Life and Work

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When we launched Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community a year and a half ago, our primary goal was to expand executive opportunities for women in the Jewish communal world. To succeed in this enterprise, we knew we needed to identify the obstacles women faced, and to create strategies that would allow them to surmount these obstacles. We recognized from the outset that this process of discovery would illuminate the changes that are needed overall to make the Jewish communal workplace a healthier environment for everyone. So we declared a dual agenda for our initiative: to promote women and to promote a more vibrant and productive Jewish organizational environment for everyone, men and women alike.

The interview process for AWP allowed us to speak at length to several hundred Jewish women professionals and to dozens of their male colleagues. Now, I have a confession to make. I started to hear from many women, much more often than I found comfortable, that the conflict between personal and professional life was detracting from their ability and/or desire to advance in the field. I was really reluctant to listen when women told us that they might not want to advance or that they wanted to, but simply could not advance because of the pressure of negotiating the demands of personal and professional life. And I am talking about women at every stage of their career, women who articulated the dilemma powerfully and passionately. Finally, I confronted my own biases – my fear that talking about these conflicts out loud would hurt women's chances for advancement. I started taking these issues very seriously and listened very attentively to the voices of these women. Then we started interviewing and speaking with many of their male colleagues, men who were seriously concerned about carving out time for family and friends, and personal interests. And while some of these men simply accepted that the demands of their profession would take precedence over personal life, others were reconsidering their choice of career and position because of their insistence on finding the way to integrate life and work. A recent study by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center found "that nearly 80% of Americans report that having a work schedule that allows them to spend time with their families is one of their top priorities." In particular, the researchers found that "young men and their older counterparts differ markedly in their work priorities, with men ages 21 to 39 placing a much higher priority on having time to spend with their families."

While the pressure is experienced most acutely by women who still take on a disproportionate share of personal and domestic responsibilities (about 2/3rds by most accounts), recent surveys show that men are increasing their involvement in parenting by at least 30 minutes a workday. And men are spending more time on chores as well.

The reality is that 3 out of 4 married employees have spouses or partners who are employed as well. Yet, despite the increased involvement of men on the home front, and the dramatic number of dual earner households, for the most part we continue to structure our work environments as if we had "ideal workers" available, workers ready, willing and able, who have no responsibilities other than their jobs. This dynamic affects everyone – not just people with children at home. In our interviews, for example, we found that single people often felt very unhappy because it was assumed that they would readily make themselves available for evening and weekend work, ignoring their desires to pursue personal interests.

The tremendous conflict that people are experiencing between personal and professional demands is not about perception. It is reality. Our workload keeps increasing. 246 hours a year between 1987 and 1998 alone have been added to middle class America's work load; that is 6 full weeks.

We once hoped that technology would ease some of this pressure by increasing options for flextime, part-time work, telecommuting and job sharing. But all too often this technology is a double-edged sword, more painful than palliative. As the boundaries blur between personal and professional realms, and expectations are created of total access and rapid response, it is increasingly difficult for professionals to protect their personal lives.

Given that these trends are so pervasive, why in constructing this forum did we say that the Jewish community is behind the curve in helping employees integrate work and life. After all corporate CEOs live by the mantra of 24/7. At least Jewish professionals, those of us who are not rabbis, can look forward to Shabbat and live by the gentler rhythm of 24/6. Certainly the values we espouse would make it reasonable to assume that life/work integration would be a serious priority on the Jewish communal agenda. As Jews we deeply appreciate the significance of developing Jewish identity, and living a Jewish life, personally and communally. We focus on initiatives to foster Jewish continuity, renaissance, renewal, Jewish literacy, Jewish culture and spirituality. The opportunity to create a Jewish family and build a Jewish home is central to our identity. But is our commitment to these principles reflected in the kind of norms we establish in Jewish communal workplaces? Are they embedded in policies about childcare and maternity leave and comp time? Are our principles aligned with the models of professional and volunteer leadership that we promote, leaders who most often demonstrate their commitment by working at an extraordinary and relentless pace?

To help us gain insight into the struggles of a dedicated Federation CEO who truly seeks to develop a well-rounded personal Jewish identity, we have invited the head of GMJF to speak with us. When we listen to Jacob Solomon, I think we can empathize with the exquisite tension that is experienced by those who pursue professional excellence, or excellence as volunteer leaders, while seeking to live a rich Jewish personal life. But he, like most of the Jewish communal leaders in the field, is wrestling with this challenge on an individual level, looking at how it affects him and others personally. This is a good place to start to explore this dilemma but the Jewish community as a whole needs to take

the next step, and begin confronting these challenges on a systemic level. Later in this session, I will invite you to join me in imagining what our Jewish organizations would look like five years from now if we were successful at creating a new work environment that genuinely prized helping people navigate the demands of personal and professional life. And I think you will be inspired to prepare for that exercise by listening to Jacob and by hearing from a representative of the corporate world, Ellen Auster. She is going to talk about the ways top professional firms like Deloitte and Touche are wrestling with this challenge, not simply by providing more support for flexible work arrangements for individuals but by overhauling the entire way in which assignments are structured and work is organized. The comprehensive program that Deloitte established is one of dozens of major corporate initiatives that have been launched to create workplaces where people want to achieve and even advance, while still having time and space for personal commitments.

The kind of systemic change that has been instituted in the private sector is the fundamental transformation that the Jewish community needs to consider, not as a gesture of goodwill to women, but as a competitive strategy for attracting and retaining talent, while lowering the high costs of unnecessary turnover and recruitment.

For the Jewish community to begin this process, it will require a willingness to slaughter (halachically, of course) a few sacred cows. We are much too complacent about the way we do business in the Jewish world. In our interviews for the Ma'yan Women's Leadership Initiative, women volunteer leaders expressed a powerful concern that their daughters and sons are unwilling to follow in their footsteps unless Jewish organizations restructure volunteer opportunities. Yet, we rarely take out the red pencil we use to cut organizational budgets, and apply it to trim meetings, and dinners and other public events. Imagine how much personal time we might rediscover for volunteers and professionals alike if we were ready to scrutinize our time expenditures with the same ferocity that we give to our organizational finances. This is especially critical now when even our most loyal volunteers are expressing their inability to integrate organizational commitments into their over-programmed lives.

We interviewed 200 Jewish professionals in the course of establishing our AWP pilot projects. One of the most common comments in interviews with some of the most dedicated professionals was the feeling they expressed of being "weary to the bone" – burnt out, struggling with pervasive feelings of inadequacy at home and at work. "Bone fatigue." Does anyone wonder whether or not people who are tired to the bone are at their best at engaging and connecting people? As volunteers and professional leaders we are responsible for bringing people together and inspiring them to tackle challenging issues. Yet, by overwhelming our volunteers and ourselves with too many meetings, too many events, and too many ceremonies, are we really engaging people or just getting them into a room? This is even more difficult now when we are in the midst of trying to shape an agenda around Jewish identity and Jewish renewal while simultaneously being confronted with problems that we thought we could relegate to the past, from anti-Semitism to peace and security for Israel. Orchestrating a communal conversation, when we are betwixt and between these very different agendas, cannot be done unless we give

our leaders time and space for reflection and renewal so that they can find the nimbleness needed to help the community respond to the adaptive challenges. Finally, we must challenge the notion that commitment equals time, and that our Jewish professional and volunteer leaders need to sacrifice their lives on our behalf.   Perhaps we need to think about ways we can unleash leadership at every level of our organizations and create a new culture of participation in the community.

To create significant change in work/life integration, we need a three-part strategy that takes into account the way individuals are affected, the way work is structured, and the norms of organizational culture. To succeed we need to design initiatives that have an impact on all three arenas.   We discovered in the first stage of our Advancing Women pilot groups, that one of the most fundamental ways we could improve conditions is literally to give individuals an opportunity to wrestle with their choices and their dilemmas out loud. Simply creating an environment in which it is permissible and even encouraged to discuss these issues with one another has a profound effect on both the individual and the organization.   Needless to say this is not a substitute for appropriate personnel policies or initiatives geared to improve the work lives of individuals. But is a good starting point for any program.

Life/work initiatives often require that we carefully analyze the way in which work is structured – to reveal not only what might lessen hours but, most importantly, what will lessen hours without compromising effectiveness. The best change initiatives actually enhance organizational excellence. For example, a major foundation whose employees were suffering from the demands of international travel found that people were rewarded most in the organization for launching new projects as a result of their trips to the field. The consulting team found that the staff's preoccupation with traveling to program sites and coming up with new ideas for projects was often detracting from their focus on evaluation and leveraging lessons learned from existing work   Over time, the foundation's leadership began to restructure work assignments to require their professionals to devote more time to mining the greatest benefits from existing projects, by improving them based on feedback from the evaluations and by disseminating their results more widely. Eventually people found that their schedules were less overwhelmed by the demands of travel, allowing them more personal time.

Changing the way work is structured requires a change in the Jewish community's organizational culture. We need to foster a new tolerance for experimentation, innovation and the risk of failure. If we enhance our capacity for experimentation, we can begin to learn from interventions in other fields. For example, an engineering firm which prided itself on working through the night to solve crises and holding impromptu meetings whenever a problem emerged, instituted "quiet time every day." Interruptions were forbidden and this gave people time to focus on preventing problems rather than solving them at the last minute. When I first shared this idea at a conference for Federation personnel, one man immediately interrupted and said, "this would never work at a Federation. You can't apply these lessons to us." Only a few minutes later a colleague raised her hand to report on how the institution of "quiet time" was transforming the nature of her work at Federation.   We can learn a lot if we are ready to

risk challenging our most cherished assumptions that lead us to believe the way things are is the way they have to be.

I began our conversation with a confession. I want to close by making a commitment: AWP is no longer running from the problem of navigating work and life. In fact, we have embraced it, and we have embraced the opportunity to bring the best thinking in every field to the Jewish world. We look forward to bringing the best thinking of the Jewish world to the larger world. We can do it. We can start. It starts with a genuine openness to learning. It starts with a belief in our capacity to change. So I turn it over to two people from whom I have already learned so much, Ellen Auster and Jacob Solomon.