



Conversations with the Experts

“Starting in Our Own Backyards: How Working Families Can Build Community and Survive the New Economy”: A Book by Ann Bookman



Ann Bookman

Bio: Ann Bookman is Executive Director of the MIT Workplace Center. She is a social anthropologist who has authored a number of publications in the areas of women’s work, work and family issues, unionization, and child and family policy. Her new book, *Starting in Our Own Backyards: How Working Families Can Build Community and Survive the New Economy* (Routledge, 2004), extends the discourse on work-family integration to include issues of community involvement and civil society. Bookman has held a variety of teaching, research, and administrative positions and has also worked in government, as a presidential appointee during the first term of the Clinton administration, as Policy and Research Director of the Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor, and as Executive Director of the bipartisan Commission on Family and Medical Leave. She is co-editor of *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*.

Editors Note: Dr. Bookman, has been doing research on work and family issues since the 1970s and as a social anthropologist, she brings a unique perspective to the field. In her new book, ‘Starting in Our Own Backyards’, Ann eloquently integrates community-based support for families, and community involvement, with the more familiar terrain of work-family conflict. We had the pleasure of speaking with Ann recently about her experiences writing this book.

A Conversation with Ann Bookman

Community volunteerism is alive and well, especially among middle-class working parents of school-age or younger children, according to MIT Workplace Center Executive Director Ann Bookman, who tracked 40 such families over a five-year period. One reason why, Bookman found, is that parents depend on these organizations to manage their own work and family responsibilities. They have a vested interest in their success.

In her book, Bookman offers a new model for achieving work-family integration. On the household level, she believes that families will need to rely on community organizations and build supportive social networks among themselves. In terms of new private and public policies, she believes a multi-sector approach is needed, involving business, labor, government, religious institutions, schools and other community-based groups, each of whom will benefit by committing resources to the task of resolving work-family conflicts.

Starting in Our Own Backyards began when Bookman was part of a two-year cross-disciplinary team effort sponsored by the Radcliffe Public Policy Institute in 1997. The team studied various aspects of work and family among people employed by the biotech industry. Bookman focused on people’s lives outside of work and the community resources that the families turned to for help managing their responsibilities. She then did two additional years of field work, focusing on volunteerism with community-based institutions and was surprised by how many people give their time to community organizations given the widespread belief that this sort of engagement is on the decline.

“I think that working families are more and more aware that they can’t deal with their family care responsibilities by themselves, whether it is little children, school-age children, or elders. They are really in a partnership with community-based services, schools and faith-based institutions to nurture and educate their children and care for their elders,” she says.

The insecurity of the biotech industry likely strengthens workers’ reliance on social networks and community

institutions. Bookman chose the biotech industry to focus on because it offers a window into the knowledge-based workplace of the 21st century. Biotech calls for an educated, scientifically literate workforce. The majority of the workforce is fairly young, and in the “thick of work-family conflict,” Bookman says. And, reflecting the new economy, job security in biotech is low. In fact, the three companies Bookman studied all changed their names and either went through downsizing, bankruptcy, or restructuring while she was working on the book.

The biotech workers Bookman followed don't know how long their work community will stay intact, so rely less on their coworkers for support than they do “communities” outside the job. These communities include physical places, such as neighborhoods, as well as social networks of extended families, religious institutions, and other working parents. To learn how the different networks operate, Bookman used a research method called “snowball sampling.” She asked the study participants to identify the two or three individuals who helped them manage their work and family responsibilities and then interviewed them. These would typically include child care providers, after-school providers, school professionals, clergy, friends, and relatives. She also asked each of the workers in the study to draw a map detailing these connections.

“Both those maps and the additional interviews really fleshed out this concept of multiple types of community,” she says.

A surprising finding was the prominent role that extended family plays in the lives of the biotech workers. Many of the study participants – whether they worked in the professional, technical or production jobs -- live near parents or siblings, and rely on them for help with childcare. In fact, most of the workers mix paid care with help from relatives. They also help with the down payment on a first home. In fact, Bookman explains, “The ability of many biotech families to maintain a middle class life style depends on a cross-generational financial transfer strategy.” The book also discusses the high level of participation among the workers in faith-based institutions. Many rely on clergy and other congregants for work and family support.

“As it becomes clearer and clearer that jobs and employers no longer provide security, I think many working families are trying to build a safety net in their communities. They are turning to their neighbors, other parents, fellow congregants, to create relationships of mutual support and assistance,” Bookman says.

However, Bookman is quick to emphasize that this does not absolve employers of the responsibility to help mitigate the needs of their workforce.

“There is still a tremendous need in biotech for family-friendly workplace policies. Just because it is an insecure environment doesn't mean that people have any less need for flexible work arrangements and support for family care,” Bookman says. “Biotech employers need to recognize that their workforce is getting a lot of support back in their community. Therefore it is incumbent on employers to pay attention to the state of resources people have in their communities and try to invest in those community-based services and acknowledge the community dimension of family care.”

One way companies can do this is to give employees regular leave time to volunteer for the institutions that they rely on for child and elder care, and for their children's education.

“It is really time to expand the concept of what a family-friendly policy could be to include leave time for community service, and also to raise the importance of employers building partnerships with community-based services that can support their workforce,” Bookman says. “In the new economy, the jobs that are going to be created will lack stability and long-term employment with one company will be rare. This calls for more extensive community-based resources and much more support for people who want to volunteer. I found that the level of people who volunteered was higher than I expected, but not enough according to their own wishes. Many workers told me they wanted to do more but could not because of the inflexibility of their work schedules and other demands on them. We need to reward employees who are contributing to the larger social good, and make it possible for more workers to get involved in building a truly caring society.”

For more information about Starting in Our Own Backyards: How Working Families Can Build Community and Survive the New Economy, please visit, <http://www.routledge-ny.com/books.cfm?isbn=0415935881>

For more info on the MIT Workplace Center, please visit, <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/>

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E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-4033 / 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-1080

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