

By Jodi Lipson



gen at work are we there yet?

“You can be anything you want to be.” That’s the message Julie Eddleman heard growing up. She believed it, and today she’s climbing the corporate ladder at a global conglomerate. Many Gen X women got that same message: Put your mind to it and it’s yours.

In contrast to their mothers, many young women *can* and *do* pursue any job in any field, often experiencing no career restrictions or obstacles because of their sex. Still, GenXers won’t declare the victory of gender equity at work.

Julie Eddleman epitomizes the generation at its “you-can-have-it-all” best. “My parents allowed [me and my three sisters] to think we could do whatever we want to do, and they gave us a stable foundation,” she says. With a master’s degree from Purdue University, Eddleman became an executive at Procter & Gamble.

In her 33 years, she perceived being treated differently than males just once—in sixth grade, when only boys could play bas-

ketball at the playground across the street. When she protested, a boy taunted, “Girls can’t play basketball. I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back.” She accepted his challenge and beat him 15 to 2.

Eddleman has watched the percentage of women in business schools rise. Workplaces like Procter & Gamble, she says, reflect that shift. Statistics confirm that more younger women than ever before become business people, entrepreneurs, lawyers, and doctors. About 75 percent of women ages 25 to 34 work compared to 40 percent of their mothers’ generation. At work, Gen X women break through to upper levels.

While Eddleman acknowledges the discrimination women face, she concludes, “We’ve made a ton of progress.”

Leslie Essien, 34, also notes the positive trend.

“I see more women—including African American women—gainfully employed. I see more women as CEOs, entrepreneurs,” she says. “That’s exciting and encouraging.” She, like Eddleman, attributes that progress to the opportunities afforded in education.

But Essien, an office manager, also agrees that women face discrimination.

In 1990 she left school to get married and then quickly realized she wasn’t meant to be a stay-at-home wife. Essien went back to work in sales and domestic work—traditionally female jobs, even among Gen X. Service jobs bring additional costs.

“I could not make it working \$8 an hour here and there, two or three jobs. I was killing myself,” says Essien. Women earn only 76 cents to every dollar men earn, in part attributable to occupational segregation.

“For the most part,” continues Essien, “there are still issues with race and gender.” The workplace is still dominated by an older generation of white men who hold traditional ideals about business—“the people in power, in places of influence, sitting on boards, in upper-level management,” she says. They are the people making decisions about hiring and salaries and promotions.

Essien’s not sitting back. She is pursuing a degree in anthropology/sociology and African American studies and plans to develop a nonprofit center to teach families to understand and respect diverse cultures.

Illustration by J. Clint La Follette

Success Strategies

From Julie Eddleman, Leslie Essien, and Lindsey Pollak

Networking

“There’s still an old boys’ network,” says Julie Eddleman.

Lindsey Pollak has found, however, that women aren’t always comfortable networking. “Men are quick to play golf with their buddies, but a lot of women feel like they’re using people,” she says. “When you’re genuine and qualified, you’re not.”

Students can attend events like the National Conference for College Women Student Leaders. Pollak also suggests, “Join the associations, go to events, talk to everyone you know.” Women have additional opportunities, she says, such as AAUW and the National Association for Female Executives, where she consults.

Negotiating

Young women, says Pollak, aren’t earning as much as young men. She attributes this in part to a lack of negotiating skills.

Even when women do negotiate, they realize a lower return from their bargaining efforts. According to theshadownegotiation.com, when men negotiate an entry salary or a raise, they receive on average 4.3 percent more than the initial offer. By contrast, when women negotiate, they realize only 2.7 percent more. Over the span of a career, this gap translates into a 35 percent wage differential that can be traced back to starting salaries.

Mentoring

“She is a woman of integrity,” says Leslie Essien of her mentor. “She has wealth of knowledge and a great deal of wisdom.” The two met when Essien worked at the NAACP, and they established a professional relationship. Now Essien talks with her mentor every two months or so. “I find out how to handle challenges on my job and pursue my goals,” she says.

“Organizations like AAUW are important, groups that provide mentoring opportunities and guidance,” adds Essien.

Changing Jobs

People don’t expect to hold just one job throughout their lifetime, according to Pollak. “When you’re looking for jobs, assessing your career, women no longer think, ‘Oh, I’ll be at IBM for 30 years.’”

Women can go into the workforce with this new mindset, adjusting their work lives as they go. Some of those changes will depend on your life situation, Pollak says, “whether you’re negotiating kids, establishing your career, or established.”

A critical difference in generations is that more women today start their own businesses or choose careers where they can enjoy more flexible schedules


Balancing Family and Work

“I work too much. There’s no question,” says Eddleman. She works 12-hour days, 60-hour weeks, she says, because her partner is understanding and their 17-year-old “probably would rather see us less.”

“Most of my friends are in traditional families, with a wife, husband, and two kids, and it’s a huge challenge for women to figure out a balance,” she says. “The women are still doing the majority of cooking, cleaning, and housework.”

She plans to have more children, and when she does, she says she will work less. Still, she doesn’t know if she would have achieved the same success working a shorter workday.

Several women at high levels in her company do lead balanced lives and can serve as her role models. The highest-ranking woman has two children and, says Eddleman, “probably works 8 and a half or 9 hours a day and restricts global travel.” Notably, these women at her office have nannies, which are not an option for the majority of working women.

For the rest of us, juggling skills are an undeniable asset, and women continue to seek other solutions to balance family and work. 



FROM TOP:

Julie Eddleman, Manager of Media Strategy and Planning, Procter & Gamble; speaker, 2003 National Conference for College Women Student Leaders

Leslie Essien, student, Guilford College; workshop presenter, 2003 AAUW Convention; member, AAUW Student Advisory Board; panelist, AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund campus outreach

Lindsey Pollak, co-author, *Women for Hire: The Ultimate Guide to Getting a Job*; speaker, 2003 AAUW Convention