direction do you see that the work-life field has taken as it has evolved?

Seitel: Looking back, there's no doubt that for the first few years, the focus was all on women. It wasn't until the mid-90s that the evolution occurred and we started writing about men and fathering. By the late 90s, we started to see articles on alternative work arrangements, telecommuting—and even virtual offices—and news about expatriates and the global workplace, which is now a huge issue.

Merck was another big leader in work-life. In 1989, we got the news that they were actually looking at employees' workloads. They assigned teams of employees to analyze, dissect, and reorganize work and come up with solutions to give people a sense of control over their workloads and schedules.

Casey: Do you know what precipitated these efforts?

Seitel: Workers' complaints that they had too much work to do.

I was interested in who first used the word "engagement" in terms of a workplace concern. We first wrote about it in 2000; Ray Baumruk from Hewitt Associates was out in front on this issue. He did some studies and found that the top performing 25% of organizations showed a significantly stronger tendency to *engage* employees. I think he was the first to use that word. He found that leading companies gave employees more control over their time and additional training to manage what they had to do.

So it went like this: We moved from a focus on women to include men, then to flexibility, then to new ways to work. That was the path. Interestingly, the direction has always seemed to follow the economy. During boom times, the news is all about recruiting and retaining skilled workers. In recessions, like now, we hear about downsizing, layoffs and how to avoid them, what to do with survivors, how to keep them engaged, and how to cut the costs of benefits. It's certainly economically driven.

Speaking of the evolution of work-life, we should mention that since the late 1980s, the field itself has been evolving, growing, spreading, and becoming more integrated with other areas of employee relations. As someone whose constituency is made up of people who are interested in work-life, I can tell you they're there, but they're getting harder to find! They're in diversity, technology, even facilities management, and with names like talent or human capital management, culture and inclusion, people services...on and on. So that seems like the last step in the progression: Work-life is being integrated into other areas of the company.

Casey: What do you see as the current "hot issues" in work-life?

Seitel: If you asked me a few months ago, of course, my answer would have been different. But now it's what happens to work-life when so many employers are focused on survival and cutting costs. What that means is that we need to send a different message! We need to point out that morale and engagement suffer during economic downturns, so it's important to keep workers productive, and that means offering more control over how and where work is done. Most of the time, that doesn't cost anything. That need makes the virtual workplace the hottest issue right now. It's been growing for the past 3 or 4 years for many reasons, including reducing highway congestion and decreasing our carbon footprint. Telecommuting isn't free, of course, unless you just let those people work from home who already have the equipment they need. Otherwise, the cost is about \$3,000–\$5,000 per person, maybe as much as \$12,000, depending on how much you provide in the way of technology. But there's a huge payoff; studies show telework not only reduces companies' costs, it increases productivity, morale, satisfaction, and the ability to recruit.

Health-care costs are obviously a hot issue. Hopefully this administration will find a way to provide health care that doesn't take such a huge bite out of employers' profits.

And we have to look globally, with so many companies having employees in other countries where there are different laws and customs. Some companies are working with 100 different languages. What an enormous task!

Casey: What do you believe are the biggest challenges or barriers to achieving successful work-life integration for employees and employers?

Seitel: Six months ago, I would have said workload and manager resistance. Now, of course, it's the economy and the need to cut costs. But some of the biggest barriers are still managers' resistance to change, more work with fewer people, and the inability of some companies to understand that the one thing many employees want is free: more control over when and where their work is done.

Casey: Is this because managers interpret that wish as "workers want more control over their time, which means we have less control over them"?

Seitel: Absolutely. Training can really help managers learn to take their eyes off the clock—and employees' chairs to see who's in them and who isn't—and look at results. It does call for new and different methods of managing, planning, and measuring, and it's not all that easy to do in a knowledge environment. And managers need support from the top. They need to know that if the boss comes around and sees empty cubicles, he's not going to say "So what do we need you for?"

Casey: What, in your opinion, have been the greatest accomplishments?

Seitel: I've always felt we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Working Mother Media. Their Best Companies competition has tapped that deep desire to compete and has really made a difference in the lives of thousands of people.

In terms of studies, I have to mention the [1996 Ford Foundation study](#) by [Lotte Bailyn](#), Barbara Miller, and others that revealed a payoff for sitting down as a team and asking the question, "How can we make your lives more livable and still get the job done?" That study gave birth to work redesign—the ability to look at your tasks through a work-life lens and figure out how to do them in a way that also allows you to live your life.

Another important study was the 2005 study by WFD [Consulting for Corporate Voices for Working Families](#). They found that in every company in the study, flexibility was a driver of financial performance and productivity. That was groundbreaking; it linked flexibility to increased revenue, positive impacts on cycle time, client services, talent management, and savings of millions of dollars by preventing turnover.

There have been tremendous accomplishments by individual employers as well. Some organizations have demonstrated that you can treat people as valuable assets and, by doing so, impact performance. Marquette Electronics, for instance, treated their "concrete walkers" and "carpet walkers" the same back in the 1990s, when that wasn't done by many companies. Sun Microsystems is reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 20% with a full range of steps, including having more than half their workforce working from home. Patagonia was one of the first companies with a child-care center, just because it was the right thing to do for its employees. These companies have been out in front, doing the right thing and saving money because of it.

Casey: Do we need more research on work-life issues? If so, what types of research would help to move us forward? What focus should the research take?

Seitel: There's so much valuable evidence about the payoff for work-life initiatives. But I think it only becomes important if there is a champion to bring it to the top floor. The only study I can think of that might be missing is evidence that managers who become more flexible make more money and are happier, more satisfied, and get promoted faster.

Casey: When I started at the Sloan Network, I did some presentations on using information to make informed decisions, and I came to the conclusion that people often don't use research to make decisions. Oftentimes, companies will have access to a flexibility report, but they think, "I don't believe it," or "We're different; that wouldn't work here." Is data what drives decisions?

Seitel: I think data helps, but it rarely drives people to take that first step. I worked with a company that called us in to do a study because the CEO's secretary was pregnant with her third child, and they were interested in putting in a day-care center. This was based on pure emotion! A lot of times, personal experience, emotion, or a gutsy employee who comes forward is the driver.

Casey: How could workplaces that are just getting started with work-life efforts begin to promote work-life integration for all employees? Unions?

Seitel: I think managers should be taught to ask the Lotte Bailyn question: How can we make your lives more livable and still get the job done? Pilots are also crucial; there's no downside to piloting. You can be fully representative in the pilot, have everyone set goals, make sure you know that you'll be able to define success when you see it, and, when it's done, tell everyone what happened! If it succeeded, market it! If not, tweak it and try again!

As far as unions are concerned, they have played a huge and valuable role. They've provided living wages and benefits to employees who otherwise wouldn't have had them. In a perverse way, I think unions have been responsible for the efforts of many companies who went out of their way to treat employees fairly so they *wouldn't* unionize! On the other hand, I think that if the auto industry in the United States does not survive, unions will have a very hard time. Their membership has gone down, and it will be interesting to see what people have to say about unions and their role in the demise of the auto industry if it does die. I worry that they will be blamed, and I worry about their future.

Casey: Do you feel that small businesses can be responsive to the work-family needs of their employees?

Seitel: Absolutely. For the past 3 years, we ran a competition here in Minnesota called the Work-Life Champion Awards. We discovered that many small companies are doing a great job; they're doing it quietly, without a lot of press, and they seem to find that it's not that hard! It's a lot easier to ask the Lotte Bailyn

question when there are only a few people to ask. Employees in small companies can more easily job share, cross-train, and communicate with each other about who's going to do what tasks.

Casey: How might state public policy efforts help us to gain momentum?

Seitel: Look at California. They've been so creative about funding family leave. On a city level, look at Milwaukee and San Francisco and their paid leave mandates. Although businesses are struggling against the Milwaukee legislation, all the evidence from San Francisco shows there's no reason to be afraid of it; businesses are not harmed. And there's no reason that states can't do what San Francisco has done.

On a national level, I hope the Healthy Families Act passes. We think of sick leave as being covered because so many employers do offer it, but there's a huge number of Americans with no paid sick days, and if they call in sick, they lose their pay and sometimes lose their jobs. The United States has so little national commitment to its future, particularly when compared to countries in the European Union. States can take the lead. Right now, families have to depend on the kindness of their employers, and, unfortunately, that's just not enough.

2003 Analytic Timeline of the Work-Family Area of Study

GENDERED SOCIETY

Trends Seen Over Time in A Sampling of the Work-Family Literature from 1960 to 2001*



* This sampling is by no means meant to be a comprehensive literature search of work-family publications over the decades. Very low numbers on the graph do not necessarily represent a lack of literature during that year, but that few articles were found using our particular methodology and the particular resources we used. (Please see handout)

The World of Work-Family Through a Gendered Lens: 1960-2002

Comments and Observations:

In large part, interest in work-family issues grew as the number of women entering the paid labor force over the past 30 years increased. As a consequence, much of the work-family literature has roots in gender-related issues. For the purposes of this preliminary analysis, we focused on work-family research articles that mentioned men, women, or both in the title of the article.

Salient Themes in the Work-Family Literature

1960s

- Feminism
- Gender Roles
- Transitions
- Women's Capability in the Labor Force
- Working Mothers vs Homemakers

1970s

- Dual-Career Family
- Effects of Mother's Work on Children
- Gender Roles
- Institution of Marriage
- Masculinity
- Values
- Womanhood
- Women's Rights

1980s

- Consequences of Role Strain (on mental & physical health, on spouse, on children, etc...)
- Divorce
- Fatherhood
- Housework
- Masculinity
- Parental Leave
- Sex Segregation
- Occupational segregation
- Single parenting
- Work-Family Balance

1990s

- Divorce
- Equal Pay for Equal Work
- Multiple Roles
- Overwork
- Role Overload
- Role Spillover

1990s (cont'd)

- Role Stress
- Sex Segregation
- Single Parenting
- Time Famine/Bind
- Wage Gap
- Women in Management
- Work-Family issues in Gay/Lesbian Couple

2000s

- Corporate Women
- Fatherhood
- Gender Equity (domestic sphere, workplace, etc...)
- Gendered Access to Work-Family Benefits
- Maternity Leave / Paternity Leave

Source: Matz, C. (2003). *2003 Analytic Timeline of the Work-Family Area of Study*. Poster session at the annual academic conference of the Business and Professional Women's Foundation, Orlando, FL. Retrieved from <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/timelines/2003/2003.pdf>

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202



www.bc.edu

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation