



## *Conversations with the Experts*

### Challenging an Outdated Career Path Template



**Phyllis Moen**

**Bio:** Phyllis Moen is the Ferris Family Professor of Life Course Studies, as well as Professor of Human Development and of Sociology at Cornell University.

Moen is founding director of the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center. She also created and directs the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, to promote understanding career/life issues over the life course.

This past year, Moen served as an invited fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, where she completed a book manuscript, *Life Works: Navigating a Life Course of Labor, Love, Learning, and Leisure*. Professor Moen is the author or co-author of six books and numerous articles.

**Editors Note:** In February 2001, Phyllis Moen authored a report, "The Career Quandary", which created a buzz among academics, policy analysts, and work and family researchers. The "Career Quandary" is a sophisticated analysis of career paths throughout the life course that considers the historical and contemporary, the personal and public. Recently, Moen agreed to share some of her insightful ideas about career development.

"The quandary that confronts employees, organizations, governments, and communities is the mismatch between career norms, expectations, policies and practices, on the one hand, and the realities of a changing economy on the other." (Moen, "The Career Quandary," *Population Reference Bureau Reports on America*. 2(1).).

### An Interview with Phyllis Moen

**Sloan Work and Family Research Network:** In your article, you challenge the existing career path template, referring to it as "a lock-step, full-time, march to a one-way, one-time progression to retirement." Please tell us about this outdated template.

**Moen:** Both work hours and the organization of career paths follow this lock-step blueprint that is based on middle-class male breadwinners of the middle of the 20th century who did not have family responsibilities. They had a full time homemaker to assist them, not only with their family responsibilities, but to assist them in their career development. I think that is a piece that is often missing, the idea that people could move up a lock step career ladder precisely because they had someone else behind the scenes to wash and iron their shirts, to get them out of the door, to move with them, to entertain their colleagues, etc.

Policies and practices related to every phase of the life course follow this blueprint. We assume, for example, that education occurs in your 20's before career development. In fact, increasingly, men and women are going back to school and getting additional education so the lock-step is broken. I make the point that the lock-step template not only has tremendous implications in the early years and the middle years, but also for the retirement years. Again, retirement assumes this lock step, which means our policies and practices around pensions assume continuous and full-time employment.

Increasingly, jobs are not based on continuous life-time employment and the employee contract is disappearing. Career development in the 21st century does not follow the traditional career development as we knew it in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**SWFRN:** What does this mean to working families, minorities, or folks who are not in the professional jobs?

**Moen:** In the past, especially in the 50's, the lockstep worked well for white blue-collar men, when they were members of unions and they had good contracts, like the auto workers. Minorities have typically been less tied to the labor force and have been more like women, generally—cobbling together a career path. Minority experiences are exacerbated by an occupational environment of insecurity and uncertainty. And white men no longer have a full-time homemaker, so they are finding it increasingly difficult to follow the lock-step blueprint—if it is available.

**SWFRN:** If career ladders are unpredictable, what effect does that have on employee's professional identity?

**Moen:** Employees have to think of their careers and their identity in terms of themselves and their abilities, not with a particular organization or even occupation. This has particular implications for women because in the past women did not identify with their occupation or job, but they do now. And, therefore, this makes the possibility of managing a career, a family's goals and responsibilities difficult.

Most employees have to piece together different kinds of occupations, or jobs, or hours, or employers and build their own career—to customize their own career path. Today, this is increasingly common for men and women regardless of family responsibilities.

**SWFRN:** What are some of the structural constraints that you have identified?

**Moen:** I think we are in the middle of, what I call, a structural lag or policy lag, where our policies are really geared toward something that is increasingly rare. Organizations are structured for an unencumbered employee. Workers are expected to travel with their jobs or to work overtime, even if they are told at the last minute, as if they were not encumbered by family or other responsibilities. The needs of the workers are at odds with the requirements of their jobs. Government policies perpetuate the myth of the unencumbered worker.

Government policies have locked us into this idea that full-time work is 40 hours or more per week and continuous work throughout the adult life course. Benefits and social security are tied to this myth.

**SWFRN:** What are the levers for change?

**Moen:** The levers for change are the baby boomers. Not the early work and family issues, because they are viewed as women's issues. The levers for change are baby boomers who are at this stage that I call "mid course," a shifting gears or looking ahead to retirement stage. To me, retirement is no longer a passport to old age, but a passport to another career. We need different entry points, exit points and hiatus points in careers instead of lock-step continuous full-time work. I think we are on the cusp of change.

**SWFRN:** Please tell us about structural "leads" or policy "leads."

**Moen:** Government is responding somewhat with what I call structural "leads" or policy "leads," such as pension portability. If we are experiencing the end of the lock-step life course, there is a lot more that needs to be done.

What are some ways that we could have sabbaticals to go back to school? Maybe time off to climb a mountain or have a child? How can that be built in with health insurance, benefits, that only come with full-time employment? We need career flexibility. The way to do that is by managing one's own career—being in charge. But that, again, is placing the burden on the individual.

I think we have to create an infrastructure that makes career flexibility possible. Think about it like a highway. Thus far there has been one big interstate—the lock-step career path. What we need now are many little paths that leave and return to the interstate; several interstates. We need to have multiple options that lead to the multiple goals of the individual.

In the past, one was either on or off track. We need different ways of getting to various goals while providing some modicum of security. I think a key issue is health insurance because it is so tied to hours and type of job. We need to rethink unemployment policies, work hour policies, needs of all workers. This is more difficult now that the economy is becoming more problematic.

**SWFRN:** How can research contribute to change?

**Moen:** I believe research can contribute to change or I would not do it. I'm really invested in these ideas. Research can:

- Document the nature of the problem and help define the problem. To date, researchers have ignored the fact that people have been able to invest so much in paid careers because somebody else was doing the care work in their lives—it came as a package. We need to move beyond focusing our research exclusively on paid work.

- Reframe and not use the taken-for granted templates. Underpinning most of the research on career development is the lock-step, template of full-time, continuous work throughout adulthood. Yet, increasingly, careers come in many shapes and sizes and are often a patchwork arrangement. Researchers need to study the arrangements, how people do manage, and chart the differences.
  - Recognize that career development occurs in the context of one's social network. We make decisions based on our goals and interests and abilities, and also the goals and needs of other people in our lives.
  - Reframe issues to be more realistic with today's realities and today's work- force. I study the couple and how hard it is for people to negotiate two careers. I use the term "career" as the trajectory of occupational involvement and the intersection with family careers and with the other spouse's career.
  - Examine organizational and governmental policy and potentials for change. We can investigate the structural "leads"—what works, does not, and why.
  - Study differences in policies and cultures of various organizational environments.
  - Go beyond trends and look at subjective definitions and meanings.
  - Explore, not only objective circumstances, but the subjective ideas of careers and how they relate to each other. One of the things I find interesting is that women earn less and have lower status in our study generally, but rate themselves higher in terms of occupational success. I think it is reference group, but also maybe they have had lower expectations or they are defining success differently. They don't define success in terms of money, they define success as making a contribution or learning something—a different style.
  - Researchers need to think about careers in terms of gender. Our research shows that couples make career choices jointly, to move or not move, to go back to school or not; mostly that means that women pick up and put down careers or don't work. Also, typically scaling back when children are born is almost always done by the women. Even among egalitarian baby boomers, if they have children, we end up with neo-traditional relations —both are in the labor force, but one works long hours and one works short hours. If they don't have children, often the women work long hours, too, so you've got two careers that encompass their lives.
- If I had not considered gender in my research, I would not have found some of the things I did. For instance, because women have not followed the lock-step career path, they frequently cannot retire and get their pension. Also, our research shows that women frequently don't qualify for downsizing retirement packages, because they have not worked full-time or the requisite years. Women continue to be disadvantaged in terms of career development that is the result of earlier choices or obstacles in their lives
- Look at career development over the life course. Too often we've thought of career development as only something that happens in the early years of career choice. But, careers develop throughout the life course. I keep thinking "what am I going to be when I grow up?" I don't think this ever ends. It's always being fashioned. I'm still trying to figure it out—that makes it interesting.

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