



## *Conversations with the Experts*

### **Striving for Flexibility, Diversity, and Balance: A Glance at Work-Life Issues in Norway**



**Ragnhild Sohlberg, Ph.D.**

**Bio:** Ragnhild Sohlberg, Ph.D. is Vice President, Corporate Center, Norsk Hydro ASA in Oslo, Norway (Norway's largest industrial, multinational company), as well as an Adjunct Professor at the Norwegian School of Management. Though originally from Norway, Dr. Sohlberg obtained most of her education in the United States. She got her B.A. and M.A. in Economics at The University of Wisconsin and her M.Phil. and Ph.D. at The Rand Graduate School of Policy Sciences in California, where she studied NATO manpower issues and wrote her dissertation on NATO ground forces. In the late 70s and early 80s, Dr. Sohlberg was a Professor at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA where she did research for the Pentagon. Before returning to Europe in 1982, she worked for a year and a half in Sweden at the National Defense Research Institute. She then came to Norway to work in industry at A/S Norsk Elektrisk & Brown Boveri and later, at The Royal Norwegian Council for Scientific and Technical Research (NTNF). In 1985, she joined Norsk Hydro, where she became the 1<sup>st</sup> woman to reach the level of Vice President in the company's history. Since 1985, she has had 60 different appointments in Norway and abroad, including serving on the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee, 1900-1994.

**Editors Note:** Dr. Sohlberg has been described as "worldly and reflective"; her perspective "shaped by her U.S. education, by motherhood and grandmotherhood, and by impressive careers in both academia and business." (Excerpted from: Fishman, Charles. (1999, July). "The way to enough." *Fast Company Magazine*, 26, p. 160 ) As the first woman to have reached the level of Vice President at a major Norwegian company, she has been quite influential in the promotion of flexibility, diversity, and balance in workplaces in both Norway and the European Union. We had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Sohlberg about some of the work-family issues that Norwegians are currently facing.

### **An Interview with Ragnhild Sohlberg, Ph.D.**

Dr. Sohlberg views the world in terms of balance and in terms of the optimum allocation over time of scarce, valuable resources. Flexibility, diversity, and balance, she says, all serve a business purpose. Ultimately, they are strategies to make workplaces more effective.

Norwegian workers enjoy progressive work/life benefits, but because the culture rewards long working hours and has developed a lifestyle of hectic "free" time with multiple activities for all family members, many parents find it difficult to achieve sustainable balance in their lives.

One significant barrier to change is the drive among Norwegians to maintain their material living standard that has resulted from the lucrative offshore oil and gas sector. In many families, both fathers and mothers are in the workforce, bringing two incomes into the household. Their jobs tend to consume much of their personal time as companies striving to compete in a 24-hour global economy require their employees to put in long hours, says Dr. Ragnhild Sohlberg.

"Families have gotten used to the high material living standard which is difficult to give up," Sohlberg says. "Along with other industrialized nations, we are thing-rich and time-poor."

Women began entering the paid workforce in large numbers during the 1970s, when the women's rights movement led to a higher proportion of women in colleges and universities and in all sectors of employment, in particular in government and Parliament. As a group, Norwegian women are now on the average slightly higher educated than men, with 60 percent of university students being female. However, there has been a cost to these professional and

educational gains, Sohlberg says, noting that women still tend to be “triple-workers – husband, children, paid work.” As the population ages, an increasing proportion may have to spend time taking care of elderly relatives as well.

As a result of the time pressure, a greater number of women are choosing to work part time. However, men tend to work longer hours.

Sohlberg, who for more than 20 years has followed the changing age distribution in Norway, Europe and the US, says she is concerned that young people who see their parents laboring long hours will choose other, less demanding careers. When the baby-boomers retire, there won't be enough workers in their fields to replace them. Young people are showing signs that they crave greater work/life balance in their lives. The majority say they prefer time off from the job instead of paid overtime. When looking for a job, many query potential employers about their family-friendly policies, and 80 percent of new fathers take at least the four weeks of paternity leaves.

“Another barrier lies with companies that interpret what is needed to compete in a 24-hour globalized world, is to “exploit” their employees at the expense of families and personal time,” says Sohlberg. “This is clearly an unsustainable practice and not profitable in the longer run.”

One solution to the time bind is for companies to institute flex-time in what Sohlberg calls a “win-win” framework, one that will result in a more effective workplace and a better work/personal life balance for all.

As a whole, Norway is far ahead of other countries in terms of flexible work time and family welfare benefits. Unlike in some European countries where women are reluctant to take time away from their careers to bear children, Norwegian women have up to one year paid maternity leave and can extend this on an unpaid basis and thereafter continue their career, normally without repercussions. Also, when a child is sick in Norway, a parent can stay home. Many people have home offices, allowing them to fit work in between family time.

“A lot of people have complete home offices in addition to the ‘office-office’, which I also do. It is also part of the reason why I don't get so tired because I can schedule my day more according to the tasks at hand and how inspired I feel,” Sohlberg says. “The young people can schedule it according to their family. I spoke to some men who are now fathers and they go to work in the morning when their kids go to school and then they come home when the children come home. They are with their family for awhile and then continue working at home, from the home office - - something many women certainly also do. This type of flexibility is healthy for the person and it is also very good for the children. Then you can have a win-win situation. However, this requires self-discipline to avoid working too much!”

Not every worker has the same degree of job flexibility because it is up to individual units within companies to set their own policies. Sohlberg points out that heavy morning traffic suggests that too many people still work traditional hours at their workplace.

Toward reducing working hours, she recommends organizations identify the “time thieves,” including too many and unproductive meetings, ineffective use or application of technology and the associated de-professionalization of work, ineffective organization of work, and unproductive time in traffic jams to and from work.

Looking ahead, companies should do what they can to ease the pace of work, otherwise they risk losing good workers who opt to retire before the official age of 67. There is talk of raising the retirement age to stave off an expected labor shortage, but Sohlberg says that won't help the situation if those senior employees are unmotivated and unproductive. Instead, industry, companies in general and the public sector should investigate restructuring career patterns, or ladders, to include time-limited leadership assignments combined with time for reflection and for updating of skills and knowledge. This will help ensure that people remain enthusiastic about their jobs and effective throughout their working lives.

Sohlberg, 66, says she herself hopefully is an example of the importance of allowing ample time for each phase of life, including family, education and career. She stayed home in her 20s, was a student and single mother of two in her 30s, and began her career while in her 40s.

“I have been ‘out there’ for maybe 25 years. So, why shouldn't I still be going strong?” she says.



