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Women partners leaving the firm: Choice, what choice?

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper is based on the experiences of 31 women who had recently left partner roles within an international management consultancy firm. The aim of this paper is to explore discursively their perceptions of choice within their decisions to leave.

Design/methodology/approach

Data were collected from 31 women using semi-structured telephone interviews, a 66% response rate. A discursive approach to analysis was adopted.

Findings

The decision to leave was the culmination of many interacting factors at a time when a financial incentive for resignation was available. Findings presented here focus on discourses of loyalty to and affection for the company and work life integration.

Research limitations

Limitations include access only to women who had left the firm, allowing for no comparison with those who were still partners. Additionally, we were unable to speak to any of the male partners who had left the firm in the same timescales, although in smaller proportions.

Practical implications

The findings indicate the need to review the excessive time demands placed on partners and provide further support for policies which enable greater flexibility.

Originality/value

This paper uses data from a rare sample of women, those who have actually left senior roles within one organization.

Keywords:

Women, work life integration, choice, professional services, leavers

Research paper

Introduction

Concern over the relatively high numbers of women managers leaving organizations has been growing. Many organizations have developed initiatives with the specific aim of supporting women's career progression to the higher echelons of corporate life, such as mentoring programmes and women's networks. The retention of valued talent is recognized as a priority and organizations strive to brand themselves as an employer of choice. Such strategies have had some success and higher proportions of women are found in more senior positions, arguably having broken through the glass ceiling. Despite this progress, women continue to leave organizations in higher proportions than their male counterparts at senior levels, and there is little in the literature examining this phenomenon. This paper attempts to fill this space.

The aim of this paper is to explore discursively how women partners represent and describe their decisions to leave a professional services firm. This context is important in that the nature and structure of these services (usually project-based) place demands on senior staff, particularly partners, in return for high levels of extrinsic and some intrinsic rewards. The demands include not only high levels of professionalism but also extreme commitment, such as the ability to travel nationally and internationally on demand, to work around the clock at whichever premises whenever necessary, and to provide speedy and efficient solutions to the clients' problems. Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) provide an account of the nature of such firms. This study begins by considering the very limited literature on women leaving organizations followed by an examination of the discourse of choice within the work life balance literature. After outlining the methodology for our study of 31 women partners who have left a global management consultancy firm, we present empirical evidence from the women themselves. We next discuss the implications of such evidence and make suggestions for further research in this important area.

Women leavers

Despite the level of concern expressed in many organizations, and Belkin's (2003) "opt-out revolution" article which discussed the push of job dissatisfaction and the pull of motherhood, a search revealed very little extant academic literature on senior women who have left organizations. Of course, the decision to leave an organization does not necessarily mean that women wish to permanently turn their backs on corporate life. Many women take career breaks at some stage in their careers, and Hewlett and Luce (2005) point out the ease with which women can "off-ramp" and the difficulties they face when planning to return to organizational life. The kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) focuses on the "fit" of work and family, and offers an explanation for the large numbers of middle management who leave corporate life. Women talked about opportunities and possibilities as well as the blocks experienced in creating their own path which provide challenge and allow specific needs to be met.

Mallon & Cohen (2001) studied women's transitions from careers within organizations into self-employment, seeking a further understanding of how women themselves experience and make sense of changing careers. Dissatisfaction with organizational life, changes in organizations which contradicted personal values and principles, and an imbalance of personal and professional life were key factors in the decision to move to self-employment.

Looking at more senior women leaving organizations, Marshall (1995, 2000) identified no single pattern, but emphasized the complex nature of such decisions, each of which is individual and multi-faceted. Factors identified by Marshall regarding women's decisions to leave employment included leaving changed roles that had become untenable, blocked promotion prospects and wanting a more balanced life. One particular theme was their experience of difficulties with inappropriate and often hostile interpersonal behaviour, often for the first time in their careers. It was not that they could not cope, but that they did not respect or want to work in such unproductive environments. Several such factors contributed to individual decisions in accumulating and complex ways. In particular, the choice relating to work-life integration emerged from these studies as a key explanatory factor.

Work life integration and choice

Work life balance or work life integration?

The language used to describe the integration of work and nonwork domains reflects its socially constructed evolution. Research emphasis has moved from "conflict" through "seeking balance" to "integration" (Burke, 2004). Similarly there has been a shift away from "work-family" or "family friendly" when referring to supportive organizational policies to "work-life" in order to remove the emphasis on parents, especially mothers. "Work-life" has also received criticism with its suggestion that work and life are somehow separate (Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild, 2007), rather than work being a part of life.

The term "work/personal life integration" was offered by Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt (2002) who seek to acknowledge the importance of individual priorities and choices with the use of the word "integration", rather than "balance". They suggest that balance indicates an equal split of time between the two domains, which is an unrealistic state of affairs, whereas integration focuses on a sense of satisfaction in both the work and non-work domains. But "integration" also suggests the blending together of work and personal life, and individuals do not always want to manage the two areas by merging them and some may prefer to keep them separate. Thus, authors have begun to refer to the harmonizing of work and the rest of life (Lewis & Cooper, 2005; Gambles, Lewis & Rapoport, 2006) to indicate their interaction in positive ways. The demands from the work and non-work domains are not absolute and can not necessarily be easily measured. The demands vary, as do individual responses to such demands. It could be argued that people self-impose expectations with regard to performance of both work responsibilities and household and other non-work obligations (Quick, Henley and Quick, 2004). Managing such expectations can enable an individual to cope with conflicting priorities and Quick et al place more emphasis on the importance of energy in a given situation, rather than the amount of time spent there. So the argument moves away from a sense of balance or equality of the different domains, and acknowledges the relevance of timely emotional engagement within each domain and the ability to focus on

situational requirements. But this still suggests a large element of choice, whereas Caproni (2004) argues that the language used in the work life balance debate adds to the pressures experienced by individuals who are seeking to achieve this elusive state of satisfaction with both work and non-work domains. She describes the conceptualization of work-life balance as individualistic and achievement-oriented:

> "setting us up to strive for one more thing that we cannot achieve and, in doing so, keeping us too focused, busy and tired to explore the consequences of our thinking and actions" *(Caproni, 2004:212).*

The family context

The continual working towards balance can also imply a greater choice over life decisions than often exists. For instance, care may have to be provided for children or for elderly parents, but the demands for such care are often unpredictable, due to combinations of circumstances, thus reducing the element of choice and control (Caproni, 2004). Additionally, high-quality regular childcare for older children (6+), specifically after school care, is more difficult to obtain than the more routine requirements sought for pre-school children (Moore, Sikora, Grunberg &Greenberg, 2007).

A study which compared single women without children with married women with and without children found that all three groups experienced similar levels of difficulty of balancing work and non-work (Hamilton, Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2006). This under-researched group of never-married women without children experienced greater pressure to take on additional tasks late in the evening or at weekends, precisely because they were viewed as having fewer family obligations than others (Anderson, Stewart & Dimidjian, 1994, cited in Hamilton et al, 2006). Similarly work was described as "all-encompassing", leaving few resources for seeking activities outside the work place (2006:408). This study provides a different, yet important perspective to the discussion of choice experienced by these individuals in the decisions they make regarding work life integration.

Negative or positive?

However, not everyone agrees that balance has been about seeking satisfaction in both domains. A different interpretation suggests that one of the flawed assumptions in the work life balance debate is that work has been portrayed as negative and problematic, with individuals wanting to reduce the time spent at work as a result (Eikhof et al, 2007). These authors suggest that work life balance programmes ignore the possibility that people may gain satisfaction and fulfillment from work, and state that a common, and inaccurate, premise for flexible working arrangements is that "*work-life balance provisions are introduced to help employees reconcile what they want to do (care) with what they have to do (work)*" (Eikhof et al, 2007:327, brackets in the original). They argue that employees may want to work and that the work life balance debate tends to ignore this as a possibility. However, others talk about positive spillover (Kirchmeyer 1993) and the enrichment which takes place between work and family (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Control and workplace flexibility discourses

Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport (2007:361) argue that there are in fact two overlapping work life balance discourses; "the personal control of time" and "workplace flexibility" with both including a dimension of choice. The former indicates that individuals are able to make their own decisions about the priorities in their lives around work, career, family and other aspects of life, paying little attention to the gendered assumptions about commitment and competence which underpin the concept of the ideal worker (Rapoport et al, 2002). Flexibility discourses emphasise the choice available to employees regarding where, when and how much to work, and again may not challenge the gendered constraints to adoption of FWAs. These two discourses are evident in a study by Drew and Murtagh (2005). Firstly senior managers felt unable to control their work time in terms of demonstrating what might be considered "normal hours", because of the long hours culture. Similarly, the flexibility discourse was highlighted with flexitime and home working arrangements seen as incompatible with senior management posts, particularly by the male managers.

Genuine choice or pressure of the 'ideal worker'

Additionally, women may view working as a financial necessity rather than a real choice (Houston & Marks, 2005) partly because of the huge effort needed to overcome the psychological and practical barriers in order to work. This does not, of course, preclude the experiencing of some satisfaction as a result of working.

Managers and professionals are particularly susceptible to the "ideal worker" norm of domesticity and the subsequent doubt over their commitment to their employer and their career if they stray from that ideal by adopting a pattern of work which involves less face time. The ideal worker has historically been seen as someone who can give their time unstintingly and willingly to their employing organization, and have no conflicting demands on their time (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989; Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek and Sweet, 2006). Alongside this is the assumption of the existence of another adult based full time in the home to attend to domestic and caring responsibilities. In the 21st century many families do not have such a structure of full time breadwinner and full time homemaker (Marks, 2006) and households may consist of different mixes of number of adults, age and number of children or no children, and presence or absence of elderly dependents (Ransome, 2007).

Other literature focuses on the issue of choice in women's careers. For instance, Lyonette and Crompton (2008) talk about the choices women accountants make in their careers, finding some indication of women choosing to stick at the level below partner because of the increased demands and pressures which would result from such a promotion, including the adverse impact on family life. They point out that choices are made from a range of "realistic" possibilities, within the bounds of constraining factors, and for women, domestic responsibilities are examples of such constraints.

Hence the language in the work life balance arena shapes the way in which the constraints are framed, choices made and outcomes achieved. The personal control of time and the ability to work flexibly are two discourses that contain both constraints and choices, but whilst personal control of time may be easier for some senior staff, the ability to work flexibly may not always be available for those at the top of some types of organization, especially client-based services. For women at partner level in professional

service firms at the peak of their careers, in the mature life stage, probably having already acquired significant financial resources, one choice may be to exit or 'off-ramp', rather than continue their professional career within their firm. This study examines what happened in the case of those women who made the choice to leave.

Discursive approach

In this study, the discursive approach is viewed as an examination of how language (in the form of spoken interaction) is used to construct and change the social world, while challenging the accepted ways of looking at the world (Dick, 2004). We use Watson's (1995:816) description of discourse as a "*connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions, which constitutes a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue*." So it is a form of sense-making, both on the part of the interviewees, who here make decisions about the information to include and to omit in their accounts of their decision to leave the firm (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and also on the part of us, the interviewers and researchers. We examine the varied discursive constructions used by the participants to achieve their particular purposes, whether this is their portrayal of themselves as valued partners or of making sense of what is happening within the firm, particularly with regard to the number of women partners leaving. As Watson points out, these discursive constructions are similar to interpretative repertoires (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984, cited in Edley, 2001:197) which are "quite separate ways of talking about or constructing" a given topic. Similarly, Clarke, Brown & Hope-Hailey, (2009) refer to "antagonistic discourses" where individuals present self-narratives which incorporate contrasting positions.

Method

Following an approach from an international management consultancy firm, we sought interviews with women partners who had left the firm over the previous three years. Access was provided by the Head of Diversity who contacted the 47 women leavers in that period to see if they would be willing to be interviewed. The project arose as a result

of the women partners leaving in higher percentages than male partners, causing concern within the firm, not least because of a range of initiatives which had been introduced over the preceding years to support women's career progression. The 36 women who responded were contacted by the project manager to set up semi-structured interviews, and 31 female partners eventually participated, a response rate of 66%. Only one interview was undertaken face-to-face in the UK, as most of the women were resident overseas. We therefore continued using telephone interviews over a period of about a month, after piloting the method to ensure that an open and frank discussion would be possible. The interview schedule was emailed to the respondents the day before the interview. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Anonymity was guaranteed, and raw data were not given to the firm, although a report was delivered including recommendations for good practice.

The first step in the analysis involved the reading and re-reading of the transcripts by all three researchers and then a discussion to identify discursive patterns within the text. The discursive approach to analysis requires a familiarity with the data (Kelan, 2007) and this continued through the use of NVivo, organizing and categorizing the data, focusing on the similarities and differences in the ways participants talked about choice and the decisions made during their employment with the firm and their decisions to leave. Further discussion occurred, leading to deeper understanding of the concepts invoked by the texts. In reporting the findings some demographic detail will be supplied to provide some context to the quotations used, but the aim of this paper is to understand how the women made sense of the choices they made, rather than to seek any connnection between choices made and factors such as gender, parental status etc.

The Sample

The women ranged in age from 37 to 60 and two thirds were married or with a partner. Sixteen women had children under the age of 18 and the other fifteen either had no children or their children were grown up. Five women were currently at home full time with children of varying ages and a further four were retired. Eleven women were in paid employment undertaking a variety of roles with differing levels of responsibilities. Three

women had their own businesses, and nine were involved with voluntary work, sometimes alongside paid work. Length of employment with the firm ranged from 4 to 29 years and the women had left up to four years previously. Twenty one of the women had most recently worked in North America and the remaining ten had worked in the continents of Africa, Australia, Asia and Europe.

The financial situation was a major factor for most of the women. Eighteen out of the 31 women had left three years previous to the interviews at a time of general economic downturn and many of these talked about the financial package which was made available to them. For some, this allowed them to maintain their desired lifestyle without having to earn money in the future.

The following section identifies two contradictory discursive constructions: that of loyalty for the firm as a wonderful place to work, and secondly a discourse of the lack of choice and control over lifestyle with regard to meeting priorities from both the work and non-work domains. It is important to note that these discourses were not separate but were enmeshed within the interviews. We will discuss these discourses, highlighting differing elements of the discourse of choice and lifestyle as we contrast it with the loyalty discourse.

Contrasting discourses

Loyalty

This discourse emerged through representations of the women's positive experiences during their time with the firm and their statements of the high regard in which they held the firm. The previous limited research has highlighted the negative factors which combined to push women towards the decision to leave organizations. In this study, we identify resistance to criticizing the firm through the loyalty discourse.

Sherri's talk illustrates the emphasis on the firm as a good place to work, despite reservations which may have occurred over time. She evidently felt that it was important to provide a context for her honesty about some of the more negative experiences which contributed towards her decision to leave.

> I would say that in the grand scheme of things [ABC] is probably the best place to work. I really don't want comments taken out of context because I still stayed with [ABC] for 20 years. I really did check this a number of times in my career when I was low and thinking of leaving, and I looked at the options and the other organizations I could work with etc and I still believe that [ABC] is a great place to work. (Sherri, no children)

Sherri refers to the ongoing choice she has made over a number of years to remain with the firm. The loyalty discourse included a strong need for the interviewees to present their affection for the firm indicating a sense of respect for the firm itself as an organization and also for the people who work there. Suzan's view represents this high regard for previous colleagues:

> I have a high regard for the company and the people and everything it stands for. (Suzan, children 12-18 years)

Part of the loyalty was evidenced through a strong sense of identity with the firm, and gratitude for the opportunities which had been made available and fully utilised.

> The firm was a very big part of me for a very long time. (Joya, no children)

> I love [ABC], I really love [ABC] and I had a great career and I'm very thankful and grateful for what I learned and the people with whom I worked and what I achieved, it was a great, great career. I loved it. (Megan, children 5-12 years)

Despite the eventual decision to leave, these women were keen to stress their successful careers in a highly regarded firm. Joya's comment in particular offers some explanation for the emphasis on loyalty. Her social identity was enmeshed with the reputation of the firm, and to acknowledge and allow criticism of the firm would therefore involve self criticism which these successful women would not be comfortable with.

Choice and lifestyle

Issues around choice and lifestyle emerged in three ways: choice in the desire for greater integration of work and non-work, choice within a context of constraints, and choice and

the demanding role of partner. Our intention is to demonstrate the contradictory nature of the loyalty discourse with the significant sets of choice discourses on which the participants drew to explain their decision to leave the firm.

Choice in desire for greater integration

The choice discourse manifests through the representations of individual priorities when the women described the position of work within their whole lives. There was no sense of seeking an equal division of time within the work and the non-work domains, and similarly the women did not talk of blending or integrating their work and personal lives. Aileen expressed her loyalty and affection for the firm: "*ABC is a wonderful company and I think very highly of it"* but she also explained how she had recently gone through a divorce and wanted to reduce her time away from home and her children at such a distressing time for them. However, she perceived herself to have no option other than to continue to work in the same way:

> I felt [the senior partners] were, although nice, they were very unsympathetic to the situation and I just don't feel that there were any options there. … It was kind of like you understand what the expectations are, you've always been a good performer, you know what it takes and either accept it or don't. ... There was no discussion about part time, it was just accept it; you're going to have to travel if you want to be there. There was just no sympathy at all. (Aileen, children 12-18 years)

So the discourse of choice becomes polarized and these women demonstrated their awareness of the extreme options they had to consider. Kim expressed her appreciation of the initiatives within the firm which had been introduced to support women's career progression:

> I know everything the firm's done and we've done so much to help retain senior women. … We've done so many great things, so I want to give credit to all of that but every once in a while I just came to the realisation that you want to have this great career that requires a tremendous amount of time and commitment and you just can't balance everything sometimes. (Kim, children under 12 years)

There was an increasing recognition by some of the women of the demands which family life placed on them and Kim went on to explain the shift in her desires away from doing whatever was required by the firm:

> The year prior to when I had my third child, I tried a part time schedule and that helped but I think once I was home with all three kids, getting involved with their lives more, over the year and a half that I was home on this leave of absence, it just became clearer and clearer to me that I wanted to be at home with them. The balance I had been trying to achieve was so difficult; I had to make a choice, so that's why I finally chose to resign this past January. (Kim, children under 12 years)

There appeared to be a gradual acknowledgement that any sort of balance between the work and nonwork domains was not possible. Alexis suggested that the only practical way to achieve such a balance was sequentially, prioritizing work or family at different times.

> I came to the realization at one point because I was in that group of women who felt you could have it all and I ultimately came to the realization yes you can have it all but not all at once, you just have to take different stages of your life and I just had to come off the consulting career path for five years at important stages of my parenting. (Alexis, grown up children)

Yet, she too presented an interesting contradictory perspective in her statement: "*I think very highly of ABC and I found ABC to be very, very supportive of my time and participation in the firm*". So she had to step off the career path to attend to parenting priorities, and yet still spoke of the support she received, so again illustrating the contradictory elements of this discourse.

The difficulty in achieving any sort of compromise between the demands of work and home was echoed by Libby who used particularly emotive language as she described the options which she had clearly rejected, but which would have enabled her to maintain her previous high levels of performance.

> I wanted to come back to work, I loved my job, but I found no matter how much I tried I just couldn't be the same top performer that I was before I had my baby. Sure,

> I could have made the decision to outsource my family and get a full time live-in nanny and continue to work the same hours, but I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to sell my family off to somebody else. (Libby, children under 5 years)

Libby provides an interesting contrast to many of the other women who engage in both the discourses of loyalty, and of choice. Although she expresses enthusiasm, it is for her job rather than for the firm. Instead of the loyalty and affection, there was a sense of resentment and anger at the lack of support and understanding which effectively removed the option of staying with the firm. It would have been at too great a cost.

Similarly, Cassie explained the discrepancy between the wants and needs of junior colleagues and the lifestyle which they observed of the existing partners.

> I've seen too many associate partners leave because they've said to me I don't want that lifestyle, I need to have some time to have children and deal with elder care and whatever, so I think the firm really needs to address that because they are losing a lot of talent. (Cassie, children under 5 years)

So there are some fundamental life choices within this discourse of choice, requiring women to consider their future and the investment of time needed to achieve their lifestyle goals.

> Do I want to take this job or do I want to go and do the things I want to do, i.e. get married, have a family and all that? Now I'm not saying you can only have one or the other, but I was thinking that being involved in work at [ABC], I have forgotten about a lot of things in life, you know what I'm saying? (Aisah, children under 5 years)

Choice in a context of constraints

The choice discourse is presented paradoxically, with a spectrum which has "all work" at one end and "all family" at the other. Despite the use of various strategies over time, the women were experiencing a feeling of being pushed into decisions they find problematic. However, there is also uncertainty in the way forward. Laura questioned the boundaries she would be looking to put in place if she were to return to a role similar to her previous one with the firm.

> I have thought if a big project came up and [ABC] asked for me to come back, what would be the parameters that would be ideal with respect to that balance because it certainly does change at every point in time, every life change. (Laura, children 12-18 years)

Freeing themselves up to spend more time with their children was a key part of the discourse for the mothers in the sample. Women with children of differing ages had concluded that it was the right time to work and travel less, in order to spend more time with family. For instance, Kerry, who had "*been with [ABC] for 20 years and had a wonderful career with [ABC] and had fantastic opportunities*" went on to say:

> I feel a little bit like I've missed out on the first ten to twelve years of their lives and I wanted to be more involved in their teenage years than I was in their toddler years and be available to them. … Unfortunately in my professional role in [ABC] it was not possible to have that time and flexibility to get involved in their lives to the extent that I wanted to. (Kerry, children under 12 years)

Similarly, Ellen explained

> I love [ABC]. [ABC] gave me the life I have right now. … But being around for my two children is my big role right now. … I want to be there for this part of their life, I don't want to miss my kids growing up. (Ellen, children under 12 years)

So Kerry and Ellen have availed themselves of the only option they could see within ABC, that of leaving the firm that they regard so highly, as there is little support to enable them to meet their other priorities.

Choice and the demanding role of partner

In a different way, those without children talked of the importance of spouses/partners, families and friends in their lives, and of the challenge of managing the competing demands on their time. The demanding nature of the partner role makes it difficult to allocate significant amounts of time to others without the constant distractions from the office and/or the client, as Sherri described:

> My parents are aging, they're not well, and I all of a sudden decided I absolutely had to spend more time with them and that's not just on weekends, it's going and spending large blocks of quality time with them when I can just focus on them and not be on the phone or on the computer and everything else back to the work site. (Sherri, no children)

The issue of travel featured strongly in the choice discourse, as it was described as an inherent part of the role of partner by these women and was a major constraining factor in the choices they experienced. The partner role requires a great deal of travelling, taking all of them away from their families and friends on a continual and relentless basis. In the quotation below Agnes emphasizes her developing competence at creating non-work time at weekends, but the inability to address the demands placed on her by the need to travel.

> I still have an awful lot of respect for [ABC], but the travelling - everything else I could manage because the work hours I could manage. I tended to work quite a bit but I controlled it myself and I got better about not working weekends and so everything else I can manage but the travelling. (Agnes, children under 5 years)

However, Kim explained that it is not just the travel, but the whole nature of the job and the expectations of senior partners and clients, even when working locally to one's home base described as "an in town job". Such a working arrangement added the additional pressure of expectations from immediate family of a greater presence in the home, because of the assumption of more normal working hours.

> The client comes first and that means whatever you need, whatever hours are required, it can be just as hard to be on an in town job, so even when there is no travel, but you've got to be at the client at 7am for a meeting or there's a crisis and you're there until 11. Sometimes I found being in town can be just as demanding because your family thinks you're at home, so why aren't you coming home for dinner, and eating with them? You're still spending all your time away. (Kim, children under 12 years)

Discussion

About half of these women had children under the age of 18, yet the issues of motherhood were not about coordinating childcare arrangements or dividing up parenting with a partner, but about wanting to spend time with children at varying stages in their lives. Several of those without children, or with grown up children, talked of wanting the opportunity to have broader experiences in their lives, mentioning wider family and friends. Unfortunately many tended to see the issue as very clearly defined in terms of **either** their role within the firm **or** a life outside the firm.

The women in this sample were not necessarily off-ramping but seeking to work in a way which gave them control over their lives, especially with respect to minimizing the amount of travel which took them away from home on a regular basis. Although there was evidence of the pull of motherhood mentioned by Belkin (2003), these women did not express dissatisfaction with organizational life per se. On the contrary, they stressed positive elements of much of their careers, expressing loyalty and commitment to the firm which many still held in high regard.

As is common with discourses (Watson, 1995), two dominant themes co-existed in the accounts of these successful women leavers, i.e. loyalty and choice regarding work life integration. Yet the hegemonic positioning of the choice discourse meant that other alternatives were suppressed. Women showed loyalty and affection towards their firm, but this was not reciprocated in the form of some temporary control over their personal lives or some flexibility so that they could manage less stressfully their nonwork responsibilities. The flexible working offerings for women lower down the hierarchy were much celebrated by the firm, but there was no flexibility in the partner tier. These women perceived that the firm was expecting all or nothing, and did not seem to recognize the paradoxical nature of their loyalty to the firm and their decision to leave.

Although there were combinations of factors which contributed to the women's decisions to leave the firm, the focus of this paper has been the discourse of choice with particular emphasis on lifestyle. There was little evidence of either balance in the sense of division of time between the work and nonwork domains, or of integration or the blending of work and personal life. The discourse presented was of a forced and extreme choice.

However, it is clear that the women partners had certainly gained satisfaction and fulfillment from their jobs over a long period of time. The issue was not about "wanting to care" and "having to work", therefore demonstrating support for the inaccuracy of such a claim, pointed out by Eikhof et al (2007). The financial package available at the point of departure and high levels of remuneration, often over a period of many years, enabled them to leave, given that they felt unable to continue to work within the firm because of the extreme demands that the partner role required.

The "personal control of time" and "workplace flexibility" (Lewis et al, 2007) were both absent, highlighting "work life imbalance". These women clearly did not fit the "ideal worker" norm. Many were single or in a relationship with another full time worker, hence the lack of the "other" adult based in the home and needed by the ideal worker to be able to maintain their level of dedication to the job role. Also these women had an increasing desire to attend to demands from outside the work domain.

Implications and conclusions

This study adds to what is known about the importance of family life for women, with many of those who were not mothers still experiencing a tension between the demands of day to day organizational life at partnership level and the need to give attention to extended family and friends. Importantly, this study uses data from women who have left the same organization within a relatively brief period of time, providing unique data and valuable insights into what is known about women in senior positions who choose to leave and yet display tremendous loyalty and affection to the firm. These findings therefore strengthen the choice discourse, which serves to neutralize and suppress feelings of discontent over the constraints imposed by the firm's cultural expectations of those in the role of partner. This effectively removes the responsibility from the organization of the need to facilitate the work life integration of partners.

The study has several limitations. First, we only talked to women partners who had left the firm and left at a particular time of economic downturn when a significant financial package was available to them. Speaking to women partners who had maintained their partner role in the firm during the same time period would have produced a useful

comparison. Similarly the inclusion of men in the sample would allow useful gender comparisons and this provides an opportunity for future research.

Understanding the factors which led these valued women partners to leave the organization, notwithstanding the initiatives and support which had facilitated their achievement of such positions, will allow the organization to review the demands placed on partners. The extreme expectations, particularly involving excessive travel and time away from the family, should be reviewed in the light of these findings, if the firm wishes to stem the flow of women partners.

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