



WOMEN *at* MIDLIFE *and* BEYOND

A Glimpse into THE FUTURE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, increasing numbers of women have remained in the workforce throughout their adult lives without taking significant time off for childbearing or childrearing. The labor force participation of women is expected to continue to increase, by 7.8 million workers between 2001 and 2008. In addition, large numbers of women continue to re-enter the workplace after their children reach school age. Historically, for example, from 1980 to 2000, the number of working women aged 35 to 54 increased by 16.4 million.

These changes mean that for the first time women at midlife and beyond are a significant component of the workforce. Pathbreaking women who entered the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to work throughout their adult life are now at late career stages and are moving toward retirement. Other women have now worked for 15 to 20 years and have reached midlife or the period beyond midlife. By examining the growing percentage of these women at midlife and beyond in the workforce, this report provides a *glimpse into the future*.

THE STUDY

This report describes the results of a project that focused on understanding the special issues and challenges faced by women age 35 and older. The study explores the following questions:

- > *What issues are faced by women at midlife and beyond with respect to their careers, family, and the interaction between the two?*
- > *How well do women at midlife and beyond balance work and family responsibilities?*
- > *How satisfied are women at midlife and beyond with their jobs, careers, and life in general?*
- > *How well do women at midlife and beyond believe their companies respond to the issues they face at midlife and later life, and what do they think their companies should do?*

The Center for Work & Family at Boston College supported this study – Women at Midlife and Beyond: A Glimpse Into the Future – because of the recognition that work-life issues for women over age 35 is an understudied area. Some women leave the workforce or particular employers during midlife, in part because organizations fail to meet their needs. They seek alternatives, such as self-employment, a shift to an unrelated job in a different industry or occupation, or a complete departure from the workforce. If they do not leave their organizations at midlife, in later life these women may choose to retire early because their organizations do not acknowledge their particular needs.

THE SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

In this study, surveys were administered and interviews were conducted with women age 35 and over in three organizations – two health care organizations and a financial services company. Surveys were received from 1578 women at midlife or later life stages; for comparison purposes, survey data were collected from 300 women younger than 35 in the two health care organizations. In order to obtain more detailed information, interviews were also conducted with 104 of the women who returned the surveys.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As a result of analyzing the survey and interview data, the following conclusions can be reached about the women age 35 and over in the study:

- > *Caregiving Responsibilities:* Child care remains an issue for women at midlife and beyond. The women most frequently allow their children to care for themselves; otherwise their spouse or a paid provider outside the home provides care. Self-care for children can potentially create a need for greater access to and support by parents if issues arise, increasing the need for personal days or flexible hours. Elder care responsibilities increase as the women age and include financial support, personal visits or telephone calls, taking an adult to appointments, or helping them pay bills.

> *Work and Future Plans:* Women at midlife continue to express a need for compensation and benefits as the most important reason for working; however, this appears to be less important as women reach age 50 and older. These women are not as interested in new challenges, being able to advance, or gaining added responsibilities. In terms of the future, women over age 50 expect to be working fewer hours in the future and are less likely to leave their jobs for any reason. This interest in working fewer hours as an individual approaches retirement suggests that organizations should consider a variety of part-time and staged retirement options.

> *Work-family Balance:* Women at midlife express varying views in terms of the level of difficulty in balancing work and family responsibilities, although most feel that their work and family balance is at least acceptable. Our data show that concerns or stress regarding family and home negatively affect between one-fourth and one-half of employees. These issues are most exacerbated for women ages 35 to 50.

> *Family Friendliness of Employing Organizations:* The women at midlife and beyond value the support of executives for family-friendly initiatives but believe that supervisors and co-workers are more supportive of work-family programs than executives. Support by an immediate supervisor for work-life policies and programs is one of the most significant factors for employees' effective work-life balance. Benefits that help balance work and family are greatly valued. A majority of women at midlife and beyond value flexible work schedules, paid and unpaid family-related leaves and sabbaticals, eldercare referral, health insurance, access to fitness facilities, access to personal services, and work-family committees and policies.

> *Overall Attitudes:* Women at midlife and beyond are quite satisfied with their jobs, although they feel better about their supervisors than either their wages or management's concern for them. In general, they are not particularly committed to their organization, although women age 50 and older are more likely to feel that they could be happy staying at their organization for the rest of their careers. It is important for women at midlife and later life to be productive in their careers, but most do not want to focus on their careers to the exclusion of other responsibilities and interests. Nearly all of the

women at midlife and beyond in our study are satisfied with their lives. Family relationships, security, and personal fulfillment are seen as the most important parts of their lives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Since the number of working women age 35 and older is predicted to continue to increase, companies need to respond to the needs and challenges faced by women at midlife and beyond. Here are some actions that companies might take to address these issues:

> Carefully tailor their benefits to the needs of women at midlife and beyond.

> Link work-life benefits to appraisal and retention systems to reinforce the value of supporting work-life balance of employees.

> Ensure support from supervisors for work-life programs and benefits through training and rewards for this support, as well as a culture of family friendliness.

> Alter compensation to provide sufficient wages and benefits, as well as paid leaves, for women at midlife and beyond.

> Assist with dependent care by recognizing that some women at midlife and beyond have responsibility for both children and dependent adults.

> Consider the role of spouses by recognizing that benefits should address the needs of both partners and allow collaboration in dealing with work-family issues.

> Provide challenging and interesting assignments to keep women employees motivated and employed.

> Encourage organizations to build commitment from women employees by meeting their needs and providing them sufficient challenges and opportunities in the workplace.

> Examine retirement options to ensure that they meet the needs of workers and do not cause companies to lose valued employees prematurely.

> Conduct more research to gain a better insight into the specific needs of employees and to highlight differences and similarities among different cohorts of workers.

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Boston College Center for Work & Family is committed to enhancing the quality of life of today's workforce by providing leadership in the integration of work and life, an essential for business and community success. Our vision is that companies and communities will work together to ensure their mutual prosperity and the well-being of employees and their families. The Center has three main areas of focus: research, membership, and education.

For more information about the Center, please visit: www.bc.edu/cwf or contact us at: 617-552-2844.