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What is This?

GENDERED CHALLENGE, GENDERED RESPONSE

Confronting the Ideal Worker Norm in a White-Collar Organization

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This article integrates research on gendered organizations and the work-family interface to investigate an innovative workplace initiative, the Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), implemented in the corporate headquarters of Best Buy, Inc. While flexible work policies common in other organizations "accommodate" individuals, this initiative attempts a broader and deeper critique of the organizational culture. We address two research questions: How does this initiative attempt to change the masculinized ideal worker norm? And what do women's and men's responses reveal about the persistent ways that gender structures work and family life? Data demonstrate the ideal worker norm is pervasive and powerful, even as employees begin critically examining expectations regarding work time that have historically privileged men. Employees' responses to ROWE are also gendered. Women (especially mothers) are more enthusiastic, while men are more cautious. Ambivalence about and resistance to change is expressed in different ways depending on gender and occupational status.

This analysis integrates the literatures on gendered organizations and the work-family interface to examine an attempt to change the organizational culture.[1] We investigate an innovative initiative, the Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), as implemented in the corporate headquarters of Best Buy, Inc. We ask two questions: How does this initiative attempt to challenge the ideal worker norm, which gives primacy to paid work

obligations over unpaid family care work? What do women's and men's responses reveal about the persistent ways that gender structures both work and family life? Previous research has pointed to the gendered assumptions embedded in organizational practices, policies, and informal and formal reward systems (Acker 1990; Martin and Collinson 2002) but has rarely considered how these gendered expectations and practices might be challenged (Acker 2006; Britton 2000). Work-family scholars have documented that "family-friendly" policies (such as flextime and telecommuting) foster helpful changes in some employees' work practices. But scholars have also argued that these policies leave the broader organizational culture unchallenged and may marginalize the women who are more likely to use them (Glass 2004; Hochschild 1997; Ryan and Kossek 2008).

Studying this initiative as it unfolded allows us to explicate the gendered ideal worker norm from the perspective of employees. While organizational insiders are rarely attuned to the gendered organization of work nor openly critical of the organizational culture, here we capture an internal challenge to the masculinized ideal worker norm and employees' dialogue about the proposed changes. Our analysis reveals the salience and power of the masculinized ideal worker norm in this organization as well as the ways that gender and occupational status affect employees' reactions to the proposed changes.

THE GENDERED IDEAL WORKER NORM

When feminist scholars talk about "gendered organizations" (Acker 1990, 1992; Britton 2000; Ely and Meyerson 2000b), they note that most

workplaces are organized as if paid work is the only, or at least the primary, responsibility of employees.[2] White-collar workers—especially managers and professionals—are expected to work long hours, arrange their outside responsibilities around their paid work, and be willing to relocate or travel as requested (Bailyn 1993). These behaviors signal appropriate devotion to one's work (Blair-Loy 2003) and are expected to continue throughout adulthood (Moen and Roehling 2005).

These expectations, sometimes called the "ideal worker norm" (J. C. Williams 2000), reinforce gender inequality in the workplace. Because of differences in men's and women's family work (Bianchi et al. 2000) as well as different cultural expectations of mothers and fathers (Hays 1996; Townsend 2002), women, and especially mothers, are less likely to follow the expected pattern of continuous, full-time employment (Hynes and Clarkberg 2005; Stone 2007). Women, and mothers in particular, are less likely to live up to these expectations and less likely to reap the economic rewards associated with being an ideal worker.

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity in white-collar organizations involves publicly privileging a business or professional identity that distances men from day-to-day family caregiving and from blue-collar labor (Connell and Wood 2005; Pleck 1993). Even among men who identify as egalitarian husbands and active fathers, family responsibilities are often hidden because "the intrusion of private sphere issues into the public sphere [of the workplace] shatters the image that one is an addict, that one is always ready, willing, and able to work" (Cooper 2000, 395). In other words, living up to the ideal worker norm is an important way to enact masculinity—and protect a privileged position—in white-collar workplaces and at home.

WORK-FAMILY POLICIES AND THE CASE OF ROWE AT BEST BUY

Feminist scholars have long called for changes in the organization of work, including better part-time jobs, more work-time flexibility, and paid family leaves; but research suggests that work-family policies and flexible work arrangements have had a limited impact for several reasons. First, access to work-family benefits and flexible work arrangements is quite uneven across and within organizations. Higher-status employees with high income and better benefits are more likely to have access to work-family benefits (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Deitch and Huffman 2001; Lambert and Waxman 2005) and to report greater flexibility (Moen, Kelly, and Huang 2008; Executive Office of the President 2010). Within firms, managers

generally decide who can use flexible work arrangements and reserve them for "high performers" (Kelly and Kalev 2006; Kelly and Moen 2007). Second, flexible work arrangements remain a deviation from the norm (framed as "accommodations"), and existing policies do not challenge "organizational discourses of time as representing productivity, commitment and value" (Lewis 1997, 13). Third, utilization of these options is often limited due to fears about career consequences (Eaton 2003; Hochschild 1997). Empirical research suggests that wage growth does slow for mothers who telecommute or shift to part-time work, although flexible scheduling seems to be less consequential (Glass 2004). Recognizing these limitations, researchers and work-life practitioners have argued that changing *policies* is now less important than changing *organizational cultures* (Batt and Valcour 2003; Mennino, Rubin, and Brayfield 2005; Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness 1999). But how can organizational cultures be changed?

We investigate an attempt to change an organizational culture from the inside: the ROWE initiative as implemented at the corporate headquarters of Best Buy, Inc. Compared to more common work-family initiatives, ROWE is distinctive in both goals and strategies. It has been designed as an "adaptive culture change strategy" (Ressler and Thompson 2008) that is broadly applicable and not targeted to working mothers or parents.[3] Employees are asked to throw out conventional time expectations and instead believe they can do "whatever they want, whenever they want, as long as the wor k gets done" (Ressler and Thompson 2008, 3). Employees and managers are asked to focus on desired results, not "face time" or hours worked. This purportedly gives employees control over when and where they work, since working a nontraditional schedule and being away from the office should no longer be deviant.

ROWE is implemented at the team level, with four participatory sessions and a managers' orientation, in sessions lasting about six hours. The first session for employees covers the ROWE philosophy and the change process. This is followed by a session that critically examines the current work culture and develops a vision of the desired future state. For example, employees role-play responding to comments that focus on time spent in the workplace (e.g., "Just getting in?" "Your kid is sick again?"), in ways that do not reinforce the old time norms (e.g., saying, "Is there something you need?"). The third session asks teams to identify concrete practices they could change. For example, employees try to find ways to respond to customers' requests without needing all team members to be present all day, every day. Several weeks later, there is a forum to share questions, concerns, and positive experiences. After these sessions, the team is said to be "working in a ROWE environment"—even if some individuals choose not to change their work routines. The team-level implementation is intended to limit distinctions

between those who utilize ROWE by shifting their hours or working from home and those who do not, in order to avoid the marginalization of those who adjust their work routines around nonwork responsibilities. Both individual behavior changes and changing team norms are targeted.

ROWE was not presented as a work-family initiative or a gender equity initiative; rather, it was strategically framed as a smart business move. Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, who developed ROWE while working in the Best Buy human resources department, were partly motivated by a desire to challenge gender inequality by criticizing the traditional organization of work. However, they felt that a gender or work-family framing would lead to the initiative's marginalization (personal communication, September 14, 2005). Other organizational initiatives that have implications for the gendered ideal worker norm have also been framed primarily as efforts to improve productivity or avoid burnout (Perlow 1997; Perlow and Porter 2009). Those who have studied initiatives that have paired gender goals with the goal of improving organizational performance report that it is difficult to keep the gender narrative going within the organization (Ely and Meyerson 2000a; Meyerson and Fletcher 2000; Rapoport et al. 2002). Despite the gender-neutral framing, we show below that gender structures how employees confront the masculinized work culture and react to the proposed changes.

METHODS

Best Buy, Inc. is a Fortune 500 retail organization, described by insiders as informal, energetic, and open to change. It has a history of rapid growth and now has more than 100,000 employees worldwide. The headquarters employed almost 4,000 employees when we studied it from 2005 to 2008. According to management, ROWE is currently implemented in more than 90 percent of teams at the corporate headquarters near Minneapolis, Minnesota. It has not been adopted in the retail stores.

Our data reflect the experiences of white-collar workers within this corporate setting in the Midwest. The survey we conducted reveals that ROWE participants are predominantly white (91 percent), fairly young (mean age of 33 years), and highly educated (84 percent have a college degree), as are other employees at the corporate headquarters. Thirty-five percent have a child living at home, and 14 percent are caring for an adult relative. Company data indicate that women make up 47 percent of the headquarters workforce. Thirty-two percent of women are in managerial positions, compared to 42 percent of men. Our survey finds that 7 percent of women are in hourly positions compared to 3 percent of men. Employees average 47.4 hours per week on the job.

The research reported here is part of a multimethod study of the impacts of ROWE on the work-family interface, turnover, and health outcomes. The overall picture is one of positive results for both women and men. Drawing on quantitative survey data collected at two points in time, we find that ROWE reduces work-family conflict and time strains (Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2009), reduces turnover (Moen, Kelly, and Hill 2009), and increases some positive health behaviors (e.g., sleep, clinic visits) (Moen et al. 2010). The gendered dimensions of challenging the organizational culture are, however, best captured with ethnographic data.

We analyze field notes from ethnographic observations of 154 ROWE sessions held between April 2005 and August 2006. We observed ROWE sessions in 15 departments, each with multiple teams. We conducted non-participant observation of the ROWE sessions, sitting at the back of the room and taking copious notes. At a team's first session, we introduced the study briefly, emphasizing our status as University of Minnesota researchers, the fact that Best Buy was not funding the research, and the fact that no identifying information would be published or shared with the company. Facilitators reported that sessions we did not observe were identical (in terms of questions, concerns, and the talkativeness of the groups) to those we observed. We aimed for near verbatim records of the discussions, though we only used quotes in field notes if we were certain we captured the participants' phrasing. We noted emotional tone, jokes, asides, and contestations. We recorded each person's apparent age, race, gender, and occupational status, if that was revealed. All ROWE facilitators were women.

Field notes were coded in Atlas.ti by two of the authors, who compared coding on the same notes initially; and all authors discussed emergent codes. We read and reread text associated with each code and then pieced together a larger thematic narrative for each of our questions. In our analyses, we attend to gender dynamics and coded references to gender as well as to differences by age and by occupational status. In this workplace, markers or discussions of class are primarily evident in distinctions between lower-status jobs (e.g., administrative assistants) and those in professional or managerial positions or on a career track to attain those positions.

FINDINGS

Criticizing the Current Culture

How does ROWE attempt to change the ideal worker norm, which gives primacy to paid work obligations over unpaid family care work? ROWE prompts employees to critically examine expectations about commitment and

productivity and provides them with a ready language for recognizing and responding to old norms. Expectations about (1) long hours, (2) visible busyness, and (3) responsiveness to unexpected work—all dimensions of the masculinized ideal worker norm with its assumption that committed employees are always available—dominate discussions of the current culture.

Employees clearly believe that long hours are viewed by the company as an indicator of dedication and productivity. In one session, a facilitator asks, "What do we believe about people who work a lot of hours?" and participants respond as follows:

> Woman 1: They're so good.
> Man 1 (manager for this team): Dedicated.
> Woman 2: Overworked.
> Woman 3: Overachiever.
> Woman 4: Slow at getting work done.
> Man 1 (manager): Important.
> Woman 5: They'll get more rewards.
> Man 2: They go above and beyond.
> Woman 1: I don't think they have a good life balance.
> Man 2: They work harder, not smarter.
> Man 3: They're trying to impress the boss.

The facilitator then asked, "What about the flip side? Working fewer hours?"

> Man 2: Slackers.
> Woman 5: They don't care.
> Woman 3: Not engaged. They need more work.
> Woman 1: Not contributing what they should.
> Man 2: Not making themselves available.
> Man 1 (manager): Not a team player.
> Woman 7: You get jealous of them.

The description of those who work long hours is mixed, with the women in this team more critical and the male manager most positive in his language. Long hours are recognized as bringing status ("they're trying to impress the boss" and "they'll get more rewards"). The description of those who work relatively few hours is negative and generally dismissive, with employees signaling their disapproval (save the woman who said she was jealous) or their recognition that managers are likely to disapprove.

The prevailing culture affects who is recognized and lauded. For example, here two employees (in a human resources team) discuss whether hours affect people's careers:

> The facilitator asked how people were rewarded in the organization and a man responded "with better assignments," but then he said he wasn't sure face time mattered. A woman (with whom he works closely) responded, "Think about when they were giving out the MVPs ["most valued player" awards at a recent departmental meeting]. Everyone who got one, they said 'You were here so many hours' and 'You're a teamwork trooper' because of how long you are here."

Working long hours is a sign that employees are readily available and eager to meet others' needs; it further reinforces the ideal worker as someone—most often a man—who does not have, or does not attend to, other pressing commitments outside of work.

Visible busyness also serves as an indicator of status, regardless of whether the activities are actually productive. This is stated most explicitly by a woman vice president who responds to "What is our culture like today?" by saying,

> The culture "values activity whether that activity is valuable or not." There was an audible "oooh" from several people when she said this and then the room got silent again. The VP added that "it [activity] was a measure of commitment and productivity." A woman said "Just because there's move-ment doesn't mean there's growth." The VP then said that "There's more willingness to redo than to stop and reflect."

Here a woman executive draws on an existing internal critique of the Best Buy culture as reactive and too quick to shift gears (Gibson and Billings 2003). Nonetheless, the other participants are not quick to join in on this critique. Employees realize that those who are not visibly busy are judged harshly, as this excerpt from a different session illustrates:

> The facilitator asked what they believe about people who are triple booked for meetings. Immediately there were answers that "They're very impor-tant" and "very busy." The facilitator asked "What about the poor soul who doesn't have any, or maybe two meetings a week?" A woman said some-thing quietly to the woman manager, who relayed to the larger group: "She said, they're expendable." There was a snicker.

This concern is particularly salient because the company underwent sig-nificant downsizing during our study. The status associated with busyness pushes employees to attend multiple meetings, even those they know are unproductive. Employees then find themselves working evenings or week-ends to make up the lost time (cf. Perlow 1997), something far easier for

singles and men than women with care obligations. In this context, the ROWE maxim that "every meeting is optional" is an important challenge to the long-hours culture.

Employees also identify two routine work practices that reinforce the primacy of the job over all other obligations, regardless of how work affects their planned work or planned time away from work. "Drive bys" are occasions when colleagues or internal customers stop by to ask a question or resolve something quickly. "Fire drills" occur when workers put aside their usual tasks to deal with a crisis situation that requires immediate attention. Employees recognize these practices lead to longer hours and increased stress, but they know responsiveness is expected. Those in lower-status occupations are especially susceptible to last-minute requests. A woman administrative assistant asks,

> "What about when your boss or your boss's boss says, 'I'm meeting with so and so and I need these metrics. Can you pull them?' It might be that they are meeting now or the next morning. To me, that is a fire drill." . . . The facilitator suggested that they ask people "When do you need it by? Can this other document that is already prepared give you enough information?" She said that you need to challenge the requests and ask questions, not because you're not going to do it but to get clear about it. The assistant agreed, saying the questions are "more about clarification" and she seemed to like the idea.

The employee is reassured that "clarifying" the urgency of the request might work, but questioning a superior's request is acknowledged to be difficult and especially tense for "support staff" whose job is defined as helping others.

In this organization, long hours, visible busyness, and quick responsiveness to unplanned work all signal employees' commitment and productivity. These expectations reinforce the broader gender order that advantages men (as well as some women with few family responsibilities) within this workplace. ROWE questions these expectations and suggests a different vision of an ideal worker who prioritizes family and personal responsibilities.

Presenting a New Ideal of Organizing Work around Life

The alternative vision of the ideal worker is predicated on integration of work and personal life. In ROWE sessions, employees are told they can legitimately organize their work around their lives, as long as they fulfill their work obligations. This frames employees' control as contingent on their satisfactory work performance. Still, ROWE provides a space for employees to imagine a future in which work, family, and personal needs are easier to reconcile, when the time spent at work takes a backseat to more

concrete measures of performance. In an early session, employees discuss when it is acceptable to be away from the workplace. They often say that it is acceptable to attend a funeral or go to the doctor, with some disagreements about whether it is legitimate to leave work to care for a sick child, to take vacation, or to recover from a cold. Unacceptable reasons for not being at work usually include running personal errands, being tired, wanting to see a movie, going to the gym, or not feeling like working. Facilitators instruct them that, in ROWE, "everything is acceptable, as long as the work gets done."

Employee advocates also claim that ROWE allows work and family life to be integrated more easily. When a panel of employees (selected by the facilitators) spoke to executives considering the initiative, one woman notes that she now volunteers at her children's school each week. She appreciates ROWE and credits it with feeling able to volunteer, although she reassures the managers that "if I *have* to be here [at the office], I'm here." A younger man on the panel reports that he had just taken a trip to another state to visit family, which he would not have taken previously. Because he answered e-mails and participated in a conference call while on a hike, he did not file this as vacation. These stories emphasize that employees in ROWE are highly engaged and productive, even as they begin to organize work around their life outside of work rather than vice versa.

Family Caregivers—Mostly Mothers—as Champions

Our observations of more than 150 ROWE sessions indicate that employees' engagement with the initiative is high during the group sessions, but women in their 30s and 40s (who are more likely to have children at home) are particularly enthusiastic. The facilitators also state that women are quicker to see the value of the initiative and more likely to publicly champion it. Women are more receptive to critiques of the masculinized work culture and more openly excited about the initiative's potential to reduce work-family conflicts. Men who find the current organizational culture less problematic find the ROWE solution less compelling. For example, a manager in his late 30s notes that there was a mismatch between his work life and ROWE because he has so many meetings scheduled right now.

> He also joked that some of the things listed (as benefits) aren't relevant: "I'm not allowed to do laundry." A woman then explained that Monday was her first day back from maternity leave so laundry was a big part of her life right now, with a newborn and a two-year-old. She said that it would be great to do a few loads three times a week at 9 a.m. rather than trying to do

some every night. She said in general if she could fit more chores in during the week and keep her weekends for leisure, that would be great.

The manager links the gap between his current schedule and his ideal to the meetings he is asked to attend; as discussed above, a heavy meeting schedule is assumed to indicate one's value to the company. By distancing himself from housework and by expressing ambivalence about ROWE elsewhere in the session, he lays claim to being an ideal worker and suggests the initiative is not relevant to men such as himself. The close ties between middle-class masculinity and business success point to the loss of status that might come if the work culture changed in ways that fit women's lives better. Alternatively, men may respond cautiously because they find it unnerving to discuss work and family—which are implicitly gendered—in a company training session led by women, even if the issues are personally relevant to them. In contrast, the mother just back from maternity leave openly acknowledges how valuable additional flexibility would be for her. ROWE is clearly appealing to this mother and to many others as well.

Discussions of sick children reveal both the pressure that parents—primarily mothers—feel to meet acute family needs and some coworkers' resentment when parents prioritize those needs over paid work. One role-play exercise designed to raise the visibility of organizational assumptions, expectations, and judgments has a participant read comments such as "Your kid is sick again? Wish I had a kid" and "Can't your husband stay home with your daughter?" to someone else in the room. For example, a young woman says, "Your kid is sick again? I wish I had a kid" to another woman (in her early 30s), and the facilitator asks how the comment made her feel. The woman receiving the comment says, "I'm numb to it, because I hear it so much. I feel their time will come. They're younger." The ubiquitousness of these judgments also comes across here:

> A woman says to a woman with whom she's been friendly during the session, "After I read this to you, you'll totally know why! Your kid is sick again? I wish I had a kid!" The group laughs. "Why did she say this?" the facilitator asks. "Because being home with kids means vacation," a man replies. "She's a slacker!" another woman says.

The vacation and slacker comments were said ironically, but these quick comments indicate that the criticism of those who care for sick children are salient to the participants. The next remark captures one of the few times that a father claims the relevance of this dilemma for himself. In a session for a human resources group (i.e., a culturally feminized department), a man reads the card to a woman:

"Can't your husband stay home with your daughter?" She groans and puts her forehead down on the table. The facilitator asked "what do we think about people with kids?" A second woman said they don't work as hard and the woman who had received the comment said they use kids as an excuse. The man who'd read the comment said "I used so many days for [name of daughter] this year that when I finally got sick myself, I had one-half day left." The team manager (a woman in her 40s) then says "And you had to take vacation days."

Of course, many of the men in ROWE sessions were fathers, but the fathers who acknowledge that caregiving responsibilities affect their jobs are also revealing that they are not traditional ideal workers. Mothers' work-family conflicts are assumed and familiar topics of conversation.

The salience of family work for women continues as participants move into implementing ROWE. One of the last activities asks employees to commit to making a change as an initial step toward creating the new culture in their teams. Our coding of 159 commitments indicates that family-related commitments (e.g., take son to tennis lessons at 3 p.m., pick up the kids from day care and go to the park) are the least common type. But far more women than men propose family-related changes, and more of men's commitments are explicitly work-related (e.g., make an agenda for every meeting, challenge "fire drills"). Publicly expressing a desire to "work smarter" reinforces men's status as ideal workers and reinvokes men's traditional privilege and power based on their apparent work commitment (Connell and Wood 2005). Women may find it easier to admit they plan to use ROWE to meet family obligations because others already assume they are not traditional ideal workers. Thus, these discussions may unintentionally reinforce women's status as workers who are torn between work and family obligations.

Avoiding Systemic (Feminist) Critiques

While many women and some men disparage the long hours, visible busyness, and reactivity that create problems in their personal lives, few offer a more systemic critique of the masculinized work culture. The most explicit gender critique we observed came when facilitators asked participants to describe the current company culture. After the group listed work conditions that were commonly identified in the sessions (e.g., face time, excessive e-mails):

A middle-aged woman says that Best Buy culture was "designed by men, for men." Her male coworker turned toward the guys he was sitting next to and said "I guess we're in the wrong room." A woman (coworker) added that this

was based on men being the breadwinner, being able to "stay at work all day while someone else takes care of the kids throwing up at home." A third woman also chimed in and added that Best Buy was "behind the times a little bit" in this regard. Their male manager wrapped up the discussion by saying that the current culture was like "swimming with sharks after being rolled in mayonnaise" and there was laughter in response.

In this exchange, a middle-aged woman broadens the discussion from specific work practices to the gendered organization itself. When a man quickly distances himself (and the other men) from the conversation, other women elaborate on her comment in a supportive way. The manager's final comment is ambiguous, referring to the competitive feel of the current culture but also deflecting the explicit gender critique.

This exchange also offers evidence ("I guess we're in the wrong room") that men would be uncomfortable if ROWE had been motivated primarily by gender equity. The woman who presented the gender critique was apparently uncomfortable as well. The following day, she revisits and softens her statement about the company.

> She said that before they began, she wanted to amend something she said at the previous session. Instead of saying the old culture was "by men, for men" she wanted to amend what she said to "by men, for men, and in that they are not different from other corporations." The facilitator nodded and said this is a struggle in "Corporate America," not just their company, and that it is "how work is in organizations."

By altering her specific critique to a more general comment, she attempts to dispel any residual tension caused by her earlier remark. The facilitator quickly legitimates her new framing but then moves on to the planned activity. Neither the original comment nor the revision prompts a broader discussion of gendered structures, policies, or expectations (cf. Martin 2003).

In another session for managers, directors, and vice presidents, a woman questions the facilitators' claim that "fire drills" will disappear by noting that they bring rewards, recognition, and status.

> The woman manager said that, in her group, there are "people who create [fire drills]. They love it. They thrive on it. We call them arsonist firefighters. They are the ones who love it because 'I get patted on the back because I put it out. I'm actually the one who started it.'" She seemed annoyed by this situation and conveyed that her team has discussed their frustration with this pattern in the past.

Her critique echoes that of feminist scholars regarding a crisis orientation to work, including a "heroics strategy" in which employees (often men) created problems in order to fix them in ways that "got the attention of powerful people" (Ely and Meyerson 2000a, 596). The manager's comments are immediately followed by a higher-status man:

> The VP from the other department said that sometimes fire drills aren't malicious and gave the example of a store burning down, something hitting the news media on a certain day, or a system crashing. The facilitator agreed with this and said the goal was to help people be better at identifying the real emergencies.

While it is true that external events do prompt business crises, the woman manager's claim that "arsonist firefighters" fare well in the company is not directly addressed by the man executive or by the facilitator.

Fears about Following Through

Employees are positive about the proposed changes but sometimes skeptical that they will actually be implemented. This skepticism is voiced differently by employees in different occupational statuses, illustrating again the intersection of gender and class at work. Administrative assistants—all women in the sessions we observed—express concerns that their role will tie them to a particular work location and their supervisor's schedule, even in ROWE. In one heated session that included senior managers, professionals, and assistants, a woman in an hourly administrative position asks,

> "Can you, as a salaried person, trust us?" [to be responsive to their needs in ROWE]. The senior manager (a man) said that "hourly workers need to be here to support us" and another woman shot back "but you're not going to be here anyway!" No one said anything for several seconds.

This exchange reveals the power imbalance in these gendered and classed relationships, which make lower-status employees—usually women—skeptical of achieving the flexibility that ROWE promises. The masculinized ideal worker norm is built on an edifice of women's nearly invisible support, at work and at home, and this manager conveys he expects "support staff" to be in the office even when managers and professionals are not. Repeated concerns about how ROWE could work for "nonexempt" employees reveal the initiative's focus on changes that resonate with salaried professionals and managers, as well as managers' and professionals' reluctance to cede control to lower-status employees.

Employees in higher-status positions worry that embracing the proposed changes would damage their careers. In an activity where employees describe how they feel now, "A young man said 'torn' and the facilitator asked him to explain. He said that you show up at a meeting and know you could [get] more done elsewhere, but 'you know it would be a career-limiting move.'" The employee is describing the pre-ROWE culture, but employees often seem unsure whether the proposed changes will actually alter this dynamic. Younger employees who are building their careers seem especially cautious; this is sensible since ROWE aims to change the rules of the status game they are actively playing. We often noted quiet skepticism or a blank-faced, attentive stance among younger men and occasionally among younger women.

Managers sometimes raise these career concerns, perhaps realizing employees are reluctant to discuss these matters publicly. For example, at the last session, a male senior manager who was quite supportive of the initiative shared that he still worried about career consequences. In response to a question about whether they would attend meetings that are not a high priority,

> The senior manager said "is there a leader attached to it? If an officer calls [the meeting], I generally show up." The facilitator asked him why and he replied "because I like to keep my job" and laughed. He then added that "if I'm not there it may cause some disruption or a lack of progress that's critical to the organization." He was worried about "personal damage" that might come back to him as a result of not going and said "I'm just being real honest here." Another man muttered something about "CLM . . . career limiting move."

Here the senior manager reacts first with concerns about protecting his own job and status, then offers a business rationale for needing to be at the hypothetical meeting, and then returns to the career worry. The shorthand "CLM" signals others' familiarity with this concern.

Gender and Power in Managers' Response to ROWE

Managers routinely revealed ambivalence and anxiety about the changes proposed in ROWE. This is not surprising; facilitators repeatedly talk about transferring control over when, where, and how work is done from managers to employees; the need to manage differently; and the natural anxiety managers feel. A gender analysis reveals intriguing differences in the form and impact of managerial ambivalence and resistance.

Women managers expressed concerns about knowing where and when employees were working in a distinctive way that we call "monitoring by

mothering." Women employees and managers often asserted that it is "common courtesy" to tell others when you are working off-site. For example, a woman manager claimed that "It is common courtesy to say where you are going" if you leave during the workday. Extending this point, several women managers said they would worry that employees who are not in the office are hurt—or possibly even dead, on the side of the highway—rather than working elsewhere or taking care of other things. In one session, a younger woman starts a discussion about whether and how employees should tell their supervisor and coworkers they are working off-site:

> "I assume you need to communicate it." . . . She said it felt like just not coming in, without explicitly telling people, "would get you in big trouble." A woman supervisor joked that she and a more senior manager "are like the worried mother hens. We would be wondering if you were dead, killed on the highway."

Here an employee questions whether employee control is actually acceptable. Rather than reassuring her, the supervisor justifies her desire to keep tabs on subordinates by saying she and the senior manager are concerned about employees' well-being. In a another discussion, a supportive midlevel woman manager announces, "I don't need to know that you're getting a haircut, but I do want to know if you are working from home because otherwise I'll worry that you're on the side of the road." A third woman manager also noted that "the manager inclination is to worry."

However, we do not see men managers expressing their desire to know where employees are by saying that they worry. Instead, they explain that "we depend on each other" (as one male manager explained it during a similar debate) or convey the expectation, without explanation. For men, managerial authority and control is accepted and taken for granted. We believe women managers are negotiating the "double-bind" need to demonstrate warmth as well as competence, "doing femininity" by invoking a maternal role even though that subtly undermines their leadership role (Eagly and Karau 2002; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Monitoring by mothering personalizes their claim to direct and scrutinize their employees' work patterns. But motivating employee compliance with an emotional appeal reveals that these women managers' authority is less than, and less legitimate than, men managers' authority. This finding complements other work on mothering at work as a way to exercise limited power and influence (Britton 2003; Ollilainen and Calasanti 2007; Pierce 1995).

Overt, sustained resistance to the initiative was quite rare but we observed two departments in which high-status men vociferously challenged ROWE; these departments withdrew from ROWE during our study. In an early session for managers in one group, the facilitator was peppered with questions by the VP (a man), and then a man director said: "but the company won't survive! That's the hard truth! Globally, it won't work!" Later on, the facilitators met with some advocates (all women) in the department and heard that the VP was only attending some sessions ("which told [them] a lot"). One woman believes these two men would not "let their nonexempt utilize ROWE. They want or need them here 8 to 5." The department then went "on hold" without completing all the sessions. A senior manager in the second department was resistant from the outset, justifying his desire to have employees work on-site by saying, "the world is ruled by those who show up"; and "at the end of the year, I evaluate who has made the biggest impression on me." A woman later told facilitators that employees did not feel comfortable participating in ROWE sessions when the senior manager was present. The senior manager was apparently asked not to attend sessions, but the male manager below him continued his vocal criticism. The facilitators proposed dividing sessions by occupation, but the department withdrew from the initiative. Of course, some senior men executives had very positive responses. Recognizing their influence, facilitators invited them to sit on panels describing ROWE and to talk privately with skeptical executives. Still, these two cases of overt, sustained resistance illustrate the power that senior men hold to shut down this challenge to the masculinized work culture, at least within their domains.

CONCLUSION

This study utilizes an unusual opportunity to analyze an internal attempt to change the assumptions, expectations, beliefs, behaviors, and interactions that constitute the gendered ideal worker norm and subtly but continuously advantage those with few caregiving responsibilities. ROWE activities and discussions deinstitutionalize the taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations by making them visible and vulnerable. Compared to other flexible work policies that "accommodate" selected individuals, this initiative attempts a broader and deeper critique of the organizational culture.

Yet employees' discourse about that culture simultaneously reveals the continued strength and saliency of the entrenched ideal worker norm for employees. Our analysis also demonstrates gendered, and classed, responses to these proposed changes. ROWE renounces long hours, visible busyness,

and accepting unplanned work as signs of commitment or productivity and validates the daily integration of work and personal life, including the prioritization of personal responsibilities at times. Despite widespread interest in ROWE, women, especially mothers, are especially eager for these changes; and men, particularly younger men, are more cautious.

The intersection of gender and class at work is evident when employees in different (gendered and classed) occupational positions react differently to the proposed changes. Lower-status women fear they will not be able to make these changes because the senior managers they "support" will want them to stick to traditional work patterns. Higher-status employees worry that they will face career penalties if they make these changes. These worries seem to underlie men's, especially younger men's, caution about the initiative. Gender also affects how managers deal with the anxiety they feel about the proposed changes. Some women managers turn to "monitoring by mothering," playing on their concern for employees to request continued reporting of employees' whereabouts. While some men managers expect employees to continue sharing their work plans, they do not justify this with an analogy to fatherly concern. Instead, they and their employees seem to assume the legitimacy of men managers' requests on their face. Overt resistance to ROWE was rare; but senior men executives who repeatedly, and publicly, challenged the proposed changes were able to maintain the current culture within their departments.

Given these gendered responses to an initiative that challenges the gendered ideal worker norm, what are the prospects for broad, meaningful, and sustainable change in this organization and in others that pursue a similar strategy? The short answer is that we do not know, though we are hopeful. The risk of the gendered and uneven response to ROWE is that (some) men's caution may stymie the change in the culture overall, reinforcing the ideal worker norm as they enact hegemonic masculinity. Women may believe these changes are happening—that they can work in new ways and still do well—but those who most visibly adopt ROWE ideas and practices may continue to be marginalized. In that case, mothers, involved fathers, and others who accept the new culture would be judged against those who abide by the existing ideal worker norm, with its expectation of the primacy of paid work time over nonwork commitments.

On the other hand, if the organization now holds two *legitimate* visions of the ideal worker, the two organizational subcultures may continue to be in dialogue, with concerns addressed over time as members get more experience working in new ways. Research on organizational change finds that ambivalence often encourages change by keeping the conversation going (Piderit 2000). This more hopeful assessment is bolstered by our

quantitative research on the ROWE initiative at Best Buy. These analyses show improvements in work-family conflict and work-family fit, some health behaviors, and turnover in the period following a department's exposure to ROWE (Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2009; Moen, Kelly, and Hill 2009; Moen et al. 2010).

The tenacity of the masculinized ideal worker norm and related practices at work, even in the face of a workplace initiative that confronts the organizational culture directly, underscores the embeddedness of gender at work and at home. Still, times are changing, with ever fewer workers—women or men—having the backup at home that facilitates being an ideal worker. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that patterns of practice that worked in the past may be open to challenge when new conditions emerge. Flexibility is gaining prominence on the policy agenda, and the conversation about work family issues is broadening (Executive Office of the President 2010). Perhaps this provides an opening for an initiative like ROWE to topple— eventually—the masculinized ideal worker norm by challenging the way work is accomplished.

NOTES

1. We understand organizational culture broadly, including the assumptions, expectations, beliefs, choice sets, interaction norms, reward systems, and official employment policies that enforce all of this within a workplace.

2. Of course, organizations are gendered in other ways (Acker 1992; Britton 2000). Gender is invoked and male privilege is reproduced by policies and practices that assume heterosexuality and reward systems that recognize individual "initiative" but do not acknowledge mentoring and other relational work (Fletcher 1999; Roth 2006; C. L. Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999).

3. For more information on Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), see Ressler and Thompson (2008) and www.gorowe.com.

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