

SEQUENCING

The Latest Recruitment and Retention Challenge

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More and more highly trained female Jewish communal professionals are choosing the new career path of sequencing: work, then family, then work, rather than all at the same time. The Jewish community must make every effort to retain these professionals by keeping them connected when they are no longer working and by facilitating their re-entry to the workforce.

The feminist movement advanced the idea that women can “have it all” – husband, children, and a successful career, all at the same time. Increasingly, women now in their 30s and 40s are choosing a different path. Rather than working full time and raising their children simultaneously, women are choosing to take time off from their professional careers. Most of these women do intend to return to the work force at some time in the future, though that may be in six months or fifteen years, or sometime in between. In other words, they still wish to have it all, but are choosing to do so in sequence – work, then family, then work, rather than all at the same time.

This trend is being noticed by the Jewish and mainstream media. According to a recent article in *Lilith* magazine, “About 40 percent of American mothers combine parenting with full-time jobs; 25 percent are fully at home with their children; and the other 35 percent combine parenting with some kind of paid work” (Peskowitz, 2004). This last group may work anywhere from a few hours per week at home to three or four full days in an office. Regarding the middle group, *Time Magazine* reported that, “census data reveal an uptick in stay-at-home moms who hold graduate or professional degrees – the very women who seemed destined to blast through the glass ceiling” (Wallis, 2004).

The economics of Jewish communal work make the sequencing choice even more compelling. Many women find that, after paying for daycare for even one child, there is minimal income left for the family, though, to be sure, the health insurance and other benefits are factors to consider. Some men in Jewish communal service may find this to be the case as well, especially if their wives work in the for-profit sector.

I have chosen to leave the work force to be “fully at home.” After earning master’s degrees in social work and Jewish communal service from the University of Southern California and Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, I returned to my home community of Chicago to work at Council for Jewish Elderly as a social worker with a clinical caseload. Over the next ten years I took on roles of increasing responsibility, culminating in directing a city-wide program serving Holocaust survivors and their families.

During those years I met and married my husband and gave birth to our son. It never occurred to me to not return to work, though I also knew that I wanted to home at least part-time. I was lucky: My supervisor was very supportive and helped me arrange a three-day a week schedule that seemed to work for both of us, allowing me to return to my position after taking

four months of maternity leave.¹ As my son passed his first birthday, I began to have second thoughts, however. I felt I was missing too much of the joy and wonder of his childhood, and I wanted to spend more time with him.

At the same time, I found my work to be profoundly meaningful, and I was, and still am, deeply and passionately committed to the Jewish community on both personal and professional level. That commitment can be traced to growing up in an actively Jewish household, participating in a synagogue youth group, Jewish summer camp, Israel trips, Hillel and certainly my experiences in graduate school and in the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program. Shortly after beginning my professional career, I was involved in founding Jewish Communal Professionals of Chicago, a professional networking association that is now a local group affiliated with JCSA. I was invited to serve on the board of AJCOP and then JCSA, and currently serve as an officer of JCSA. I could not imagine leaving Jewish communal work.

After months of debating the issue with my husband, I decided to be home full-time with my son, but there was no doubt that I wanted to remain involved and engaged in the Jewish communal world. I also wanted to continue my involvement as a volunteer, including serving on the board of my synagogue and on the founding board of a new community Jewish day school in Chicago.

I was not alone. Brenda Gevertz, JCSA's executive director, connected me with two other professionals who had made similar decisions: Beth Finger in the New York area and Dana Sheanin in the San Francisco area. Through email exchanges and conference calls, we determined that we had similar goals and set out to see if there were others like us: Jewish communal professionals committed to this field who are currently taking time to be home with their children, but who are interested in staying connected to the field.

With the support of JCSA, we spread the word of an initial conference call to gauge interest in forming a network of such professionals. Over 15 professionals from across the country participated in the call. There was a great deal of excitement as callers brainstormed goals for the group and possible topics for future conference calls, and suggested a list-serve to facilitate ongoing dialogue and possibly even local get-togethers. Even before the list-serve was started, conference call participants and others who heard about the project began sending emails to each other expressing interest in the project and sharing their bios and personal stories. It became clear that we were engaging a very talented pool of professionals from across the country and across the spectrum of Jewish communal service.

Goals for what became known as the "Networking Parents" project were established over the next couple of months and include the following:

- networking
- continuing professional growth and keeping up to date on hot topics in the field
- supporting one another
- sharing resources
- studying Jewish texts and discussing articles together
- advocating family-friendly policies in the Jewish communal workplace

Two subsequent conference calls have taken place. Participants in the first call discussed Lisa Belkin's (2003) *New York Times* article, "The Opt-Out Revolution." It was interesting and poignant to note that the very issues felt by this group were also being felt nationwide. The

¹ My maternity leave was unpaid, though that I was able to utilize the vacation time and sick time that I had banked. The policy has since been changed and there are now limits on the number of days of vacation and sick time that can be used for maternity leave, far less than the three months that is customary.

second call featured a guest speaker, a Jewish communal professional who had taken time off to raise children, worked intermittently during the intervening years, and had recently returned to full-time work. She gave specific strategies and suggested pitfalls to avoid during the years at home and in attempting to re-access the workforce. A second live internet chat was a follow up to this call.

Women professionals are increasingly interested in part-time work, ranging from a few hours per week to three or four days. Many expressed particular interest in short-term projects or work that can be done through telecommuting, but are having difficulty finding this kind of flexibility in our field. When this issue was presented at a JCSA board meeting, agency executives stated that they sometimes have such projects and positions and cannot always find appropriate candidates. A proposal for JCSA to help broker these relationships, with assistance from the International Association of Jewish Vocational Service and using JCSA's new website was met with enthusiastic approval, and funds are being sought at this time to make this possible. In the meantime, additional conference calls are being planned, and the listserve continues to be a force for networking and sharing resources.²

As important as this effort is, however, it is not sufficient. Articles in local and national newspapers and magazines over the last couple of years point to the struggles that women are finding as they attempt to return to the workforce. A front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* cited a recent poll from the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York nonprofit, which found that "of nearly 500 highly educated women who left their jobs mainly for family reasons...66% wanted to return to work" (Chaker & Stout, 2004). The bulk of the article focused on the difficulties these women have when searching for a job. Executive recruiters cited challenges ranging from gaps in the resumes, changes in technology in their specific industries and the scarcity of positions. A *Chicago Tribune* article published later that same month concurred: "The trouble is that it is much easier to drop out of the work force than it is to drop back in. Networks unravel as key contacts move on. Companies change strategies. Skills become obsolete, or worse, outsourced. And women who had assumed that they could step right back on the up escalator are finding themselves trudging up the stairs to get back to work" (Clever, 2004).

Additionally, in order for these talented professionals to want to return to our agencies and organizations, we must implement policies that aid rather than impede work-life balance. Of course, these policies will benefit not only mothers but also fathers, singles, married people without children, and anyone caring for aging parents. In an article in this journal, Shifra Bronznick (2002) quoted a 2000 study by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center that found "that nearly 80 percent of Americans report that having a work schedule that enables them to spend time with their families is one of their top priorities." She goes on to write, "The CEOs of JESNA and the Jewish National Fund have eloquently articulated the rationale behind the flexible arrangements they offer their employees. It is no coincidence that, in conversations conducted as part of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community research, young professionals at these two agencies expressed a greater degree of satisfaction in their work than their peers employed in more traditional settings." Furthermore, "in the Jewish world, where living a Jewish life, raising a Jewish family, and creating a personal Jewish identity are

² To subscribe to the "Networking Parents" listserve, send a blank email to Networkingparents-subscribe@yahoo.com. For more general information, email the author at annluban@aol.com or Beth Finger at curlyfamily@hotmail.com.

considered critical to the community's vitality and viability – helping professionals navigate personal and professional responsibilities should be seen as essential” (Chazan, 2002).

The current draft of the best practices manual of the Sulam project of the Jewish Communal Professionals of Chicago presents five major categories of best practices for work-life balance: Top Management Commitment to Implement and Monitor Policies; Flexible Work Arrangements; Dependent Care Benefits; Leave Benefits; and Education and Support for Employees. (For an overview of the Sulam project, see Nagy, 2004). Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan, found that flexible arrangements – flex-time, compressed work weeks, work at home/telecommuting, and job-sharing - are made “on an individual level, rather than an institutional one. What this means is that one's ability to get flexible work arrangements is dependent on the good graces of one's supervisor” (Stone, 2004). Even so, not all colleagues and lay leaders are supportive of such arrangements. Anecdotal evidence abounds of professionals who have had flex time or part-time schedules agreed upon by supervisors or personnel managers, only to be expected to attend additional night or Sunday meetings or be called to task by lay leaders who were not part of the approval process.

The news is not all bleak, however; the for-profit world is beginning to recognize the value in these former employees. The same *Wall Street Journal* article cited above reported on such employers as General Electric and Booz Allen Hamilton who attempt to remain connected with employees who leave to be home with families. A companion article described a new task force titled the “Hidden Brain Drain” formed in February 2004 by more than a dozen big companies and law firms in the U.S. and Britain (Chaker & Stout, 2004). At the task force's first meeting, company representatives “discussed strategies for creating ‘on-ramps’ for women seeking to get back in the labor force.” Similarly, Carol Henriques, a principal with Chicago-based Capital H Group, a firm that consults to companies of human resources issues, was quoted in a *Chicago Tribune* article as saying that “retention of top talent – especially in the face of a potential brain drain as the first of the Baby Boomers start to retire – is emerging as a concern sufficiently powerful to force companies to throw out their old assumptions about why experienced mothers aren't welcomed back” (Cleaver, 2004).

This opportunity to retain the talents of Jewish women professionals is one that the field of Jewish communal service cannot afford to ignore. As highly educated, skilled and experienced professional women are ready to return to the workforce, whether part-time or full-time, we need to proactively facilitate their re-entry.

This is not rocket science. Remain in communication with professionals who are at home, and not just to solicit them for your annual campaign or fundraising event. Invite them to professional development seminars. Utilize their skills for short-term, project-based or consulting work. Provide mentors who can help them to navigate their re-entry. And when it comes time to review their resumes, focus on the skills and experiences needed to fill the position, regardless of whether the skills were developed in paid or unpaid work and whether those experiences were in the office, the home or on the ball field coaching a youth sports team.

There are Jewish communal professionals in every community who have chosen part-time work and/or “sequencing” of their work and family. If we are able to leverage their talent and ease their transitions back to work in our field, just imagine the possibilities.

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