

FORTÉ FOUNDATION

Women, Business, and the 21st Century: A Good Match?

Some Answers From Janice Reals Ellig By Susanna Margolis

When Janice Reals Ellig speaks about what women need to do to succeed in corporate America, the listener can be sure of at least two things.

First, she can be sure that Ellig knows what she's talking about. A veteran of the corporate management ranks, Ellig is today president of the prestigious executive search firm, Gould, McCoy, Chadick, and Ellig, with a finger on the pulse of employment and career trends. She also literally wrote the book on women succeeding in the corporate arena, co-authoring with executive coach Bill Morin the book that BusinessWeek in 2002 called the best in its genre: *What Every Successful Woman Knows: 12 Breakthrough Strategies to Get the Power and Ignite Your Career*.

Second, if the listener is a woman, she can be certain that Ellig is on her side. In fact, it goes beyond that; Ellig is an active mentor to and promoter of women who seek fulfilling and successful careers in business or professional organizations.

So the Forté Foundation was pleased recently to have the chance to sit down with Janice Reals Ellig and get her take on what's ahead for women in business. Here's our interview:

FORTÉ FOUNDATION: When you look ahead five years or so, which industries or types of business do you see doing the most hiring?

JANIS REALS ELLIG: No real surprise here. All the health care-related businesses will be in the forefront of hiring—everything from biomedical firms to the pharmaceuticals to companies that do research or manufacture and distribute medical supplies and equipment. That's a reflection of the aging population.

In the same vein, asset management will have a great need for talent as the baby boomers retire and look for ways to preserve or grow their accumulated wealth. So investment firms, alternative investments, private equity, mutual funds, hedge funds, financial institutions: all will be hiring.

Security is another fertile area. We've seen this especially since 9/11: a new burst of hiring from defense-related industries and the manufacturers of security equipment.

Professional services is another great growth area. Sarbanes-Oxley has had a tremendous impact on accounting, auditing, and the like, so that can be a very rewarding area.

And as always, general management is a key area. Companies are always looking for someone who has all-around skills—finance, accounting, operations, human resources—someone who can manage a division or run a company. That never goes out of style.

FF: And do all of these present opportunities for women?

JRE: Yes, but I would say more important than the type of business or industry is the position or function; that is where women can make their particular mark.

FF: Which functions?

JRE: I'll give you three answers to that. First of all, I would say women should aim for a P&L position—any line function that carries profit-and-loss responsibility. Right now, only ten percent of corporate officer-level women hold line positions. That alone makes this a huge women's opportunity.

But it also speaks to a perception that women have about a so-called "informal barrier" that they feel excludes them from advancement in the corporation, a sense that they don't have access to insider knowledge. What that really comes down to is women's lack of experience in line positions, which is the backbone of those general management skills all organizations want. It's also the meat-and-potatoes of the old-boy network that eventually runs organizations. A P&L line position is the gateway through that informal barrier into the insider network, and that's why it's something that women should go after—and it's something that should prove very rewarding to them.

FF: And the second opportunity for women?

JRE: Sales. It's a huge opportunity. When you talk about what's going to be hot projecting out from 2005, nothing will be hotter than selling, simply because everything has to be sold. Whether you're selling directly in a retail business or to a middleman or to an institution, the skill itself is invaluable. And it's a skill in which women actually have an advantage. My clients in wealth management say that when it comes to selling services—like their asset management services—women do better.

FF: Why is that?

JRE: Women are relationship-oriented, more consultative, more "holistic." They listen between the lines; they hear everything the potential customer is telling them. These are exactly the kinds of selling skills that will be essential in the new economic reality of the 21st century, so this is a real opportunity for women.

FF: And the third opportunity?

JRE: Running your own business. We know that ten million businesses today are women-owned, and it is a wonderfully creative way to live. Many of the women running these businesses have dropped out of corporate America because they're tired of bumping up against the current hierarchical paradigm. Sometimes, in some organizations it just gets too tough to try to have both a family and a corporate career.

If you're in your middle thirties and you have to leave Sunday night to call on a client Monday morning—Sunday after Sunday after Sunday—in order to meet those bottom-line results, you're going to start thinking about another way to have a business career, and that's through entrepreneurship. And running your own

business is also a way for women who feel excluded from the network—there's that informal barrier again—to begin to form their own network.

FF: How then do we change what you call the “current hierarchical paradigm?”

JRE: That's the challenge, and I think women have a responsibility to other women. We have a responsibility to stand up and speak up on the issue that there simply are not enough women at the top of corporations. We have to help make women more visible. I do believe in the power of one. One person can move the needle, and I think every woman out there has to move the needle for herself—and then reach out and help another woman move it.

Of course, it's also up to the men at the top of corporations to a great extent. They need to give some latitude to women in the organization to balance life and work. Otherwise, women will continue to opt out, and corporations will lose out on some very, very rich talent.

Right now, the old hierarchical paradigm is still just being chipped away at. Let me paraphrase Joyce Fletcher of Simmons College and remind you that what she calls “the John Wayne image” dies slowly. But I am a strong believer that women in power can help to change that landscape.

FF: Does this mean that women should be checking out those lists of particularly family-friendly companies?

JRE: It's interesting: nobody publishes a list of the top ten companies for men to work at. And the fact is that there really is no pattern of satisfaction we can point to. Women certainly do not shun competition, but feeling excluded or not respected is not a satisfying way to live. You know, when asked to define success, men say “money and power,” while women answer “balance and sanity.” Women want to be influential in their careers, but more falls to them than to men in terms of child care and eldercare. So if they can't find the satisfaction and the respect to balance their lives in a particular company, they will leave—often, as I've said, to start their own business.

FF: How important is it to have an MBA for all this?

JRE: Essential. Companies today want people with all the criteria they demand. That includes the advanced degree. It tells companies that you know how to think strategically and to approach problem-solving methodically. And having achieved the MBA also says that you're competitive and can work hard, that you set high standards, that you're ready to be a serious player in the business world.

It's equally essential—more so, really—if your aim is to start your own business. In that case, the MBA is a mark of legitimacy for investors and suppliers, and it's the training needed to make it all happen.

FF: What about managing your own career, a subject you've written and lectured about widely?

JRE: The reality is that an individual has to go into a career today with a dedication to the job she's been hired to do, to bettering the company that hired her, and to making sure she's always on the lookout for her next move up—both internally and externally. It was always this way, but in the 21st century, the pace is so much faster. Companies will continue to merge and change over and over. It's a game of musical chairs, and you have to stay one step ahead to make sure you have a seat when the music stops.

If you're in the private banking division of a big bank, for example, and you read in the newspaper that the bank thinks private banking will only constitute two percent of its business in the coming years, that's a hint: find something else to do in that organization or take your career to a firm in which your area is a core business. You can't rely on anyone else for this; it's your career, and it's your responsibility to manage it.

FF: What advice would you offer a young woman thinking about a business career?

JRE: First of all, test it out a little bit. Even before you embark on an advanced degree, test it out with people whose judgment you value. Check out different fields. Maybe go to a conference in a field you think you might like; see what the milieu is like, what the people are like, ask what the work is like. We often don't know what we don't know, so it makes sense to put yourself in the arena and see if it feels good.

I would also say, to the extent you can, think long-term. I know if you're working, for example, and you face getting an MBA in six years at night, that sounds pretty daunting, but it's really not so long when you project the long-term career those six years might give you. Try that old trick of imagining yourself at 80 and writing a letter to yourself listing what you're proud of and the regrets you have. You don't want to look back and wish you had taken the time to get the MBA after all.

Focus on what will fulfill you, not drain you. You want not just a job when you seek a career; you want a way of life that's going to be enriching.

And I would add: start now to think how you will help and support other women when you're in a position of influence. From up there, you have a responsibility to reach down and pull up someone else.