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WHAT DO MEN WANT?

Contents

Changing economies are forcing men to redefine themselves -- and it's time for companies to catch up.

Freud's famous cry of resignation -"Women, what do they want?" -- has been a feminist touchstone for nearly a century. By contrast, the good doctor and countless other social commentators always assumed they knew what men wanted, especially in the realm of work. After all, a man's profession and his ability to bring home a paycheck have traditionally defined who that man was. With wives to manage the domestic scene, working men of the past had little reason to question a system designed by and for them.

But unlike the man in the gray flannel suit of the 1950s or the fast-tracker of the 1970s and 1980s, today's organization man faces a contracting economy in which corporations are restructuring, downsizing, and laying off thousands of employees. Though many wives of male chief executives still stay at home, spouses of most other men now work. These two trends -the recent economic downturn and women's entry into the workplace -- are forcing men to redefine themselves. In order to do so, men of the 1990s must reevaluate what it means to be a success, both on the job and in the home.

Not all men want the same thing, of course. Some still resist efforts to change the old rules for masculine behavior. But in the professional ranks, a new organization man has indeed emerged, one who wants to be an involved father with no loss of income, prestige, and corporate support -- and no diminished sense of manhood. Like working women, we want it all. Yet in today's insecure corporate world, we're even less sure of how to get it.

Few 1990s men fit the traditional picture of distant father, patriarchal husband, and work-obsessed breadwinner; fewer still have dropped out of the working world completely into full-time daddydom and house-husbandhood. Rather than a suburban conformist or high-flying single yuppie, today's organization man carries a briefcase while pushing a baby carriage. He's in his late thirties or forties, balding, perhaps a bit paunchy since there's no time these days for the health club; he no longer wears power ties, and his shirts are rumpled. While he considers his career important, he doesn't want to sacrifice time with his family. His wife may have a demanding job, which he supports; but he may wonder if she thinks he's less of a man than her father, and he may resent her for the time she spends away from home.

Given that most American men grew up believing in the traditional symbols of manhood -- wealth, power, status -- there are clear emotional and financial costs involved in making other choices. Since many companies still deem dedication to career the sole marker of professional success, the new organization man may believe he has to hide his participation at home. Instead of taking advantage of his company's formal parental-leave policies, for instance, he's more likely to use sick days to watch over a new baby. Even if his boss knows this man is caring for a child and not really sick, the time off is viewed as an exception rather than a threat to the status quo.

With the costs of redefining the male role, however, come the benefits that are driving men to change: as a number of the books reviewed here will show, men who call themselves involved fathers often report that their lives are more meaningful. Some have chosen careers that provide more intrinsic satisfaction, like social work or teaching. Other involved fathers build a sense of who they are outside of work, essentially opting for less demanding jobs or "daddy tracks" that allow for more time with their kids.

But what about those who want both a challenging career and involved fatherhood? Not surprisingly, the compromises made by the new organization man bear a striking resemblance to those of the new organization woman. Because the male experience has been viewed as the norm, many more research studies have been conducted on women's efforts to balance work and family. Yet even if the evidence supporting the changing needs of corporate men is primarily anecdotal, based as it is on interviews and clinical case studies, companies would do well to consider what the new breed of organization man says he wants.

Just as many senior managers now recognize they'll lose their most ambitious women if they don't develop strategies to accommodate family needs, I believe corporations will also lose their best and

brightest men if they don't address the needs of the 1990s man.

Who Was the Old Organization Man?

The conventional image of the man in the gray flannel suit emerged in the early 1950s, after the tumult of the Great Depression and World War II. According to the business writer William H. Whyte, Jr., the organization man wanted a settled, stable, suburban existence. Individual expression was cut as short as suburban lawns; these were company men. In Whyte's best-selling and now classic The Organization Man, published in 1956, he complained that the rugged individualist had vanished. In his place were workers motivated more by a "passive ambition," those who were "obtrusive in no particular, excessive in no zeal." The future of these organization men would be "a life in which they will all be moved hither and yon and subject to so many forces outside their control."

Whyte's goal in The Organization Man was to promote the need for individualism within the context of collective life. For Whyte, increasing collectivization was not a temporary fad but had its roots in the Industrial Revolution and the rise of large corporations and mass production. In addition, the organization man's need to belong derived from one aspect of the U.S. national character: what De Tocqueville called the "special genius" of Americans for cooperative action.

But such belongingness also conflicts with "the public worship of individualism," in Whyte's words, the other side of the American coin. Unquestioning allegiance to the company, then, doesn't jibe with the work ethic of the first U.S. entrepreneurs. And a corporate environment that places emphasis on the primacy of compromise and "group think" certainly doesn't promote the entrepreneurial virtues of hard work and self-reliance.

By the early 1970s, of course, Whyte's organization man no longer matched the economic or social times. Mack Hanan heralded a new arrival in "Make Way for the New Organization Man" (HBR, July-August 1971). Rejecting the comforts of corporate conformity, this new man ran on the fast track. Preoccupied with success, he used the company for his own career advancement as much as the company used him. He was more interested in attaining power than in fitting in.

In this light, the new organization man was back in control of his career, no longer moved "hither and yon" by the inevitable organizational forces described by Whyte. According to Hanan, this new man belonged to himself first and only afterward to his profession, while "corporate belonging often runs... a distant fourth, after his sense of social belonging."

During the high-flying 1980s, the image of the career-oriented professional took a back seat to that of the greedy Wall-Streeter popularized by Hollywood. But Hanan's new organization man, having cut his teeth on the political and social movements of the 1960s, was by no means amoral or uncommitted to community. Rather, this man believed in the importance of questioning authority and "that intelligent, consistent dialogue can accelerate institutional change." He fully expected to have more than one career and was most excited by entrepreneurial opportunities within his corporation, such as subsidized start-ups of new businesses. These "corporateurs" didn't necessarily want to start their own companies, but they certainly wanted "to share in the personal benefits of leadership."

Hanan urged companies to take advantage of this new definition of male success by expanding board representation, equity participation, and decentralized decision making; by providing opportunities for collaborative leadership; and by creating an executive fast track that allowed for self-fulfillment through career advancement.

Many U.S. companies have done just that in the name of business necessity and increased productivity. The fast and furious environment of high-tech companies, exemplified by Microsoft, Apple, and Sun Microsystems, has reinforced the image of male business success that is popular today. Whether a programming nerd or a shirt-sleeved manager, he lives and breathes his job

because he loves it, even if that means eating takeout in front of his computer every night.

But just as the fast-tracker of the 1970s rode roughshod over the conventional organization man Whyte portrayed, today's men are now rebelling against the career expectations that Hanan described. In part, that's because many of the young male professionals of the 1970s and 1980s now have children. While Hanan's men believed in the need for institutional change, his article never questions a system in which only men have careers. Yet today wives work too, and they may be fast-trackers themselves. Most important, given the economic fallout of the 1980s, organization men can no longer count on their careers as an unquestioned source of self-fulfillment -- or even as a clear path to financial success.

Manhood Today and the Marketplace

In an expanding economy, hitching one's manhood to a career may make some sense. In a recession, it's a recipe for feelings of failure. A 30-year-old man in 1949 would see his real earnings rise by 63% by the time he turned 40; the same man in 1973 would see his income decline by 1% by his fortieth birthday. Men who are now 30 to 50 years old are the first U.S. generation to be less successful than their fathers were at the same age.[1] As one of the major trends of the past two decades, this economic decline has caused many men to reevaluate work in a harsh new light.

In The Male Ego, psychiatrist Willard Gaylin discusses the current erosion of American manhood in three roles: protector, procreator, and, especially, provider. He notes that "nothing is more important to a man's pride, self-respect, status, and manhood than work. Nothing. Sexual impotence, like sudden loss of ambulation or physical strength, may shatter his self-confidence. But... pride is built on work and achievement, and the success that accrues from that work. Yet today men often seem confused and contradictory in their attitudes about work."

Gaylin accurately captures the ambivalence and frustration of many men. He says, for example, that "I have never met a man -among my patients or friends -- who in his heart of hearts considers himself a success." He satirizes the executive's need for "little pink roses," those pink message slips that tell a man that he's wanted. But when that chairman of the board or CEO finally retires, he suddenly learns he's lost all value. "He becomes a nonperson," in Gaylin's words, shocked and overwhelmed by the fact that "he never was someone to be cherished for his own sake but only as an instrument of power and a conduit of goods."

Such strong words sound a bit sweeping; but they do resonate emotionally with the experiences of men who have recently lost their jobs. Indeed, depression is often the result, and as a number of recent studies show, the rate of various forms of depressive illness is on the rise for American men. [2] Gaylin describes self-loathing as one of the hallmarks of depression, a state in which a man tells himself, "I am not dependable; I am a fragile reed. Indeed, I must depend on you." As Gaylin indicates, a man's success is often defined by those around him rather than his own sense of how well he's done. Consider, then, the shaky ground that men are on once they've been laid off. No longer able to provide for their families (or perhaps even themselves), they've lost both their own sense of purpose and their value in society's eyes.

Even men who have achieved success as traditionally defined -- such as high-paying executives who can fully provide for their families -- may feel that something is missing. Few of the "well-functioning" 80 executives sociologist Robert S. Weiss chose to interview for Staying the Course, his insightful if overly celebratory 1990 study, defined themselves by vaulting ambition; most seemed to be content with a kind of grounded stability -- being what they called good fathers, good providers, good men. But all of them reported stress and irritability; half had trouble sleeping; most had few close friends, choosing instead to compartmentalize their lives to get through the day.

While they claimed to be devoted fathers and husbands, none of these executives shared housework or child care equally with their wives. Most continued to see their children in economic terms, as "a commitment, an investment, an obligation." Weiss's executives clearly demonstrate how twentieth-century fathers have come to nurture through financial support, a notion that still

underpins the prevailing definition of manhood, especially in the corporate arena.

Yet that hasn't always been the case. Historian Robert L. Griswold's impressive 1993 book, Fatherhood in America, charts how involved fatherhood has waxed and waned throughout U.S. history. Some middle class eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fathers, for instance, were deeply involved in their children's lives -- or at least in the education of their sons. In the early nineteenth century, advice manuals to parents about how to raise their children were addressed primarily to fathers, not mothers.

Although these fathers didn't shoulder domestic responsibilities as their wives did, they were sources of intellectual support. Affectionate bonds were especially strong between fathers and sons; before and during the Civil War, for example, letters from sons were primarily addressed to fathers. But after the war, letters written home were increasingly directed to mothers, as fathers became more remote, enveloped by the rise of the modern corporation and the financial rewards of American Big Business.

But now the terms have changed again, Griswold argues. The economic need for the two-income couple and women's desires to enter or remain in the labor force bring men face-to-face with their children in unprecedented ways. And by necessity, men may find a new sense of purpose through close bonds with their children. One of Griswold's "daddytrackers," a man who left a top corporate job to start his own consulting firm comments: "I don't want to make our like I'm a super father or the perfect husband because that's not true. But I know I see the kids more now. I coach baseball in the spring and soccer in the fall because I've got the flexibility in my schedule. ... I feel a little sorry for men whose only definition of success is what it says on their business cards."

Given increasing job insecurity, it's no surprise that men are now searching for ways to control their lives outside of work. But the daddy-tracker quoted above is still able to provide for his family. What about men who have lost their jobs or don't have the option of starting their own business? What about the disillusioned yuppies of the go-go 1980s who are still childless? What about gay men who are breaking out of stereotypically gay professions? If Hanan's corporateurs searched for a sense of empowerment on the job, today's men are looking for a personal potency that doesn't reside in the nature of corporate life itself. But simply switching one's allegiance to the domestic sphere has its own costs for men. At the very least, it's easier said than done.

Housework: The Final Frontier?

In some respects, William Whyte's organization man did have it all; in the 1950s, it was men who had the careers and families but only so long as their wives did virtually all of the housework and child care. Whyte's very use of organization man reflects his assumption that the world of work was almost exclusively male, an assumption Hanan carries through in the hard-driving, careerist language of the 1970s. Yet such descriptions, even if they linger in popular culture, hardly match reality today. The entry of women into the workplace is the other major trend pushing men to redefine themselves, whether they want to or not.

Just because so many U.S. women now work doesn't mean that women as a whole care less about nurturing family intimacy. Women not only want both work and family but seem to need both. A number of researchers have discovered that, contrary to conventional wisdom, women who are both employees and mothers often have better self-esteem and experience less stress than those who spend all their time at home with children.[3] But ironically, the very fact of women in the workplace has thrown men's lives into disarray. Now men too face some painful choices. "I want the best of both worlds," says one man to sociologist Kathleen Gerson, author of the significant new book No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work. "I want to make a lot of money and spend time with my daughter, but obviously I can't have both."

It's not that men don't say they want to change. A 1989 New York Times article is typical of the many work-family surveys conducted in recent years: in it, two-fifths of the fathers interviewed said they would quit their jobs if they could spend more time with their children.[4] But the desire to

change is often more rhetorical than real; few men would actually switch places with their nonworking wives if given the opportunity. In reality, taking on an increasing share of domestic responsibilities usually represents a trade-off. Of the executives Robert Weiss interviewed, those who had won custody of their children took on the parental work of mothers, such as cooking, shopping for clothes, giving baths. Yet Weiss implies that for the few men in his study who were single fathers, their careers suffered. Indeed, in corporations that view family involvement as a blight on performance, a male professional may well believe that investing more energy into the home is a form of treason.

"Housework remains the last frontier that men want to settle," writes Kathleen Gerson. But in this case, "need" may be a better word than "want." No one wants to do housework, but like Mt. Everest, that mountain of unwashed clothing still has to be laundered. Unfortunately, for most male executives, conquering the crabgrass frontier doesn't begin to compare with blazing a trail through the corporate jungle. And there are few social supports available for men's equal participation in domestic life. Male friends don't nod approvingly when men say that they have household chores to finish.

In fact, men's share of housework and child care has significantly increased since 1965 -- from 20% to 30%. But for most men who say they're involved fathers, a sense of domestic purpose begins in the nursery, not in the kitchen or laundry room. Men "make use of various employer policies to accommodate their work role to their family obligations to a far greater degree than is generally realized," reports psychologist Joseph H. Pleck in Jane C. Hood's Men, Work, and Family, a useful collection of cutting-edge empirical research on men's shifting priorities on the job and on the domestic front.

As Pleck notes, however, in the absence of corporate or peer-group support, men often do so through less formal channels. For example, a man may take vacation or sick leave to attend to births and the rigors of a young baby. This professional may tell his boss that he's having some tests run and will be in the hospital for a week -- wink, wink. Even committed family men may steer clear of parental-leave policies that are essentially intended by top management for women. In addition, while many more men use a company's options for flexible scheduling than paternity leave, they often say it's for another reason besides child care.

Such dissembling is one indication of how little the conception of success on the job has changed -- and why men still avoid the domestic responsibilities many say they want. For one thing, housework is not an exciting frontier to conquer but a necessary task to be taken care of. For another, men -- and their managers -- don't look upon competent homemaking as a badge of masculinity. Last but certainly not least, while current economic and social trends are forcing changes on the home front, the source of meaning in men's lives is open to individual interpretation.

Male Demons and the Search for Meaning

Clearly, the new male ideal is not "Mr. Mom," a simple flip of conventional male and female roles. In fact, rather than accepting the age-old notion that the good man is a family man -- and giving it a politically correct 1990s twist -- some men may actively rebel against such expectations. The search for meaning outside of family or work is by no means new. Despite the ubiquity of the gray flannel suit, 1950s men struggled with the cultural ambivalence created by two male demons: the free loner without obligations and the faceless sheep of the corporation. The demon of defiant nonconformity, personified by Marion Brando in The Wild One. didn't have the self-control necessary to become a responsible adult. Yet the demon of overconformity also haunted male professionals, as organization men of the past worried about losing their individuality and their sense of personal purpose.

Men still struggle with the same desire to break free, to leave the "rat race," to jump off the fast track. In No Man's Land, Kathleen Gerson finds that the 138 men she interviewed fall into three categories: breadwinners (36%), autonomous men (30%), and involved fathers (33%). Gerson concludes that, in a recession, becoming an involved father may help redeem a troubled manhood.

This new ideal combines both family responsibility and the quest for individuality -- the middle ground between undisciplined nonconformity and today's version of the corporate "clone." But it's clear from Gerson's interviews that many men still resist the middle ground.

Gerson's first two groups loosely match the two demons of male identity: overconformers and loners. The first group clings tenaciously to the traditional breadwinner ethic in order to maintain stability and control. Gerson notes that some look back nostalgically "to a time when male advantages were uncontested and supporting a family was an easier task." One of her breadwinners is typical in his assessment of why such an arrangement is fair: "My wife cooks, shops, cleans. I provide the money. To me, to run a home and raise children is a full-time job. If you do more, that's where you lose your children and you lose control."

Gerson's second group of "autonomous" men eschew family obligations altogether, either by remaining single or childless. Wary of intimate attachments, these men consume high-end consumer goods and leisure time. Some have failed in the sexual marketplace, others continue to play the field as contemporary versions of the 1950s playboy. Consider these comments from a 40-year-old computer consultant: "Nobody has a hold on me. I do as I wish, and if tomorrow I don't want to, I don't have to. It's very important that I never feel trapped, locked in."

Many of these men are divorced fathers who no longer contribute to either the financial or emotional support of their children, the "deadbeat dads" of the Clinton era. As Robert Griswold cites in Fatherhood in America, nearly two-thirds of all divorced fathers contribute nothing at all to the financial support of their children. Although Gerson calls these men autonomous, they seem more pitiful than free; a deadbeat dad is hardly the archetype of male autonomy.

Some of Gerson's "autonomous" men, being relatively affluent, are indulging in American men's timehonored coping strategy for dealing with conflict in their lives: escape. It's one thing to leave the rat race and find another source of work that's fulfilling; it's quite another to run for the sake of running from family commitments. But in past centuries and decades, American men have left wives and children to go west, to sea, to war, or to any other unblemished arena where a man could find himself and prove his masculine prowess.

At the turn of the century, this search for manhood and autonomy brought American men to fraternal lodges (one in five were members in 1897, according to one observer),[5] while they sent their sons to the Boy Scouts or YMCA as a way to avoid the feminine influence of mothers and wives. Today they're likely to be heading off to the woods with Robert Bly, there to drum, chant, and bond with other men in an evocation of the "deep masculine."

Yet real autonomy isn't the same as escape or disconnection. A truly autonomous man is one who feels in control of what he's doing -- be that a high-powered career, a bohemian existence, family life, or some combination of the above. As it turns out, neither Gerson's breadwinners nor "autonomous" men feel especially powerful. One 35-year-old said, "I think it's a tough world to live in. I personally find I'm struggling to do it; why am I going to bring somebody into the world to struggle?" These men feel they've backed into responsibilities reluctantly, either because they became parents against their will or through drifting passively atop an anomic sea of emotional detachment. Neither group believes they actively chose their lives. Theirs is not the life of "quiet desperation" that Thoreau abjured; it's more a life of wistful resignation, of roads not taken.

Not so for the involved fathers, the third group of men Gerson identifies. Most of these men are part of dual-career families. What's more, they have renounced workplace success as the measure of their manhood. One man who had custody of his two children chose to take advantage of his company's early retirement plan because "there's only so far you can go in a corporation, and I reached that level and realized I can't go past it. I realized I paid too high a price for what I got in return. What I got cannot get me back the time with the kids." Those who do stay in high-pressure workplaces often feel out of step, as this one accountant notes: "I'm a different person at work than I am outside work. When I'm in an environment that somehow nurtures, that somehow is cooperative rather than competitive, it enables me to be a different person, to be myself."

These men most closely fit the image of the new man of the 1990s, both in their embrace of a life outside their jobs and in the difficulties they encounter. Rather than defining themselves rigidly as breadwinners or loners, these men are searching for coherence, for a way to combine the many aspects of their lives. Many of Gerson's involved fathers have left the pitfalls of corporate life altogether, starting their own businesses or going into professions that allow for more flexibility. Through such choices, they avoid putting their manhood on the line when it comes to how their job performance is perceived. But in this respect, the new man isn't an organization man at all. And by placing less emphasis on the importance of work success, these men present a dilemma for corporations that want to retain the best professionals.

The demons of defiance and overconformity continue to haunt men for good reason; in most companies, a man's options seem limited to rebelling or not bucking the system. Before the cur. rent economic downturn, the rewards for focusing primarily on career were clear enough, while the benefits of other choices for men often seemed mixed. Although fathers today are most obviously affected by an outmoded image of manhood and professional success, men without children who want other involvements besides a career face similar obstacles. Whether gay or straight, involved fathers or public-service volunteers, male professionals still confront resistance to change on the job, much of it from top management itself.

Resistance to Change: Corporate Inflexibility

The definition of masculinity has proved remarkably inelastic -- or, depending on your perspective, amazingly resilient -- under its current siege. Except for a few involved fathers, it binds men as tightly as ever to success in the public sphere, in the world of other men, as the markers of manhood and success. "I'm not secure enough, I guess, to stay home and be a househusband," confesses one man, himself an involved father, to Kathleen Gerson.

The traditional definitions of masculinity leave today's new man stranded without social support or a set of viable options. But the real problem, Gerson argues, is institutional. It's corporate inflexibility that reinforces rigid gender definitions. In this, company policies toward family leave exemplify the unconscious assumptions top managers make about what men want -or are supposed to want. A 1989 survey, cited in Joseph Pleck's chapter of Men, Work, and Family, found that only 1% of U.S. male employees had access to paid paternity leave, while another 18% had access to unpaid leave. Nine of ten companies made no attempt to inform employees that such leaves were available to new fathers. As a result, we currently have "more reasons to be optimistic about men's desire to nurture children than their opportunity to do so," claims Gerson.

Child care is not simply a women's issue in the workplace anymore; it's a parents' issue. Yet the difficulties Gerson's involved fathers face in redefining themselves suggest that companies must do more than provide child care options. Even in Sweden, with its paid parental-leave policies and an official stance on gender equality, men spend more time at work than women do. In another chapter of Men, Work, and Family, sociologist Linda Haas reports on whether gender roles in Sweden and other progressive Scandinavian countries differ markedly from those in the United States. To some extent, they do: the participation of Swedish men and women in the labor market is almost identical. But while 43% of Swedish women work part-time, only 7% of the men do. In addition, after government efforts in the late 1980s to increase fathers' participation in family life, the number of Swedish men who took formal parental leave rose to 44%; but again, fathers stayed home with their children for a much shorter time compared with mothers -- an average of 43 days rather than 260.

Most telling, some studies have found that Swedish occupations are among the most sex-segregated in the world. Men and women do very different kinds of work at different levels of pay: two-thirds of public-sector employees are women, while only one-third of the private sector are women. Only 3% of Swedish senior executives are women. And in general, an earnings gap of 10% to 30% between men and women exists. As Haas notes of Swedish policymakers, "There is no sign that they realize that the benefits to be gained by restructuring work in nongendered ways might outweigh the personal costs to male stakeholders." In other words, business interests still cling to a traditional view of the world, one in which the primacy of men in the corporation remains

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by Linda Haas
in Hood (above).
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By Michael S. Kimmel

Michael S. Kimmel, a sociologist at SUNY Stony Brook, is the author of several books on men's changing roles and consults with organizations on improving male-female communication. His new book, Manhood: The American Quest, will be published in 1994 by HarperCollins.

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