ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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What's *Really* Holding *Women* Back?

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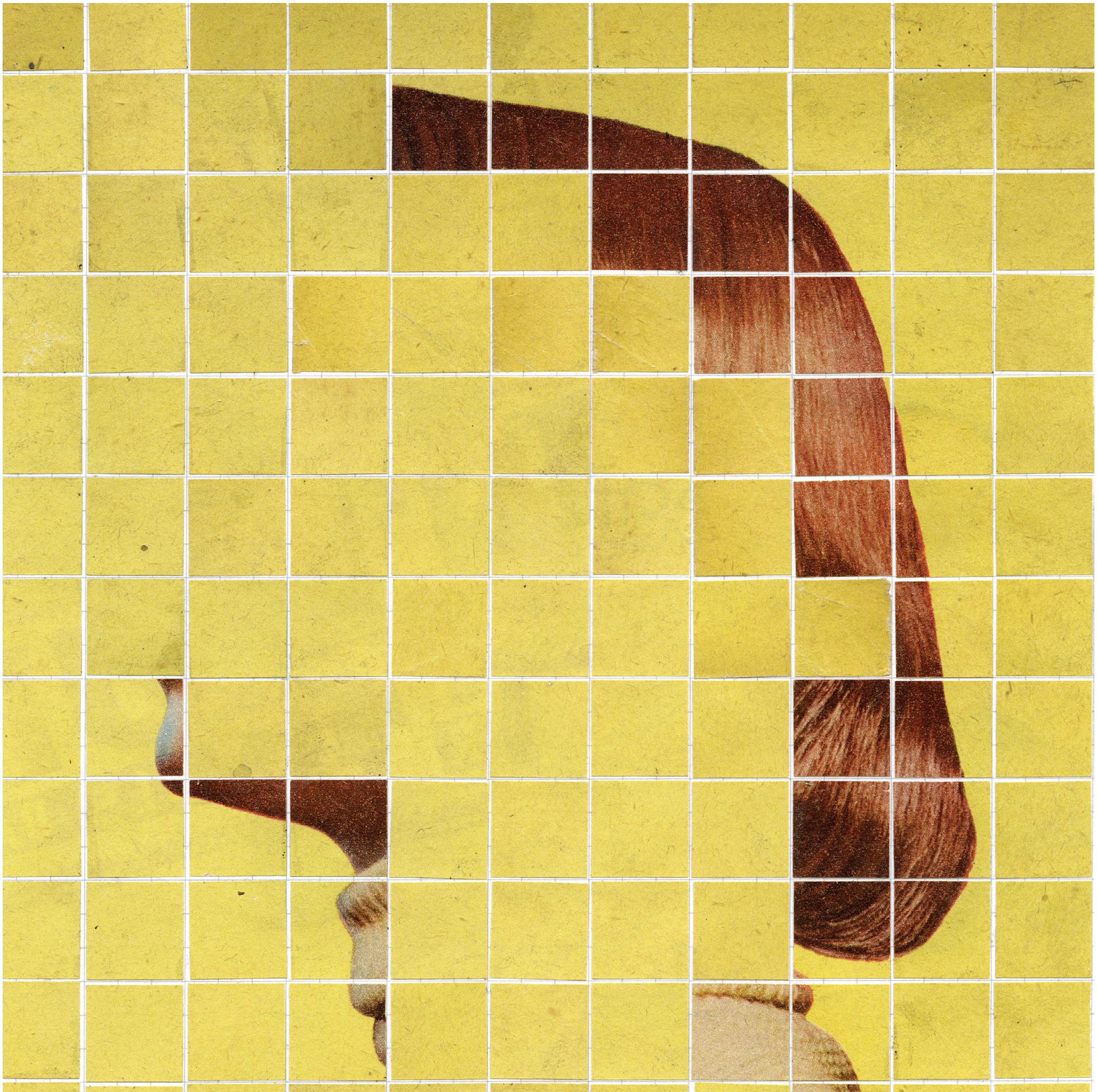
IT'S **NOT** WHAT MOST PEOPLE THINK.



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ABOUT THE ART

Anthony Gerace, a photographer and artist based in London, works primarily with collage, portraiture, and landscape. His images explore the effects of time on objects and the transient nature of memory and experience.

As scholars of *gender inequality* in the workplace,

we are routinely asked by companies to investigate why they are having trouble retaining women and promoting them to senior ranks. It's a pervasive problem. Women made remarkable progress accessing positions of power and authority in the 1970s and 1980s, but that progress slowed considerably in the 1990s and has stalled completely in this century.

Ask people *why* women remain so dramatically underrepresented, and you will hear from the vast majority a lament—an unfortunate but inevitable "truth"—that goes something like this: High-level jobs require extremely long hours, women's devotion to family makes it impossible for them to put in those hours, and their careers suffer as a result. We call this explanation the work/family narrative. In a 2012 survey of more than 6,500 Harvard Business School alumni from many different industries, 73% of men and 85% of women invoked it to explain women's stalled advancement. Believing this explanation doesn't mean it's true, however, and our research calls it seriously into question.

We heard this explanation a few years ago from a global consulting firm that, having had no success with off-the-shelf solutions, sought our help in understanding how its culture might be hampering its women employees. The firm recruits from elite colleges and MBA programs and ranks near the top of lists of prestigious consultancies, but like most other professional services firms, it has few female partners.

We worked with the firm for 18 months, during which time we interviewed 107 consultants—women and men, partners and associates. Virtually everybody resorted to some version of the work/family narrative to explain the paucity of female partners. But as we reported last year with our colleague Erin Reid, the more time we spent with people at the firm, the more we found that their explanations didn't correspond with the data. Women weren't held back because

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

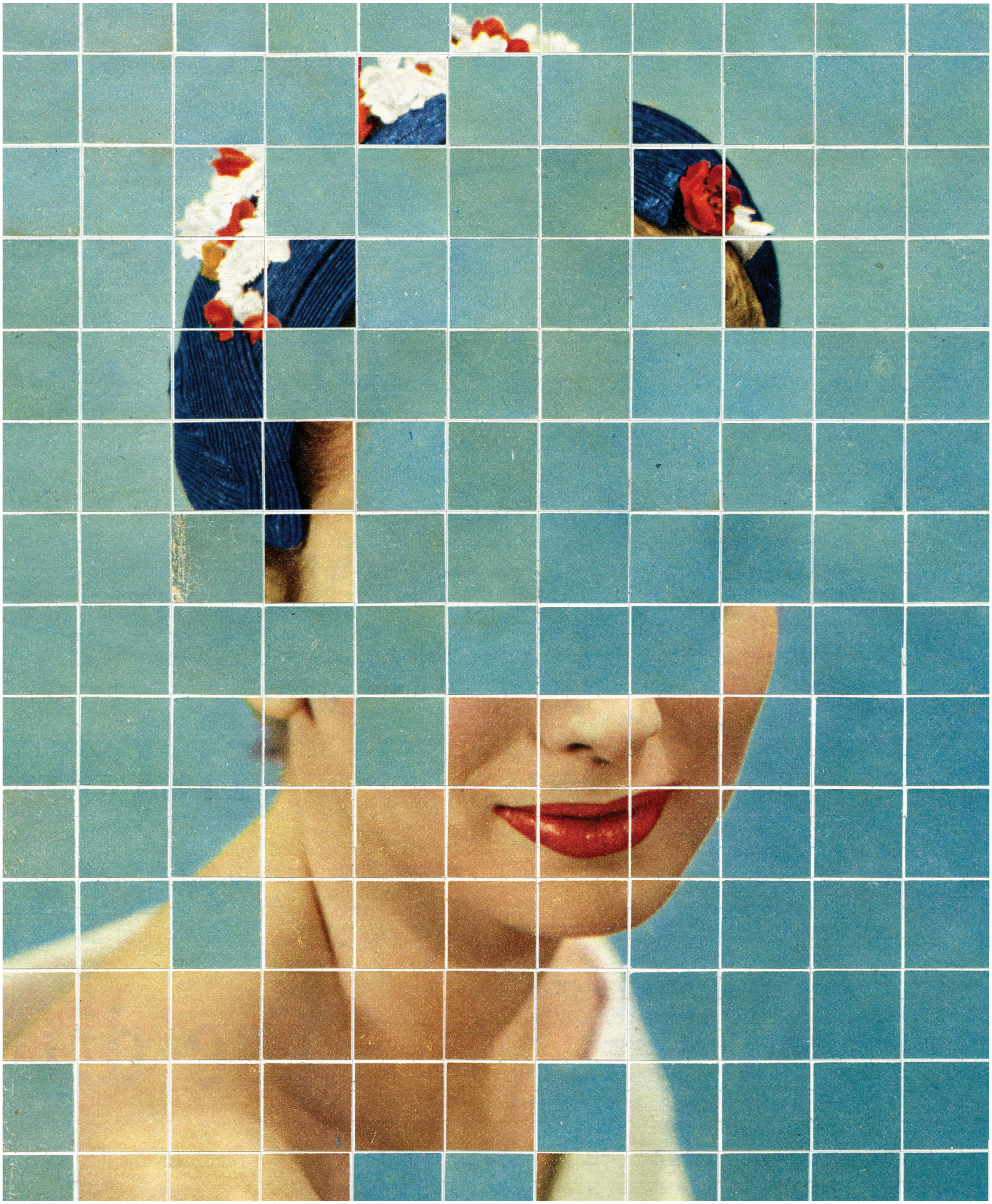
To explain why women are still having trouble accessing positions of power and authority in the workplace, many observers point to the challenge of managing the competing demands of work and family. But the data doesn't support that narrative.

THE RESEARCH

The authors conducted a long-term study of beliefs and practices at a global consulting firm. The problem, they found, was not the work/family challenge itself but a general culture of overwork in which women were encouraged to take career-derailing accommodations to meet the demands of work and family.

THE WAY FORWARD

This culture of overwork punishes not just women but also men, although to a lesser degree. Only by recognizing and addressing the problem as one that affects all employees will we have a chance of achieving workplace equality.



of trouble balancing the competing demands of work and family—men, too, suffered from the balance problem and nevertheless advanced. Women were held back because, unlike men, they were encouraged to take accommodations, such as going part-time and shifting to internally facing roles, which derailed their careers. The real culprit was a general culture of overwork that hurt both men and women and locked gender inequality in place.

What People Told Us—and What the Data Showed

On several dimensions, the firm's data revealed a reality very different from the story employees told us—and were telling themselves. The disconnects we observed made us question why the story had such a powerful grip—even on the firm's data-minded analysts, who should have recognized it as a fiction.

Consider retention. Although one of the firm's motives for reaching out to us was that it wanted help addressing "women's higher turnover rate," when we took a careful look at its data for the preceding three years, we discovered virtually no difference in turnover rates for women and men.

Another disconnect: Whereas firm members attributed distress over work/family conflict primarily to women, we found that many men were suffering, too. "I was traveling three days a week and seeing my children once or twice a week for 45 minutes before they went to bed," one told us. He recalled a particularly painful Saturday when he told his son he couldn't come to his soccer game. "He burst into tears," the man said. "I wanted to quit then and there." Two-thirds of the associates we talked to who were fathers reported this kind of work/family conflict, but only one was taking accommodations to ease it.

Accommodations were another area in which the firm's narrative and its data didn't line up. Employees who took advantage of them—virtually all of whom were women—were stigmatized and saw their careers derailed. The upshot for women at the individual level was sacrifices in power, status, and income; at the collective level, it meant the continuation of a pattern in which powerful positions remained the purview of men. Perversely, in its attempt to solve the problem of women's stalled advancement, the firm was perpetuating it.

We also found incongruities within the work/family rhetoric itself. Take the way this man summed up the problem: "Women are going to have kids and not want to work, or they are going to have kids and might want to work but won't want to travel every week and live the lifestyle that consulting requires, of 60- or 70-hour weeks." Resolute in his conviction that women's personal preferences were the obstacle to their success, he was unable to account for such anomalies as childless women, whose promotion record was no better than that of mothers. In his calculation *all* women were mothers, a conflation that was common in our interviews. Childless women figured nowhere in people's remarks, perhaps because they contradict the work/family narrative.

In a final disconnect, many of those we spoke with described experiences that called into question the work/family narrative's foundational premise: that 24/7 work schedules are unavoidable. They talked about devoting long hours to practices that were costly and unnecessary, chief among them overselling and overdelivering. We heard many stories of partners who, as one associate put it, "promise the client the moon" without thinking of how much time and energy it takes to deliver on such promises. The pitch goes like this, he explained: "We'll do X, Y, and Z, and we're going to do it all in half the time that you think it should take." Clients are wowed and can't wait to sign up, he told us.

Associates felt pressured to go along with these demands for overwork because they wanted to stand out as stars amid their highly qualified colleagues. "We do these crazy slide decks that take hours and hours of work," one said. "It's this attitude of, 'I'm going to kill the client with a 100-slide deck.' But the client can't use all that!" Another associate ruefully described all the weekends she had devoted to these sorts of tasks. "I just worked really, really hard," she told us, "and sacrificed family stuff, sacrificed my health for it, and at the end of the day, I look back on it, 'Well, did we really have to do that? Probably not.'"

We pointed out these disconnects to the firm's leaders, challenging the work/family narrative as oversimplified and

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offering a broader, more-nuanced, and data-driven explanation: What really held women back was the crushing culture of overwork at the firm. The unnecessarily long hours were detrimental to everyone, we explained, but they disproportionately penalized women because, unlike men, many of them take accommodations, which exact a steep career price.

All this led us to what we felt was an inescapable conclusion: For the firm to address its gender problem, it would have to address its long-hours problem. And the way to start would be to stop overselling and overdelivering.

The leaders reacted negatively to this feedback. They continued to maintain that women were failing to advance because they had difficulty balancing work and family, and they insisted that any solution had to target women specifically. Unable to convince them otherwise, we were at a loss for how to help, and the engagement effectively ended.

But we kept thinking about the situation. The firm's leaders were smart, empirically minded, and well-meaning, and yet they had dismissed the data and clung reflexively to an empirically dubious belief in the work/family narrative. As thoughtful as they were, it was a puzzle why they continued to rely on a "solution" that only perpetuated the problem.

The firm was not atypical in this regard. Research shows that a 24/7 culture creates discontent for women and men alike and that the "accommodations" solution, ironically, tends to derail the careers of highly qualified women, leaving companies' senior ranks depleted of some of their brightest female stars. Studies show an additional irony: Long hours don't raise productivity. In fact, they have been associated with decreases in performance and increases in sick-leave costs.

Considering those downsides, we asked: Why do companies continue on the same work/life balance path and disregard the possibility of instituting more-humane work hours?

We suspected that in the answer lay something profound but hidden—not just at our client firm but in corporate culture generally. Perhaps the work/family narrative is so pervasive and tenacious because it feeds into an elaborate system of social and psychological defenses that protect both women and men from the disturbing emotions that arise from the demand for long work hours. We decided to investigate.

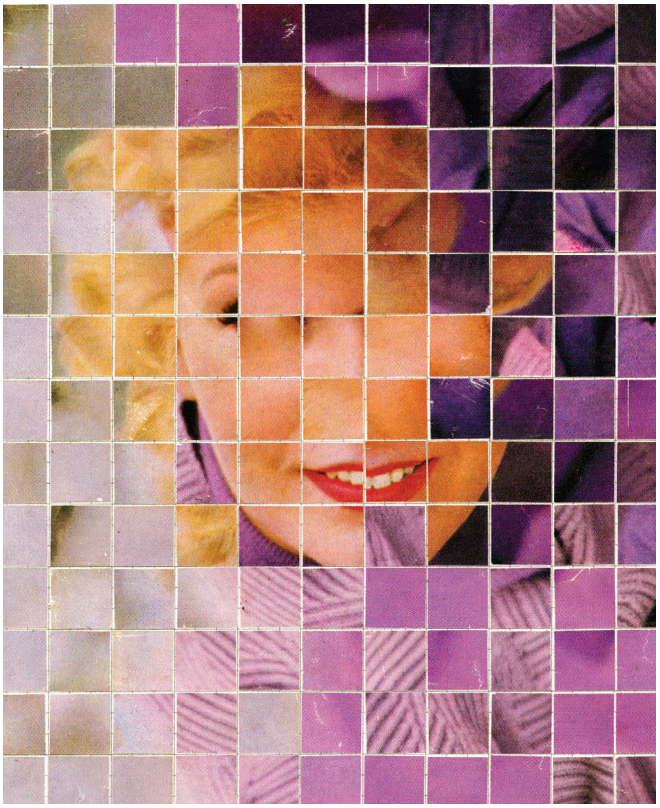
Unconscious Psychological Defenses and Universal Beliefs

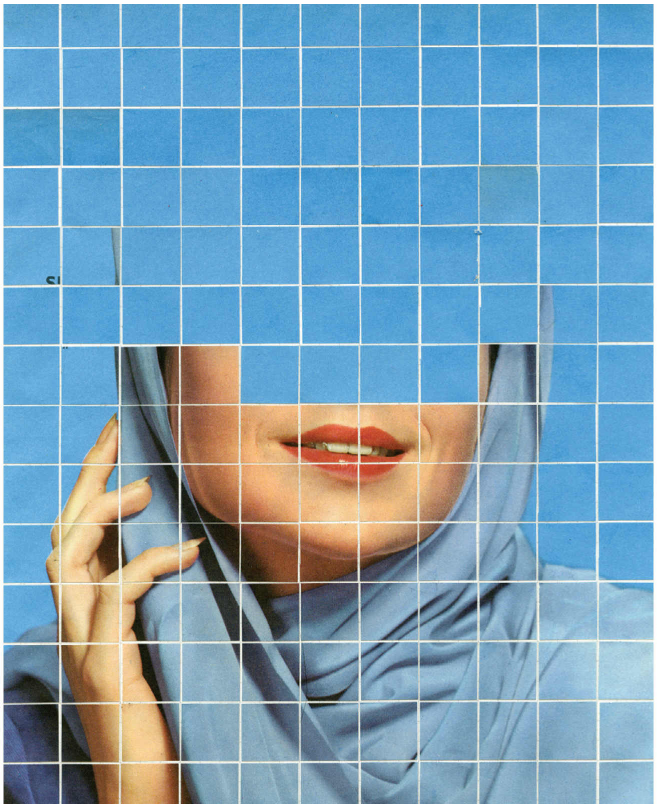
We returned to our interviews, this time paying special attention not only to *what* interviewees had said (or hadn't) but also to *how* they had said it. The exercise was illuminating. Consciously or unconsciously, virtually all the employees we had talked to revealed that they were emotionally conflicted by the firm's relentless demand for 24/7 availability and the daily choices that demand forced them to make between family and work. The unease thus created set the stage for protective measures to kick in—measures that would keep the firm's leaders from having to face up to the devil's choice they were handing their employees, and employees from having to face up to the price of whichever choice they made.

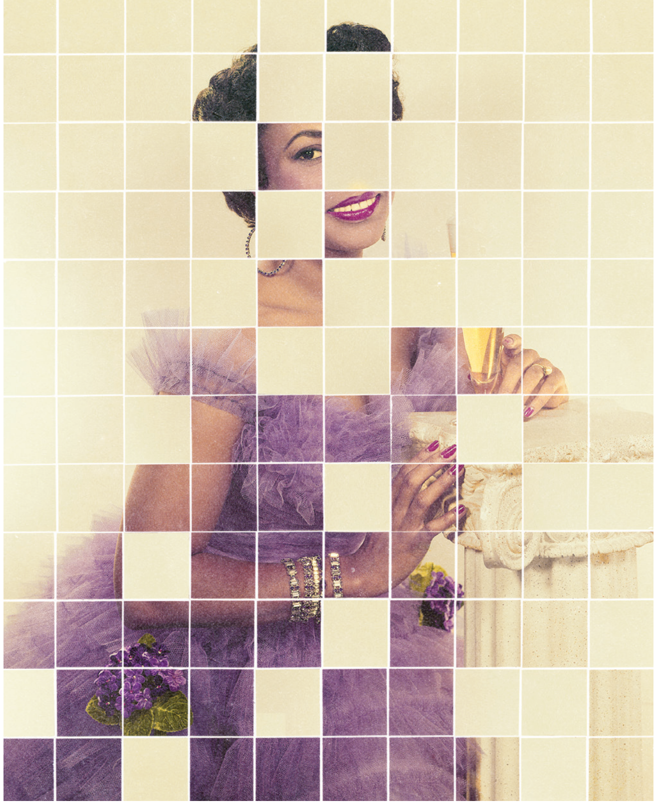
The linchpin of those protective measures was a belief in women's natural fitness for family, and in men's for work. At the employee level, they appeared as unconscious psychological defense mechanisms that reinforced the gendered work/family split. At the organizational level, they emerged as the universally held belief in the work/family narrative and in the form of policies that, as with accommodations, effectively took women off the partnership path. These employee-level and firm-level dynamics operated together to create the firm's social defense system.

All parties benefited from these measures in the short run. Firm leaders could deflect responsibility for the lack of women partners on the grounds that it was inescapable. Employees could make some semblance of peace with their decisions: Men could justify as inevitable the sacrifices they'd made in ratcheting up at work, and women could justify as natural the sacrifices they'd made in ratcheting down. And all the while, the firm's long-hours culture remained unchallenged.

But as with all defensive maneuvers, this social defense system didn't fully work. Conflict relegated to the unconscious merely hides; it isn't resolved, and anxieties continually poke through to conscious awareness, experienced differently among women than among men.







The Problem for Men

In a long-hours work culture, men have one primary identity: that of an ideal worker, fully committed and fully available. To fit this image, they must adopt the psychological stance of "my job is all-important." Nonwork identities, no matter how personally meaningful, become contingent and secondary. Naturally, this imperative to be an ideal worker generates internal conflict, especially for parents.

The men we talked to clearly felt guilty about how little time they spent with their families. They spoke poignantly about their deep emotional attachment to them, told us how much they regretted the time spent away from them, and described in heart-wrenching detail their interactions with disappointed children.

Men employed one key psychological tactic to manage these emotions: They split off their guilt and sadness, projected those feelings onto women at the firm, and identified with them there, at a bit of a remove. Consider the psychological jujitsu one man performed as he drew on the work/family narrative to explain women's lack of advancement in the firm. "I believe deeply in my heart and soul that women encounter different challenges," he said. "There's the collusion of society that it's the woman who takes the extended maternity leave, and there are some biological imperatives, too. When my first child was born, I got to carry her from the delivery room to the nursery. It's almost like I could feel the chemicals releasing in my brain. I fell so chemically, deeply, in love with my daughter. I couldn't imagine a world without her. I mean, here it was in [just] the first eight minutes of her life. So I can understand, 'How can I possibly give this up and go back to work?'"

But back to work he went. And what was his takeaway from this emotionally charged experience? A sense that he better understood the difficulties *women* face in trying to balance work and family! To banish his guilt and sadness about returning to his highly demanding workweeks, he projected his intense emotional experience onto the women at the firm—a move that allowed him to let go of those feelings while still identifying with them.

Let's unpack his story. He started with a distinction between women and men, linking motherhood to biology. It is women, not men, he suggested, who have the parenting experience. He abruptly changed course to speak about his own intensely emotional and biologically determined parenting experience but then changed course again, distancing himself from that experience and projecting it onto women. In effect, he was saying, "I was having this experience, but it was transient, and now that I've sampled it, now that I've been a tourist in this emotional land, I have a way to understand what is happening to women." The emotions he had experienced, in other words, were no longer his. They now belonged to women.

At that point he shifted the conversation to the male-dominated world of work. He told us about his time in the beer industry, a domain that, as he put it, consists of "men slapping each other on the back and talking about golf and s--- like that." In his telling, there was no room in this domain for the emotional experience of parenting, which he implicitly relegated to the world of women. Men and women, he said, just have different commitments to work and family. "I can't think of a single instance," he told us, "where the fella took a six-month paternity leave to care for the baby while mom went back to work."

This man was not alone in setting up women as the organizational bearers of distress about curtailed family time. That psychological defense gave many men at the firm the illusion of a fulfilled life and enabled them to perform as the committed workers the firm valorized. But the defense was only a Band-Aid; reality—the on-the-ground, relentless demands of family—was not so easily banished.

The Problem for Women

Women experience a different psychic tension. According to the work/family narrative and broader cultural notions, their commitment to family is primary by nature, so their commitment to work *has* to be secondary. They are expected to embrace an intensive, "my family is all-important" approach to parenting, a stance encouraged by the firm's readily accessible accommodations. But a family-first stance comes at a significant cost to their careers and flies in the face of their professional ambitions.

One "push" factor was the poor reputation of female partners with children. We heard them described as "horrible" women who were not "positive role models of working moms."

Most of the firm's women had tasted professional success and resisted the idea that they belonged at home, which made this tension especially acute. They willingly complied with the family-devotion schema but struggled openly with the idea of splitting off the work component of their identities.

That ambivalence is clear in the account of one mother, who talked about her inability to shirk responsibilities on the home front despite having a family-oriented husband. "There's just a difference between the way a mother and a father look at their kids and the sense of responsibility that they feel," she told us. "I feel my male counterparts can more easily disconnect from what's happening at home.… If I did sort of disconnect, things wouldn't fall apart, but I wouldn't feel good about it, so it's just not going to happen." Yet her work commitment was also strong, leaving her at a loss for knowing whether her family responsibilities would allow her the space to develop professionally. "I know I'll fall down from time to time," she said. "I know I need to learn…I don't doubt myself.…It's more from a place of needing to learn and needing to grow. I doubt myself generally in being able to honor that while also honoring the commitments I've made to my family. That is a constant worry." The ambivalence she felt about her career is on full display here. She embraced her family identity but was unwilling to relinquish her work identity, which is why she could say that she didn't doubt herself but then go on to say that she did.

Many other women at the firm similarly struggled with the work/family narrative's injunction to reject the role of ambitious professional. This meant that they weren't able to reap all its psychological benefits as a social defense. They willingly complied with the cultural dictate that they become the primary family caregiver, allowing men to identify vicariously with that split-off aspect of themselves—but they didn't shed their work identities. Thus the psychological resolution that men found, having made the "right" choice in fully committing themselves to a work identity, was unavailable to women, who had made the "wrong" choice in not fully committing themselves to a family identity. Working women in this situation are left with identities constructed as contradictory, forcing them to constantly assess whether they should ratchet down their career aspirations.

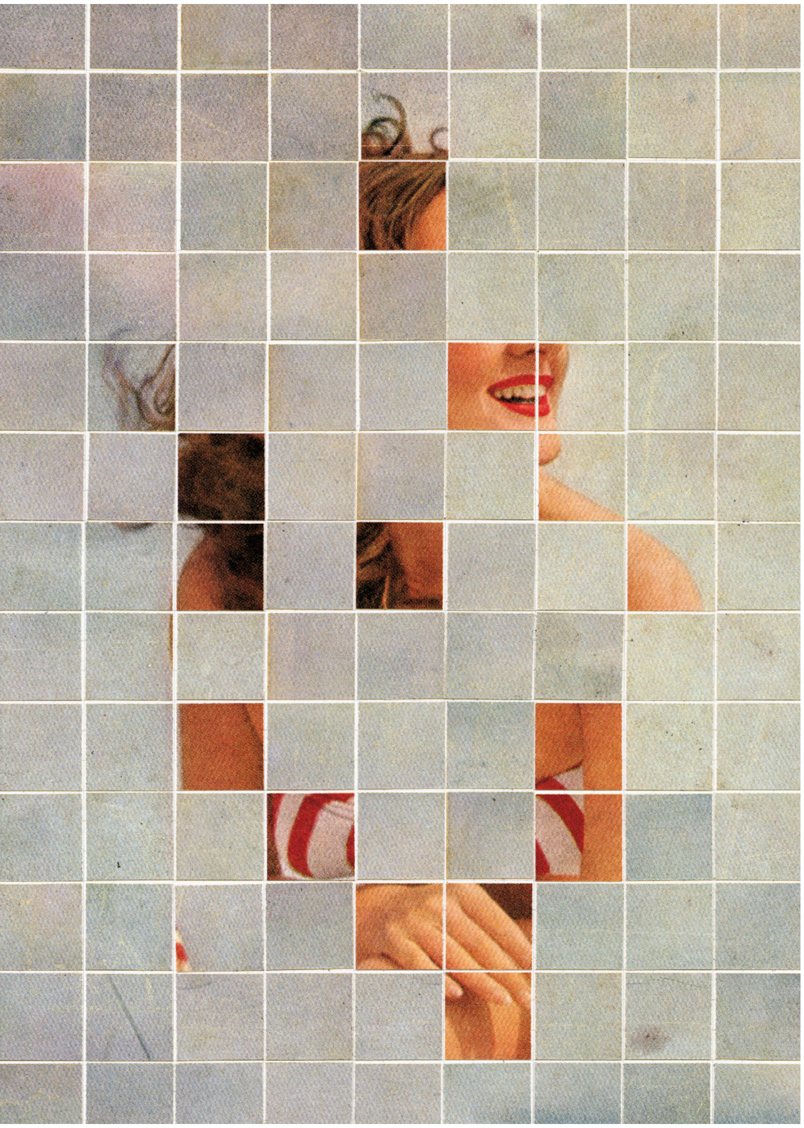
Adding to this tension at the firm were regular reminders that women were in the wrong place by being at work instead of at home—"push" factors that women had to withstand if they wanted to retain their work identities as ambitious professionals.

The Power of "Push" Factors

One particularly strong push factor that women encounter is work/family accommodations. Going part-time or shifting to internally facing roles provides an enticing off-ramp from the path of overwork, but those moves stigmatize women and derail their careers. Female associates at the firm who took accommodations generally fell off the track to partner; female partners who took them veered away from the route to real power.

Many women at the firm described having to resist a second push factor: the pressure to give up what they saw as their relational style in favor of the hard-charging "masculine" style the firm venerated in client interactions. One female partner told us how an early mentor warned that relying on her well-honed relationship-building skills would communicate to prospective clients that "you don't have a lot going on between your ears." In other words, her skill set didn't cut the mustard. Such assessments loosened women's identification with work while affirming a style more commonly associated with men, further encouraging women to step back.

A third push factor was the poor reputation of female partners with children, whose mothering was roundly condemned. These were formidable women who had held fast to their professional identities and achieved much recognition and success—achievements contradicting the idea that it is impossible to meet the demands of both work and family. One could imagine their being held up as exemplars, but we heard them routinely described as bad mothers—"horrible" women who were not "positive role models of working moms." For junior women facing decisions about being good mothers and having successful careers, such condemnation implies that professional commitment exacts a terrible cost.



With these push factors constantly reminding women that they don't really belong in the workplace, it's no wonder that women are often ambivalent about their career commitments. When faced with the long-hours problem, they find themselves on the horns of a dilemma: If they respond to the pull of family by taking accommodations, they undermine their status at work, but if they refuse accommodations in favor of their professional ambitions, they undermine their status as good mothers. Thus they are positioned to be seen as subpar performers or subpar mothers—or both. This dilemma leaves the culture of overwork intact, allows firms to deflect responsibility for women's stalled advancement, and locks gender inequality in place. Women are the ones who have a work/family problem to sort out, the story goes, and that's just the way it is.

SOCIAL DEFENSE SYSTEMS are insidious. They divert attention from a core anxiety-provoking problem by introducing a less-anxiety-provoking one that can serve as a substitute focus. At our client firm, the core problem was the impossibly long work hours, and the substitute problem was the firm's inability to promote women. By presenting work/family accommodations as the solution to the substitute problem, the firm added to an invisible and self-reinforcing social-defense system—one that cloaked inefficient work practices in the rhetoric of necessity while perpetuating gender disparities. This move gave firm leaders an unresolvable and therefore always available problem to worry about, which in turn allowed everybody to avoid confronting the core problem. As a result, two strongly held ideologies supporting the status quo remained in place: Long work hours are necessary, and women's stalled advancement is inevitable.

Our findings align with a growing consensus among gender scholars: What holds women back at work is not some unique challenge of balancing the demands of work and family but rather a general problem of overwork that prevails in contemporary corporate culture.

Women and men alike suffer as a result. But women pay higher professional costs. If we want to solve this problem, we must reconsider what we're willing to allow the workplace to demand of all employees. Such a reconsideration is possible. As individual families and employees push back against overwork, they will pave the way for others to follow. And as more research shows the business advantage of reasonable hours, some employers will come to question the wisdom of grueling schedules. If and when those forces gain traction, neither women nor men will feel the need to sacrifice the home or the work domain, demand for change will swell, and women may begin to achieve workplace equality with men.

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