

Today's Women at Work have Unique Opportunities

A new call to action for women—and employers

By Kathy Caprino, MA

Women's Work-Life Expert, Career and Executive Coach, and Author of *Breakdown, Breakthrough*

Here's a news flash: Women are poised to surpass men on the nation's payrolls for the first time in American history. According to a recent report by the *New York Times*, four out of five jobs lost in the current U.S. recession belong to men—a consequence of the surge in layoffs within distressed, male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing and construction. This emerging workplace trend may ultimately be a momentous boon to women—shifting their power and influence, both at home and on the job. It also represents a new call to action for women—and employers.

Another news report offered a different take: "Jobs of 22 Million Women Threatened by Global Financial Crisis," says the International Labor Organization, as conveyed by the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA) in the March 16 issue of its *Human Resources Report*. In a report issued in advance of International Women's Day on March 8, the United Nations agency said the global unemployment rate for women could reach 7.4 percent in 2009, compared with 7 percent for men. This trend also serves as a wake-up call for women as employers face difficult decisions about workforce reductions—causing women to work even harder to "make the cut."

The hidden element

Over and above these contradictory headlines, there's a third factor affecting professional women in the workplace—one that is hidden or seldom addressed. Before the economic downturn and unemployment hit the marketplace, many women were already facing a personal crisis: while they had been busy during their careers securing more power, they became sicker and sadder. This trend has been subtly taking place across a wide range of age, income, and marital status spectrums. Now, at a time when jobs are suddenly a necessity, working women are generally unhappier and struggling to cope with the increased demands they once sought in the quest for "having it all."

Whichever headline becomes the final truth in today's workplace dynamic, women facing these changing times have both unprecedented opportunities and obstacles. For many, they find themselves in a holding pattern as the employment landscape unfolds. Meanwhile, employers are beginning to see women in different light.

Unprecedented opportunities—and obstacles

Women may now gain access to professional power and influence that were previously out of reach. As a result, women everywhere can shape their lives and careers with a greater sense of empowerment and serve as vital role models for future generations of women and girls. Additionally, many women are likely to emerge as sole or primary breadwinners for their families and, in turn, begin to revise and update old and rigid gender roles at home—balancing domestic roles and responsibilities more fairly and flexibly. For men, these shifts offer new chances to stretch and grow as well. But don't be fooled. These emerging and unprecedented opportunities—for women, men, and organizations—will be matched by extraordinary obstacles.

The present plight—and fight—of professional women

Before the current economic downturn, women were already beset with a number of crises—personal and professional—and were seeking radical change in how they work and live. According to my research—a yearlong national study in partnership with the Esteemed Woman Foundation—seven out of 10 women, particularly those in their middle years, say they are at a major turning point in their professional lives. After devoting years to building successful careers, they feel that their professional lives and identities no longer work. Consequently, most are facing at least one of 12 “hidden” work/life crises, including chronic health problems, financial bondage, and failure to balance family and work.

12 hidden crises women face

My research helped confirm that a true professional crisis is far more than a “tough time.” It is a no-turning-back situation—a point in time that demands reckoning and reevaluation. So how do women know when they’ve reached that point? When they frequently find themselves saying, “I can’t do this”—the desperate cry, or negative mantra, of work-life crisis—and consistently have deep-down feelings of disempowerment, they are likely experiencing one or more of 12 hidden crises. Among the crises:

▶ ***Suffering from chronic health problems***

Failing health—a chronic illness or ailment—that won’t respond to treatment

The mantra: “I can’t resolve my health problems.”

▶ ***Losing their “voice”***

Contending with a crippling inability to speak up—unable to be an advocate for themselves or others, for fear of criticism, rejection, or punishment

The mantra: “I can’t speak up without being punished.”

▶ ***Facing abuse or mistreatment***

Being treated badly, even intolerably, at work—and choosing to stay

The mantra: “I can’t stop this cycle of mistreatment.”

▶ ***Feeling trapped by financial fears***

Remaining in a negative situation solely because of money

The mantra: “I can’t get out of this financial trap.”

▶ ***Wasting real talents***

Realizing their work no longer fits and desperately wanting to use their natural talents and abilities

The mantra: “I can’t use my real talents.”

▶ ***Struggling to balance life and work***

Trying—and failing—to balance it all, and feeling like they’re letting down who and what matters most

The mantra: “I can’t balance my life and work.”

▶ ***Doing work that feels wrong***

Longing to reconnect with the “real me”—and do work they love

The mantra: “I can’t feel good about my work.”

The call *and* the action—what employers can do

For women, a professional crisis is saying that change must occur—*now*. That doesn’t mean it will be easy—most likely, it won’t—but, one step at a time, every woman can create her own breakthrough. Moreover, considering the shifting or “new” workplace and an increasingly difficult and demanding business environment, organizations must be there to help—understanding and supporting women’s unique challenges and contributions.

The predominant male competitive career model has been, up until now, slow to recognize and respect women’s differences. The work landscape has changed dramatically, and despite the headlines that women are losing headway as a necessity for a company’s survival, this long-standing model has four key elements that no longer work and must be modified; these elements are:

- 1) a bias for linear or continuous employment histories;
- 2) an over-emphasis on “full-time” and “face-time;”
- 3) the expectation or belief that “ambitious” professionals will be most committed in their 30s (when many women are having babies); and
- 4) a guiding principle that money and power are primary motivators.

Now is the time to revise and reform this model. How? By expanding it with new thinking and initiatives that meet the needs and wants of women.

I believe, and my research confirms, that now is the time for such a reform. To survive and thrive in a shifting workplace and complex business world, organizations must rise up and be constant, committed, and contemporary champions for women. I offer eight strategies for getting started:

1. *Embrace women as women.*

An abundance of workplace research shows how and why women differ from men and contribute in unique and indispensable ways. Undeniably, women have distinct values and priorities, needs and wants, styles and approaches. A recent medical study shows that men and women even have unique physiological reactions to crisis and stress, and companies are best served when there is a balanced representation of both genders in leadership roles. In fact, it has been said that if Lehman Brothers were “Lehman Brothers and Sisters,” our current economic crisis might not exist!

2. *Foster support.*

Develop an internal support system for women. Create a woman-to-woman mentoring program, sponsor women-only networks, and initiate an ongoing forum for women to connect, converse, and collaborate. Essentially, encourage women to come together—formally and informally, face-to-face and online—to address challenges and opportunities, seek advice, and celebrate individual and collective successes.

3. *Train for growth and expansion.*

Commit to training and development. Help women build new hard and soft skills through formal training programs and, wherever possible, one-on-one executive or leadership coaching. Provide regular access to internal and external seminars, and promote women’s involvement in “stretch” assignments. Put women on new projects and teams—including special task forces—and broaden their distinguishing gifts, talents, and abilities.

4. Focus on flexibility.

Women's need for flexibility is bona fide and fundamental. In consideration of weighty realities such as childcare and eldercare, implement new programs, policies, and procedures that foster optimal flexibility—telecommuting, flextime, job sharing, part-time offerings, and more. Additionally, institute incentives and rewards that go beyond the traditional framework of money and power. Ask women what they really want, and work to incorporate those incentives into the company's recognition and reward programs.

5. Expand the options.

Grow the options for how women can contribute over the arc of their careers. Recognize the fluid nature of women's priorities, and consider differing career paths and trajectories—up, down, and across. Experiment with a variety of options—all providing for unique opportunities for “on-ramping” and “off-ramping” as women's lives and priorities shift at home and on the job.

6. Encourage work-life balance.

Women are increasingly beleaguered as they try, and fail, at balancing work and life. What's more, research shows that working women, even as sole breadwinners, are still shouldering most domestic responsibilities at home. Companies, in response, must be champions for work-life balance and wellness for women—offering internal resources or outside referrals to programs focused on striving for balance, pursuing a healthy lifestyle, and managing stress.

7. Empower women leaders to “walk the talk.”

Years ago, as a corporate VP in a large national marketing firm, I was “put down” by the head of HR for my choice to take a full week off to move my family, including my husband and our two small children, to another city. “I moved to another town with my kids last month and only took a half day,” the HR leader said. Criticizing my personal choice, as wife and mother, was a “less than” form of leadership—lacking a critical sense of empowerment, balance, and support to women. Worse, the source was at the helm of HR—and a woman.

Today, just as President Barack Obama is a powerful and “visual” role model for change, the workplace needs women leaders to serve as visual role models—working and living from the core values of women everywhere. Organizations must embrace this need from the top, actively spotlighting female leaders who walk the talk and encouraging male leaders to outwardly support them.

8. Measure efficacy.

Programs that support women—attracting, engaging, and retaining strong and skilled female talent—are essential to organizational success. It's one thing, however, to develop and implement those programs; it's another thing to evaluate them against key business measures or metrics. Commit to regularly assessing—quantitatively and qualitatively—how ongoing initiatives to support women impact business measures such as recruitment, retention, engagement, productivity, wellness, and more.

Bottom line

Today, with a dramatically shifting workforce and do-or-die business environment, no employer can afford to ignore or overlook the unique needs and contributions of female talent. From the HR department to the executive suite, organizations must answer the call to action and support women in unprecedented new ways.

Kathy Caprino, MA, is a women's work-life expert and author of Breakdown, Breakthrough: The Professional Woman's Guide to Claiming a Life of Passion, Power, and Purpose (Berrett-Koehler, 2008, www.breakdownbreakthrough.com). Founder and President of Ellia Communications, Inc., a Connecticut-based executive and work-life coaching and consulting company, Caprino is a trained psychotherapist, seasoned career and life coach, and sought-after writer and speaker on women's issues. She is a popular blogger on business, workplace, and career topics and trends, and as a top media source, she has appeared in more than 100 leading newspapers and magazines and on national television. Contact her on the Web at www.elliacommunications.com.

Additional Resources and Opportunity for Ongoing Dialog with Other Women

Quiz for Women

Kathy Caprino has developed a "quiz" to help professional women determine if they are simply having a tough time or indeed facing one of the 12 common crises. The quiz is available on her **Breakdown Breakthrough** book site, at <http://breakdownbreakthrough.com/book/quiz/>.

Blog link

Kathy blogs regularly on work/life issues for working women, and other major career bloggers and national newspapers have mentioned her work and research as well. Again, as an added value element, Employers Groups and other readers are invited to link to her blog (at <http://www.elliacommunications.com/blog/>) as a way to keep the conversation going. Your comments are welcome to ignite continued useful discussion.

FREE Resources

Kathy offers a wealth of free resources for women in career transition, including a specially-designed "Career Path Assessment," a LinkedIn Primer, and more. See <http://www.elliacommunications.com> for free tips and resources to help you gain clarity and make positive movement.