



Marcia Lippman

The Female Factor

Although women have taken their place beside men in the work force, they still are affected by different pressures than their male counterparts. Here are some ideas of how human resource professionals can help female employees remain a strong force in the workplace and avoid sex-role stereotypes.

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Women today account for 44 percent of the total U.S. work force—blue- and white-collar jobs alike. But stereotypes and misconceptions about female employees cause many organizations to underutilize this important segment of the work force. One of the major myths is that women are absent more often than men and that they are less committed and loyal to their jobs and organizations.

Managers and human resource practi-

tioners must improve management attitudes affecting women employees. Management training programs designed to differentiate between perception and reality may help break down the barriers caused by erroneous stereotyping. Breaking down these barriers is one way of getting women more involved and improving their productivity. Consider that a 12 percent productivity gain among 44 percent of the American work force would result in a 5 percent productivity gain overall. Such a gain is

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sorely needed; it could make the difference between economic success and failure both of corporations and nations.

Let's look at some of the misinformation concerning women in the work force and see what steps training professionals can take in their supervisory and management development courses to eliminate the stereotypes.

Sex differences in absenteeism

Many women leave boring, low-level, dead-end jobs because they're not challenged, don't expect promotions, or see no reason to stay. But so do men. Sex doesn't affect job commitment. Lots of other factors do. If managers understood that, they'd be able to do the things that would help *all* their employees be more loyal and committed to the job.

Sociologists, citing what they call "social learning," contend that it's the situation that causes behavior, not the behavior that causes the situation. If that's true, men and women in similar jobs are likely to behave the same way when it comes to leaving a job, to absenteeism, or to job involvement.

There's more turnover and absenteeism in lower-level jobs than in jobs that pay more and offer more challenge and status. It is only because more lower-level jobs are held by women that turnover and absenteeism is greater among women. In higher level jobs, however, they are just as stable as men. In fact, among older employees, women stay on the job longer than men.

Sometimes women hold higher-status positions but are still viewed and treated as lower-level employees—treatment that would reduce motivation in any employee, regardless of sex. Low motivation is a major cause of absenteeism among workers of both sexes. When you lump together all levels of jobs, absenteeism rates due to sickness or injury are essentially the same for females as for males: 5.6 days per year for women versus 5.2 for men.

Sex differences in turnover

Women *do* leave jobs more often than men. But statistics from major companies such as AT&T, General Motors, and Polaroid show that the gap is narrowing. As women climb the ladder to more prestigious jobs, they're staying longer with companies. In fact, one study shows women executives leave less frequently than their male colleagues.

Fewer women are leaving the work force

for marriage and children than in the past. Even when they do leave to have children, a majority returns to work after short maternity leaves or when their children are a few years old. And since most women outlive most men, they are able to work extra years, thus making up for the time they took out to have or rear children.

Many supervisors don't know how to help their female employees become more dedicated to their job, more involved, and more committed to the organization. But these managers don't understand why people work; how work commitment, job commitment, and organization commitment differ; and how men and women travel different routes to arrive at the same commitment.

Why people work

Fifty-one percent of American adult women work. Slightly less than that percentage work in the United Kingdom and Western Europe, slightly more work in the Scandinavian countries, and substantially more work in the Eastern European nations. The number is growing every year. Eventually, the U.S. government predicts, nine out of ten American women will work outside their homes during their adult years. And women work for the same reasons men work: economics, enjoyment, and societal expectations.

■ **Economics.** Some supervisors don't expect women employees to be very job-committed. You've heard them complain, "How can they be serious about their jobs when they don't really need to work? Their husbands support them. They're working for the extras. . . ." That's not true. Two-thirds of all working women are self-supporting. Slightly more than one-third are the only family wage earners. So managers who think most women work for "pin money" are wrong and are missing an opportunity to develop more productive employees.

Surveys show that 75 percent of all working women report they need the money. The percentage is a little lower for white-collar workers and a little higher among blue-collar women.

■ **Enjoyment.** Many women, like many men, enjoy working. They're motivated because working brings personal satisfaction and fulfillment. Women who like to work are among the most committed of employees and often are able to overcome many personal and family problems through strong job or career involvement.

■ **Societal expectations.** In today's economic environment, two salaries are often

necessary. But because most cultures traditionally promote men working outside the home and women working inside the home, society tends to view a woman's decision to take on a paying job as an extension of her regular family duties.

Traditional values are beginning to change. More and more women are opting to forego or postpone marriage and children. More and more marriages are ending in divorce. As a result, Americans—in greater numbers than ever before—are beginning to believe that women as well as men should work. We'll discuss in greater detail sex-role differences and the conflicts they create later in this article.

Types of commitment

Work, job, and organizational commitment are different. A manager probably can't help anyone become more work-committed. That value is learned when people are very young. Parents, teachers, and sometimes playmates help instill a sense of the importance of work. A good definition of work commitment is *the belief that work is good for you and helps make you feel more worthwhile and important.*

A person may have a low level of work commitment and still be committed to a particular job. Low work commitment and high job commitment rarely are found together, however. Most people will not be job-committed unless they are also work-committed.

Once you determine that an employee believes work is important to his or her life, you have a good chance of helping that worker become committed to both the job and the organization. A useful definition of job commitment is *the feeling that your identity is connected to your job. To some extent, you are what you do.*

When a person's identity or feeling of self-worth is related to his or her job, the individual is very involved and dedicated. The result is striving for and usually obtaining a high level of accomplishment. Work becomes especially meaningful to the employee. Meaningful work, in turn, helps satisfy the person's intrinsic or inner needs. Workers with low job commitment are likely to leave the job—either temporarily through absenteeism or permanently. Sometimes they stay with the job but do their "real" living off the job.

An employee can be committed to the specific job but not to the organization. Company loyalty is certainly useful, particularly when the organization faces union problems or the employee is wooed by the competition. Employee turnover is cost-

ly, and company loyalty may help in reducing turnover. A good definition for organization commitment is *a great feeling of rapport, loyalty, and identification with the organization that leads to a belief in what the organization stands for and a willingness to "go the extra mile."*

Of the three types of commitment, job commitment is by far the one that low- and mid-level managers have the strongest impact on. Your management and supervisory development courses should show managers that their actions and their influence on higher levels of management can help both their women and men workers become more committed to their jobs, more productive, and more likely to stay with the organization.

To accomplish this, training practitioners must teach managers how workers become committed to their jobs and that women workers encounter unique problems that can act as obstacles to job commitment and productivity. Managers must be able to help their female employees remove those barriers.

How individuals become job-committed

Before any employee becomes job-committed, he or she must pass through three stages of development. The first stage is the combining of *personal influences*: sex, background, attitudes, values, and intrinsic motivation. These variables blend to create the personality that both men and women bring to work each day.

The second stage occurs once the employee is on the job. The individual's personality is affected by two external *moderating influences*: family and job circumstances.

What emerges from the combination of job and family influences is the individual's *moderated perceptions*, the third stage. This stage could also be called *perceived role behavior and attitude*. Low sex-role conflict, high satisfaction of needs, and high work commitment lead to a high job commitment.

Let's look at each of the three stages in more detail.

■ Stage 1: *personal influences*

Most females are destined from birth to travel a different work path from males. Sex has no biological effect on job commitment, but it does create many different societal and family pressures. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the influences on women are different because society sees women as different. Compared with males, females are viewed as physically

weaker, more passive, more conforming to the needs of others, more understanding and nurturing, less self-reliant, less independent, and so on.

Women's ideas about life, their attitudes, and their value systems are shaped to fit this cultural view. They develop a pattern of inner social and ego needs that change the way they adapt to circumstances at work. But if other needs such as achievement and self-fulfillment are strong enough, a woman may be committed to work and her job, even though the combination of home and work environment is not especially favorable.

A computer programmer for an insurance company, Jennifer has an unhappy home life, but she's highly motivated and dedicated to her job. "I can't see myself doing anything else but working. I have an important job, people look at me with respect, and most of all I think I'm a pretty capable human being. I love my job. It has my thumbprint on it. My husband isn't thrilled about my working, but that's his problem."

Unlike Jennifer, when a woman's motivational needs are weak, a strong job commitment will depend on a favorable combination of work and family circumstances. Working men with higher inner needs also are likely to be job-committed regardless of the work environment. But men don't have to compensate for family situations if they have low motivational needs. Society's expectation that men should work gives them an extra incentive to being involved in their jobs. It's an incentive rarely given to women.

■ Stage 2: *external moderating influences*

Two major moderating factors affect women and men once they start working: family and job circumstances. Both are very important to women; only the latter has a very strong influence on men.

Research does not show any relationship between a man's job commitment and his family characteristics. But there are strong ties between a woman's level of work commitment and her marital status, child responsibilities, husband's supportiveness, husband's earnings, and her degree of satisfaction with her family life.

The connection between family and work can be positive or negative, depending on the circumstances. The longer a woman has been married, for example, the more work-committed she's likely to be. At the same time, however, married women feel more conflict than single women due to their mixing of family and work roles, and they often are less satisfied with their jobs. And the widely held belief that mar-

ried women without children are more committed to work than working mothers is false; research shows the opposite to be true.

When a woman's husband is unhappy about her working, she'll probably experience strong emotional conflict, which reduces her level of work commitment. "Lack of family support really has a detrimental effect on working women," one woman manager told us. "I had an employee, Lisa, who had a solid work history when I hired her and was just starting back to work after a three-year period in which she had remarried and had a second child. At first she seemed extremely hard-working, responsible, and dependable. Her job was being broadened vertically, so we were gradually expecting more of her. But as the job got better, she got worse."

"I couldn't figure out what was happening until another employee filled me in on what Lisa was facing at home. Her husband was a hospital administrator who was rising rapidly and very much resented his wife working—which she did both for the money and because she enjoyed having her own job. He delayed cashing her checks to show her how unimportant her contribution was to the family, demanded that she be superwoman at home while she was working, and so on. Unfortunately her husband became more upset and less supportive as her job became more meaningful. Finally the husband got a fantastic job and they moved to Florida. She, of course, still faces the problem because she enjoys working."

There's also a strong tie between high work commitment and how much husbands and wives share household and family roles. For example, the more a father helps with bringing up the children, the more likely it is that the mother will be committed.

Another factor is the husband's earnings. The more he earns, the less likely it is that his wife will be work-committed.

Women workers react in different ways to their levels of satisfaction with family life. In some cases, an unhappy home life reduces their work commitment. But for other women, an unhappy marriage drives them to bury their unhappiness in work.

The second moderating factor, job circumstances, influences both work commitment and job commitment for men and women but in different ways and to different degrees. Regardless of sex, hard-working, dedicated, and loyal employees are those who are happy with their job circumstances. Men who like their jobs, perform meaningful work, fully use their

skills, and are pleased with their psychological and physical surroundings quite easily become job-committed.

It's not so simple for women. Julie is an example. She had a male supervisor who regarded her as a token female. He made no demands on her abilities, nor did he devote any time to furthering her career advancement. "He gave me all the tedious entry-level tasks," Julie explained. "Sam was assigned all the good, complicated jobs. People came to know him and he enjoyed it. I really turned off the job."

If a woman experienced the identical job situations as a man she might become equally job-committed if her work commitment also was strong enough. But if she was unable to cope with unfavorable family circumstances, her job commitment would not be the same.

A good manager can make a tremendous impact on improving circumstances at work. Linda, an assistant manager in a woman's clothing store, took the job because the regional manager said the company believed in helping its trainees grow. "My supervisor allowed me to take on as much responsibility as I could. He helped me do my best and taught me merchandising skills. I really became engrossed in my job and didn't mind the 50-to-60-hour weeks."

It's unlikely, however, that even the best executive can do anything to improve a woman's family pressures. But we'll make several suggestions later of how training and development professionals can teach managers to help women cope with conflicts between home and work.

■ Stage 3: moderated perceptions

So far, we've learned that personal and work influences combine to form a personality profile that an individual brings to the job. In short, the individual's perceptions have been moderated or altered.

The most important of these moderating factors are the three that affect the degree to which workers are committed to their jobs: sex-role conflict, need satisfaction, and degree of work commitment.

Sex-role conflict has a negative influence on job commitment: the higher the sex-role conflict, the lower the job commitment. Working men appear to have very little conflict in this area. In fact, most men see no clash in values between working for a living and being a husband or father because society approves of this combination. The family-related male role usually requires few housekeeping chores, and even in those cases where men share the workload at home, the greatest responsibility still rests with the woman.

In the traditional societal role, a woman enters the dual world of wife and mother through the marriage ceremony. A traditionalist views woman's place as in the home where—for love and duty, not monetary gain—she maintains a pleasant, clean, gracious place to live. Traditionalists see this role as an exalted one—the highest to which a woman can aspire.

Women who don't share this belief and who want to lead a different kind of life are viewed by some traditionalists as unnatural, unwomanly, and even immoral. The nontraditionalist believes housework is no different from any other boring, repetitive job and can be performed just as well by either sex.

How people feel about their sex role pressures them to behave in certain "proper" ways. Research reveals that a woman's success can be a mixed bag. It can make her feel untrue to her womanly nature and uncomfortable because of perceived disapproval for being unfeminine.

Most females are destined from birth to travel a different work path from males

A major barrier to a woman's job or work commitment involves her understanding of the so-called feminine role: the extent to which she feels her femininity is measured by her performance of home and family duties.

As discussed earlier, a woman may encounter pressures that lead to conflicting expectations and roles. Too often, women set goals that are impossible to meet. They want to be perfect lovers, perfect housekeepers, perfect mothers. That's virtually impossible when the same women also want to be perfect, promotable employees.

Sex-role conflict plagues women with nontraditional as well as traditional values. Diane, a 23-year-old college graduate, works full-time and studies for an MBA three nights a week. She believes women ought to be free to choose whatever lifestyle they wish. Her sister is married to a "macho" man; she doesn't work outside the home and is busy raising two kids.

"That's fine for her," Diane says, "but I don't see it for me. I want a career. I want to be able to do whatever I want. There's a whole world out there just waiting. Still, I can't help feeling uncomfortable sometimes. Maybe it's because underneath it all I wonder if there's something wrong with

me. I'm different from most of my friends."

The stronger a woman's sex-role conflict, the weaker her dedication to her job. Even if her needs on the job are satisfied and her work commitment is high, if the conflict is strong enough, the working woman may leave her job. Or she may continue working—perhaps to satisfy economic needs—but will do her "living" off the job. Married women with or without children are most affected by this multiple role conflict even though their work commitment may be higher than single women's.

Although fewer women than ever are leaving their jobs because of sex-role conflict, many continue to work without much enthusiasm. These women are not making the contribution they could make, and both they and the organization are losers.

Need satisfaction is the second factor in job commitment, and is a positive one: as it increases in intensity, job commitment also increases. Most workers have a desire

to influence others, to accomplish some task especially well, and to be friendly with coworkers. The more these needs are fulfilled, the more involved employees—men or women—become.

Work commitment, the third and final major job commitment factor, also can have positive effects. Sometimes called the Protestant work ethic, it is an important ingredient for dedication to the job or to the organization. Work commitment also appears to be the link connecting background, attitudes, and family characteristics with job commitment.

How human resources can help

Women have a substantial economic impact on the organization. Lower job commitment among female employees wastes talent and energy. And depriving a woman of the same opportunity as a man to achieve success is an abridgement of human rights. For these reasons, it's important to find ways to insure continued commitment among working women.

Here are four key action steps trainers can teach their managers to use to help female employees remain strong contributors to the organization.

■ Action Step 1: Increase job satisfaction

by matching workers' expectations and rewards.

People are happy with their jobs when there's a good fit between what they expect and what they get. What they get may be either inner satisfaction or rewards such as raises and praise. Managers should find out what rewards are important to employees and match those rewards to the job. This is even more important with women than with men. Research strongly links job satisfaction with job commitment for women but not necessarily for men.

■ **Action Step 2:** *Increase the meaningfulness of a woman's work.*

Use a variety of employees' skills and emphasize task significance. Routine jobs involving only one skill become repetitive, monotonous, and boring. Women traditionally hold many of these positions such as filing clerks, pool typists, small-parts assemblers, and so on.

Concentrate on changing jobs slightly. For example, have a filing clerk also do some typing, some phone answering, and some light bookkeeping or recordkeeping. A person who spends an entire day making sleeves for blouses will not be as satisfied as one who sews and assembles

finished individuals in the sales department were kept inside. You guessed it: They were women. Their job was to handle customers who came to the plant to place orders or to complain about delivery. Their sales manager was reluctant to place these women in a "man's job" where they'd have to face the continual risk of rejection—something he felt they wouldn't be able to handle. Instead, they were paid 20 percent less than the outside sales force, given no opportunity for bonuses, and underutilized in terms of skills and abilities. No wonder these women lacked job commitment. Men in their positions would feel the same way.

■ **Action Step 4:** *Encourage women's participation in decisions.*

Give women more autonomy and feedback and place particular emphasis on increasing their participation in decision making. A sense of independence and a knowledge of their managers' happiness or unhappiness with their work will help female employees feel more satisfied and successful. The more successful a person feels, the more likely that person will be job-committed. Research shows a high correlation between satisfaction of needs,

work teams. If employees lack organization commitment, encourage their commitment to their immediate work groups. Unless a manager also happens to be the CEO, he or she probably won't be able to control the organization's unfavorable climate toward women workers. Female employees may actually dislike the firm and find its values and attitudes in conflict with their own. Advise your supervisors and management students that they can, however, have an impact on the loyalty of their subordinates toward their own work group.

■ **Help women cope with personal conflicts.** Provide counseling advice for women to aid them in understanding and coping with their personal and work role conflicts. By helping them set priorities on role demands and learn to accommodate the additional conflict, managers can reduce female employees' stress.

Unless managers specifically are asked for advice, however, it's not always a good idea for them to do counseling themselves. Instead, they should help female workers make counseling arrangements with a woman they can trust in the human resource department or with a successful female role model elsewhere in the organization.

■ **Be flexible with working hours.** Organizations can help reduce family pressures on working women by allowing flexible working hours. Most companies leave the final decision about an individual's work hours to that person's immediate manager.

Some women's sex-role conflict may be dramatically reduced if they have sufficient time to handle certain family duties. For example, if a woman could leave earlier each day than the rest of the work force, she could get home before her husband and would have time to cook or perform other activities she may perceive as part of her feminine role. To make up for the lost time, managers should consider letting women start earlier or skip lunch. Four-day work weeks, job sharing, or other alternative work schedules often can help women handle two roles with less conflict.

■ **Bend the rules when necessary.** Managerial style affects job involvement in several ways. Group morale, employee commitment to organizational goals, and individual satisfaction usually result from a lenient managerial style and a high degree of autonomy. Research has found that in small industrial work groups strict managers who made decisions according to "company policy" had subordinates with low job commitment and morale.

It's particularly important to bend the

"When I applied for a job, I was drilled on my role as a mother and how it would affect my performance"

the entire blouse. The second worker is involved with the entire product and has an increased identity with her job. And when you point out how important a person's work is—either to customers, to other workers, or to the company—your employees will feel more personal worth.

Increasing the meaningfulness of many jobs commonly held by women may or may not increase production, but it's likely to improve the quality of the employee's work, her satisfaction of internal needs, and her job satisfaction. You'll also reduce absenteeism and turnover and insure continued job commitment, dedication, and loyalty.

■ **Action Step 3:** *Use the skills of women workers.*

Too often women are automatically relegated to low-level jobs that require skills far below their abilities. In one sales organization, all but one of the 30 outside salespeople were men. These salespeople worked on salary but were paid substantial bonuses for special efforts and sales results.

Four equally talented, equally exper-

ience individuals in the sales department were kept inside. You guessed it: They were women. Their job was to handle customers who came to the plant to place orders or to complain about delivery. Their sales manager was reluctant to place these women in a "man's job" where they'd have to face the continual risk of rejection—something he felt they wouldn't be able to handle. Instead, they were paid 20 percent less than the outside sales force, given no opportunity for bonuses, and underutilized in terms of skills and abilities. No wonder these women lacked job commitment. Men in their positions would feel the same way.

In addition to the four key steps above, here are several other effective techniques managers and human resource professionals can use to help women be successful and fulfilled in the workplace.

■ **Whatever the employee's reason, support her decision to work.** Without meaning to, human resource managers and supervisors sometimes compound a woman's sex-role conflict by questioning her motives for working. Her self-doubts multiply, and her inner fears are realized when important people at work also seem concerned about the appropriateness of her dual role.

"When I applied for a job with a large insurance company, I was drilled in the interview process on my role as a mother and how it would be affected or would affect my performance in the data processing center," Lisa said. "I really resented the implication. I have enough guilt of my own when I have to stay at work with kids and a husband waiting for me. I sure didn't need to work for a company that added to my conflict. So I didn't take the job."

■ **Develop workers' sense of loyalty to their**

rules with women employees once in a while when they have demanding family pressures. Consideration at these times will inspire a worker to be more dedicated and loyal.

Anne told us a story about a manager who was particularly immovable. "I'm a single mother, and most men at work are insensitive to women's problems with sick children," she related. "I got a call from the school nurse that my child had fallen from a swing during recess. He was okay physically but was afraid and upset, and the nurse thought I ought to pick him up. I talked to my boss and explained the situation. 'The kid isn't hurt,' he told me, 'and you're not eligible for time off, so I suggest you get back to work.'"

■ *Provide social contact on the job.* Both men and women tend to become more dedicated and committed to their jobs when they're given a great deal of opportunity for social contact. This can be accomplished through working in close proximity to others, team involvement, or participation in goal setting.

In occupations nontraditional for women—such as blue-collar positions—female workers are often excluded and have little contact with their peers. Managers can help reduce this problem by arranging for women's participation in all group activities.

Ignoring the problem won't solve it

Unfortunately, sex-role conflicts are here to stay, at least for the time being. But these conflicts and other unique problems of working women need not keep them from being productive additions to the work force.

If human resource practitioners and managers work to break down the stereotypes and make the workplace more flexible for *all* employees, women and the American work force as a whole will benefit. Pretending the problem doesn't exist and refusing to deal with it will hurt American business and industry at a time when it needs all the help it can get.



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