

# When Work Doesn't Work Anymore

by Elizabeth Perle McKenna  
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Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

What happens when a middle-aged woman, "successful" in her corporate career and apparently "having it all", one day realizes that something went wrong in the way she planned her life, that having it all is not being who she really is or who she wants to be, that work, which had been the main vector throughout, "doesn't work" for her anymore?

This book is about a gender and generational crisis, that of the women baby boom generation, having virtually made it through the men's circle, apparently reaching the same powers at work, and one day, finding out that there is more to their identities than what they do. In a very light, narrative tone, McKenna relates her experience as a modern, corporate woman, who at one point in her life, turns back and reassesses the choices she has made throughout her career and the values and principles that have guided these choices. This book is interesting in the sense that it relates to all corporate women in the western world in general, while simultaneously drawing a critical eye on the American work ethics, and the role of women throughout. The author's initial analysis revolves around a conflict which she expresses as a "tear between a life built around who we thought we should be as career women and who we have become in the process of our lives" (p.15). In the latter part of the book, however, this conflict takes on an increasingly male/female note: "Women work under a no-win paradox: We need our work to be fully realized as women but in order to do the work, we have to silence a good deal of ourselves" (p.69).

What the author means by "good deal of ourselves" is that feminine part which, according to her, has not yet been integrated into the work culture. She diagnoses this sudden deep dissatisfaction with work, and that of all other women she has interviewed, as a biased definition of success that these women have grown up with, and have not reconsidered for a variety of reasons. Success had been to them success on men's terms, thereby excluding, even repressing, the female side, or values traditionally identified with feminism.

McKenna skillfully challenges this situation by persuasively suggesting that other values could be integrated into the present system, and by so doing, could most probably ameliorate the work atmosphere, increase efficiency and productivity, and give women as well as men more satisfaction and contentment. The problem, she says, is that "women compounded their lives by adding the male-defined success identity onto their female identities" (p.10).

Today however, in a changing corporate climate, it has become increasingly difficult for women to live up to the work ethics they had grown used to, and this change has been a trigger in most of the lives of the women interviewed. Changing personal values paralleled with changing work conditions have dangerously carved out wide disparities between individual and professional identities. This gap has caused women depression, loss of self-confidence, drastic changes in their lives, or, as the author did, has driven them to resign suddenly at career height, not always grasping the reasons for doing so. Of course, reactions vary according to individuals but also to financial means. As the author points out, work is first and foremost carried out for basic survival, and not all people can afford to make the same choices as the author's.

It is important to note that this is not one more feminist book about women at work. It is a woman's response to contemporary changes in the corporate world. As McKenna points out, the feminist struggle opened the way for her generation to become working women, but now, this generation has to integrate its own values into the system, so that success is no longer defined according to men's values but also to women's. In order to take that path, the author finds it necessary as a first step for "women [to] replace their emotional, psychological and even financial dependence on our work identities with a more porous, broad and flexible system of identifying themselves. One that prizes balance over attainment, meaning over status, inclusion over hierarchy, the product over the process" (p.184).

Although this book is addressed quite exclusively to western working women, it does provide an insight on changing values and the way these affect women. Whether values are changing, in the Arab countries, to the benefit or detriment of women, (and they seem to be dangerously moving towards the latter), it is important to be able to integrate our own values into the surrounding system, and it is necessary for women to work and live, without denying any part of themselves.