EXECUTIVE SPOUSES

1. General Works


Five types of executive wives were identified in a recent study: blind supporters, insiders, deferred gratifiers, accommodators, and careerists. Derr and Turner examine each type and then discuss the consequences for husbands as expectations for wives change. Various corporate responses to the problems attending these changes are mentioned such as flexible schedules, placement assistance for the spouse in a new location, changes in nepotism policies, and leaves of absence. The trend to redefine success in terms of family as well as work and its effect on the corporation is noted.


As part of a longer seminar for executives, Gulf sponsors a one-week program for wives. It has three objectives: to increase their knowledge of the oil industry, to increase their knowledge and skills in lifestyle management, and to provide an opportunity for spouses to interact socially. Earlier articles describe similar shorter programs at Kaiser Aluminum and Detroit Edison ("Spelling it out to Spouses," Management Review, August, 1978, pp. 41-42) and in Denmark ("Involving the Corporate Wife," by Jules Arboe, International Management, October, 1979, pp. 27-28).


Kanter's article is based on her book Men and Women of the Corporation. She describes three phases in the career progression of the corporate wife and the decisions and dilemmas each presents. In the technical phase the problems revolve around being excluded from the husband's work, in the managerial phase, the wife becomes more involved with the company and its politics, and in the institutional phase she often becomes a public participant in the life of the company.


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Two recent studies on executives and their wives are examined. One reveals non-working wives are still perceived as status symbols. Power-driven men were more likely to have wives that didn't work and men who had better grades in school were more apt to have wives with careers. Other researchers found opposite results among younger power-driven men. These men were more likely to help their girlfriends work or continue their education. Time will tell, the authors say, if this change in attitude among younger men is a trend towards the working wife as a status symbol or just a result of the men deluding themselves.


Murray criticizes Vandervelde's *Changing Life of the Corporate Wife* (see below) because, despite its title, he claims she argues that there has been little change. He suggests that if she had talked to executives and their wives further down the corporate ladder, she might have found things changing faster. New trends cited are rejection of transfers because wives object and employment of corporate wives.


Seidenberg sees frequent moves as a real problem for the corporate wife since she must start all over again in each new community. Her credentials, unlike her husband's, are not transferable. The author, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, feels women should develop their own identities and says the solution to the problems of executive wives may be to eliminate this role for women.


Companies must think of the executive less like a bachelor and more as a family man. Company seminars for couples are suggested as a way to improve communications. Walker stresses that "if the needs of the marriage are not met, the company, not the marriage, might be the loser." He alludes briefly to the situation where the wife is the executive and the husband the corporate spouse.


A reprinting of the classic article on the ideal executive wife (*Fortune*, 1951). It mentions the practice of "interviewing" the wife along with the husband for an executive position. Whyte details the ways in which a wife can hold a husband back and what corporations expect from the wife of an executive.

2. Surveys


Vandervelde, a corporate wife and psychotherapist who has treated corporate wives, surveyed Fortune 500 CEO's and their wives. She found despite the women's movement, attitudes towards corporate wives remained unchanged among 85% of the men and 70% of the women. The model is "Be yourself, but cater to me first," which Vandervelde calls schizophrenic. She stresses the importance of a wife having her own identity whether she works or not and discusses the changing role of the executive wife. Excerpts from her book appear in *Across the Board* ("The Corporate Wife" by Maryanne Vandervelde, March, 1979, pp. 21-30).


Wyse lets the corporate wives tell their own stories, generally unhappy ones. One of the first books to detail the problems of wives, it was based on a survey of four hundred women with follow-up interviews. Wyse, a poet and executive wife herself, ends with some ideas on how to be happier.

Zimmerman, Patricia Mary. *Changing Roles Expectations of the Executive Wife.* MBA Thesis. University of Nevada, Reno, 1977. (HE-10356, University Microfilms International, Dissertation Copies, P.O. Box 1764, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.) 90 pp. $20.00 academic, $30.00 others.

Based on a survey of fifty wives, Zimmerman concluded that the assumptions of the fifties and sixties about the ideal executive wife no longer apply. Wives who did not stay at home had less traditional attitudes towards their husbands' work and the corporation. The differences were even more striking when the working wives were subdivided into career and non-career wives.

3. Relocation


Brett's study of 500 transferred executives of ten corporations contradicts most of the anecdotal material about the stress of moves on executives and their families. She found very few differences in regard to well-being between mobile and stable couples. The mobile families were "more satisfied with their lives, families, and marriages" than were stable employees and their wives but were "less satisfied with social relationships." There was
also evidence of transfers causing problems for the children but not lasting ones.


While many corporations provide financial help in relocating, very few take responsibility for the psychic cost of moving. Foster and Liebrenz propose some steps that can be taken to ease the trauma of relocation: 1) Bridge the family-corporation communication gap; 2) Rearrange relocation schedules to allow for visits by spouses before the transfer decision is reached and help with integration of the family into the new community; 3) Support the family by giving the executive some time with the family before starting work at the new location and assist with employment opportunities for the spouse.


Many managers are refusing transfers because of a change in the ways they perceive success. Family life and stability have become more important. In a number of cases, the disruption of a wife's career is a factor. One consultant reported 80% refused the first offer of transfer. One relocation firm offers a support system for the family instead of a home purchase plan, another lines up job interviews for the spouse. See also "If It Means Moving, Forget It" by J. H. Foegen (Personnel Journal, August, 1979, pp. 414-416).

4. Working Wives


Results of questionnaires sent to corporations and executive couples on how they are dealing with executive spouses who have careers. Many companies do not yet have policies to deal with the situation. Of those that were concerned, relocation in a dual career situation is receiving the most attention.


One expert estimates one-third of executive wives now have full time careers, one-third have part-time jobs and only one-third are still in the traditional non-working role. The trend to careers is stronger among younger women and as a result the importance of the wife's social role in the corporation is diminishing. Future implications for the corporation and the executive are discussed. Among them are fewer corporate social functions, less alcoholism and depression among executive wives, reduced executive mobility, increased attention to career opportunities for spouses, and the change to a less pampered lifestyle for the executive. Individual career wives are spotlighted.