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The Thought Leader Interview: Lotte Bailyn

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BY LAURA W. GELLER

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Lotte Bailyn hates the phrase *work–life balance.* "Work–life" implies that the two exist in separate spheres. And "balance" implies that there's a trade-off to be made. For Bailyn, the T Wilson Professor of Management, emerita, at MIT's Sloan School of Management, the very existence of that phrase helps explain why organizations are still largely getting it wrong for both women and men.

Bailyn was born in Vienna, but came to the United States as a child and was raised in New York City. Her parents, both academics, were Jewish; the family fled Austria in 1937, just before the Nazi occupation. After earning a Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard University (then Radcliffe for women) in 1956, she found herself, like many of her female contemporaries, without any serious job opportunities. She took temporary research positions and raised her two sons. (Her husband, Bernard Bailyn, is a two-time Pulitzer Prize–winning historian at Harvard.) It was only in 1972, at the age of 42, that she started on the tenure track at MIT.

The late 1960s and 1970s were a dynamic time for women and families. Women entered the U.S. workforce in increasing numbers, challenging traditional gender roles and household structures. Between 1960 and 1980, the proportion of women in the workforce rose from 36 percent to 48 percent. Bailyn began interviewing couples, trying to understand how these changes affected people's lives at home and their performance on the job. But gradually she came to realize that gender diversity wasn't an isolated issue. Everyone has a life outside work, whether that life is defined by parenthood, ongoing care for an elderly parent or sick relative, membership in a community organization, or any number of other responsibilities and interests. When Bailyn started talking to employees in organizations, she found that these priorities were nearly always in conflict with traditional expectations about productivity and success.

Bailyn wrote *Breaking the Mold: Men, Women, and Time in the New Corporate World* (Free Press, 1993) to warn executives that their obsession with time as a measure of commitment, and by extension competence, was creating a situation that

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would be unsustainable for the modern workforce in the long run. "Private life and public life can no longer be seen as conceptually separate," she noted in the introduction. "Too much is at stake: the equanimity of employees, the welfare of families and communities, and even the long-run viability of American companies…. Appropriate responses to this situation go to the heart of the way that work is organized and rewarded." The book, far ahead of its time, didn't garner much notice — although it did come out the same year that the U.S. Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, still the only federal law protecting the jobs of new parents or people caring for seriously ill relatives. (It provides unpaid leave, and covers only 60 percent of the workforce.)

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

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

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

Bailyn spoke with *strategy+business* this spring, in her office at the Sloan School in Cambridge, Mass. Now in her 80s and a grandmother of two girls, Bailyn still comes to the office several days a week to work with students and participate in MIT diversity initiatives. Today, as debates over raising the minimum wage, providing paid sick leave and parental leave, and managing the cost of care gain traction, her pioneering work is particularly relevant. Companies have reason to value her insights, and Bailyn — her passion for understanding the complex relationship between people and organizations as strong as ever — is ready to share them.

S+B: You chose a career in academia at a time when opportunities for women were limited.
BAILYN: When I arrived at Harvard in 1951, there were no fellowships for the Radcliffe Ph.Ds. There were no dorms for female graduate students. The college library was open only to men. Women had to enter the faculty club through a back door, and couldn't sit in the main dining room. My husband-to-be was just finishing his dissertation at Harvard at the time, and when he told his advisor about my professional aspirations, the response was, "Does she type?" Even after I earned my Ph.D., I couldn't find a job. My first position, doing research, was one that a male colleague had turned down. After that, I held a series of positions, some half-time, some full-time — a research associate here, a lecturer there.

S+B: What were you studying during those years?
BAILYN: In the early 1960s, I attended a conference sponsored by

Laura W. Geller
*geller_laura@
strategy-business.com*
is senior editor of
strategy+business.

Daedalus called "The Woman in America." I wasn't sophisticated about gender issues back then, but I remember thinking, Isn't that a funny name? Would anybody run a conference called "The Man in America"? In the late 1960s, when my family was on sabbatical in England, I started working with Bob and Rhona Rapoport. They were pioneers in the work–family field, and wrote an influential book on the subject called *Dual-Career Families* [Penguin Books, 1971].

People were just beginning to talk about women working outside the home and what effect that might have on their children, and what husbands had to say. I was interested in a question that I hadn't heard anyone else asking: What were men's attitudes toward their *own* work, and what effect did that have on their partners' careers and on the relationship? While still in the U.K., I took a sample of couples from the Rapoports' study of British college graduates, and found that husbands with a traditional focus on career over family not only undermined their wives' ambitions, but also decreased both partners' satisfaction with the relationship.

When we returned to the States,

I started working on a study of MIT alumni. I compared men who bought in completely to the notion that their identity depends on their careers and worked long hours with men who were more involved with their communities and families. The latter group had more positive relationships with their families, but many of them found their work lives somewhat problematic. Being engineers, they found that the people skills they honed outside work weren't valued by their companies, and so they lost confidence. Some of this research became the basis for my first book, *Living with Technology: Issues at Mid-Career* [with Edgar H. Schein; MIT Press, 1980].

These studies opened my eyes to the problems inherent in thinking about work and personal life as separate spheres — and to the fact that organizations were leaving valuable skills on the table because of traditional views of success and what it takes to succeed.

S+B: How did you start to connect these ideas with managerial practice?
BAILYN: My first experience working in organizations, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was in R&D

firms. These companies hired Ph.D. scientists, assuming that they wanted to work autonomously. They let the scientists choose what they wanted to do their research on. Then, when the companies didn't get what they needed from the scientists, they started putting controls on them. So they gave them strategic autonomy, and then implemented operational controls.

As I began to talk to the scientists and some engineers, I discovered this was exactly the opposite of what they needed to do their best work. They chose to come into industry because they wanted to contribute to the organization. They wanted to be told what goal they should work toward. But then they wanted to be left alone to execute in their own way. Instead, they were supposed to set their own goals, but were then being told how to accomplish them. The organizations' assumptions didn't align with what people really needed to be productive.

When I starting working on a project at Xerox, funded by the Ford Foundation, in the early 1990s, my colleagues and I began to identify more of the typical assumptions that stood in the way of productive work.

Many of these assumptions still exist today. One is the notion of the ideal worker — the worker who has complete allegiance to the organization, is always accessible, and shows commitment by being willing to do anything at any time. Related to this is the notion that companies can evaluate people's commitment and competence by seeing how much time they spend at work.

These assumptions lead to certain practices. For example, a manager can call a meeting anytime and

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

The premise of *Breaking the Mold* was that such policies weren't helping either the employees or their companies because the policies were fighting against basic assumptions and the practices that resulted from them. At Xerox, we were able to test this hypothesis. When we started

people what it was about their work that made their lives difficult, we could show how old assumptions and old practices weren't effective for this new way of working. Once you point out the dysfunctional practices, the possible solutions actually become obvious. But these practices are typically so ingrained in the everyday workings of the organization that people just assume this is the way things have to be to get the work done. It takes an explicit bringing together of work and personal issues to draw them out.

"We tried to show company leaders they didn't have to worry that legitimizing people's personal lives would interfere with their work."

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everyone will drop everything to attend. Of course, this modus operandi only works if there's someone at home who's taking care of everything else. And even though this is less likely today to be the case, the assumptions and practices persist.

S+B: That sounds like the foundational assumption of *Breaking the Mold*.
BAILYN: By the time I started working on the book, consulting companies had started to help organizations with things like child-care referral, to enable more women to enter and stay in the workforce. In fact, some progressive companies had multiple family policies on the

the project, we saw how difficult it was to bring the domains of family and work together. As we interviewed people about both aspects of their lives, they would often respond by saying, "Why are you asking us about our work? You're the work–family people." The connotation was, "Aren't you just here to help draft some family policies to help out these poor mothers, who can't be good workers?" At the time, that was how this topic was understood.

But organizations were changing rapidly. The days of a homogeneous workforce doing homogeneous work were quickly fading — replaced by more diversity and teamwork. Based on our interviews, in which we asked

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

For example, by throwing time at problems, managers were burning out their employees. By asking people to work such long hours, companies were also creating a sort of rigidity. But research has shown that creativity and innovation require time for reflection. Moreover, we know that if you constrain time,

people work more intelligently. And from our own experience, we knew that if people work for 10 hours, they are never as productive as they are in the first two. It's not a linear relationship.

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

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

Challenging Assumptions

S+B: What was the response to
Breaking the Mold?
BAILYN: I got very little reaction to the book when it came out [in 1993]. At the time, there wasn't much mainstream academic research on work–family issues. I hoped that the book would influence business schools, and what they teach. For a

while I taught a course on these topics. But it was pretty marginal. It attracted more Wellesley students and MIT undergraduates than MBAs.

But then slowly, afterward, attention began to pick up. By the time the revised edition of the book came out in 2006, work–family integration had become a huge field. However, it still wasn't dealing with the issues as I think it should have been.

Researchers were approaching the issues on a very individual level, by considering all the antecedents of work–family conflict. But they weren't linking this conflict to organizational processes. And even when they did, they were focused more on job flexibility. Now, this approach is

very important. But it doesn't get to the heart of how work is being done or to the assumptions that affect the extent to which work–family policies are going to help anybody. The conversation continued to be about individuals, rather than about individuals coming together, being forthcoming about their needs outside the office, and then deciding collectively how they were going to accomplish their work.

S+B: Can you say more about that?
BAILYN: The typical way that flexibilities are managed in companies is the employee has a one-on-one conversation with the supervisor. The supervisor will often admonish the employee not to tell anybody about

what they work out, because he or she is afraid of setting a precedent. That makes it even worse when people inevitably find out.

What if, instead, organizations promoted these arrangements? One group I worked with advertised flexible arrangements and gave prizes for the most innovative ones. They then gathered metrics showing how strong the resulting performance was, and advertised those metrics. This is important, because when other groups see success, the ideas spread.

In one of the first organizations we worked in, the manager, based on our analysis, told his group that "anybody can take advantage of any of the flexible policies they want, as

"Nobody wanted to take the time to plan and be proactive in a system where individual heroics were rewarded."

long as the work gets done." It turned out that everybody wanted something different. That included men, and people without children. Further, the supervisors soon realized they could not deal with all requests one-on-one — they had no choice but to let their groups deal with it among themselves. And what happened? People learned to delegate and to trust one another. Absenteeism went down and customer service went up, and people's lives eased considerably. We termed it the *dual agenda* — meeting personal and business needs simultaneously.

This way of working also enables development. I knew one manager who arranged with her boss to work from home one day a week.

On the days when she was working remotely, her direct reports alternated being "in charge." They gained valuable experience, which benefited them personally, and was also useful for succession.

In many ways, this goes back to Douglas McGregor's Theory Y [as described in his book *The Human Side of Enterprise* (McGraw-Hill, 1960)]: If you think of your workforce as an asset, and assume that people are motivated and creative, they'll figure out how to make all kinds of situations work to get the job done. A great example was Best Buy's experiment ROWE, or the "results-only work environment." Best Buy's initiative yielded impressive results, but was killed in 2013 when a new CEO undertook a turnaround effort. This was right around the time that Yahoo ended its telecommuting policy.

S+B: Still, many companies now offer the flexible work arrangements that you talked about in your books. But the number of people who take advantage of them remains limited.
BAILYN: Joan Williams, founding director of the Center for Work–Life Law at the University of California's Hastings College of the Law, coined the term *flexibility stigma* to explain this phenomenon. Even though research (and practice) has shown that flexible arrangements work well both for people and for productivity, it goes against the basic assumptions that I've been describing. It also conflicts with many organizations' view of their workers as a cost.

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

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

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

It's worth noting that many European countries see their workforce

more as an asset to be managed. It's a different way of thinking. The Scandinavian countries give ample paid leave for child care. Sweden allows parents to take 480 total hours per child, which can be used until the child is 8 years old — and a percentage of those hours is specifically dedicated to fathers. In June 2014, the U.K. expanded its flexible work rules to make all employees (not just those who are caretakers) eligible to request such arrangements.

In addition, mandatory vacation is common in much of Europe, ensuring people have time to reflect and relax. Meanwhile, in the U.S., some companies are now giving employees endless or unlimited vacation. But that will never work. It looks nice on paper, but the majority of employees won't take advantage of it for the reasons we've discussed.

Beyond Flexibility

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

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

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

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

S+B: Who is getting it right today? What are some of the initiatives that have the potential to make a difference?
BAILYN: One of the people on our Xerox research team, Leslie Perlow, is now a professor at the Harvard Business School. She wrote a book that's made a big splash, called *Sleeping with Your Smartphone* [Harvard Business Review Press, 2012].

Leslie discovered that it wasn't so much the long hours that bothered the people in her study, but rather the *unpredictable* hours. She conducted an experiment at a professional-services firm in which one night, from 6 p.m. to 9 a.m., each person on the team had to take time off. They would rotate; the dates

> "Senior leaders need to realize that the way they reached the top might not be the only way to do it."

were set up beforehand, and couldn't be changed (at least not for work reasons). On the night off, the employee couldn't have any connection with work whatsoever.

The group soon realized it would have to meet once a week to figure out how to make this possible for everybody. They had to team up, so that there was always another person available in case an urgent client need arose. In the process, they started talking more about how to deal with their clients, which they had never had time to do before. And they began to talk more about personal issues and personal needs. Attrition rates improved significantly. Down the road, Leslie talked to the clients, and they were happy because they were confident that they could always reach somebody. It's a strong example of how bringing together people's personal needs with the business's needs benefits everyone in the end.

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

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

S+B: Is it possible that as our workforce gets more and more diverse, the system will start to shift organically?
BAILYN: I hope so. Company leaders will need to seek out the talent of people who think differently, who have different values. Of course, one possibility is that they'll select from the smaller and smaller group of gung-ho people, and the system won't change — the top will just reproduce itself. But I think a shift is more likely.

Recently, we've seen some companies beginning to respond to the challenges faced by low-wage workers. A growing number of companies — IKEA, Walmart, Target, and McDonald's, among others — have raised or plan to raise the wages of their lowest-paid workers. Facebook announced in May 2015 that it would require its contractors to pay their employees a US$15 per hour minimum wage, plus some leave benefits.

These are important changes. But there's still a major issue that affects many low-wage workers that is not yet being addressed to a large degree: the unpredictable nature of their jobs. Last-minute changes to their work schedules, which can be quite common, create havoc with child care or eldercare or any other obligations people may have outside work. And it's not just obligations — many low-wage workers are simultaneously trying to get an education, and they can't do that without some predictability.

S+B: Today's workplace is markedly different from the workplace you studied earlier in your career. But it's plagued by some of the same core problems.
BAILYN: I think the trouble with much of the advice out there right now is that it accepts the organizational and societal status quo. For example, there are companies that support telecommuting, but still require people to be accessible between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. That defeats the purpose. The purpose of giving people autonomy is allowing them to work when they are most productive. Time is the wrong measure — the measure should be performance and results.

I hope that people try to think differently. Some companies are doing noteworthy experiments. In May 2015, for example, the *New York Times* featured an article about the Geller Law Group [*Editor's note: No relation to the author of this article*], a law firm started by women seeking to continue their careers as successful attorneys while participating more actively in their children's lives. The article described how the employees work together to ensure that everyone's personal and professional commitments can be met. This approach explicitly takes into account people's lives outside work in determining the way they organize their work — and that's what is so critical.

This is an exciting new firm, but established companies can also

experiment. A division here or a work group there can try a more collective, integrated approach. If they are able to make the dual agenda work, their methods can spread to other groups within the company. However, it's important to share both successes and failures, because it all contributes to learning within the organization. Every organization has forward-looking managers, but their efforts are usually kept secret.

S+B: Are people prepared to work in this new way?

BAILYN: People have skills that they learn in their communities and in their homes, but they aren't really given the OK to bring them into the organization because of the fundamental separation of the work and home spheres. [See "Ellen Langer on the Value of Mindfulness in Business," by Art Kleiner, *s+b*, Spring 2015.] Think about the types of skills you acquire managing a family or working in a community organization — delegating, negotiating, empathizing. These are skills that most organizations want in their people. And they are the skills that will enable people to figure out how to work together to complete projects effectively. But first, companies need to legitimate their employees' lives outside work, so that people know that such skills are valued.

We need to start by figuring out what the assumptions and the corresponding practices are. You need to know what you're trying to change, and it's not going to be the same everywhere. If you develop a solution in one place and try to pick it up and move it somewhere else, it probably won't work. It's the process of revealing assumptions, adapting, and working together that makes the experiments succeed. There's no best practice, unless you think of the whole process as a best practice.

Challenging what lies beneath what people are doing — that's what is so tough, but also what is most important. We tend to overemphasize the presence of flexible policies, without digging deeper and trying to understand why it's hard to make these policies available to everybody. And again, we have to deal with these issues systemically. There are individual accommodations, but there are no individual solutions. **+**

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