Facing the consequences

There is still much more to learn about the consequences of women's family choices for their careers. We know that the choice to have children has a much greater impact on women's careers—whether wages, promotions, or authority—than simply getting married or caring for parents. And we know that the effects of these choices are often long-term and indirect, reducing women's wages and opportunities through how they affect subsequent decisions about whether and how much to work.

But we do not know nearly enough about all the possible penalties women might pay for certain family choices, nor do we know whether the consequences are greater or lesser than they used to be. One thing we do know, though, is that it's not just women who face these consequences. As Joyce Jacobsen points out (see page 16), anyone who behaves like a woman in the eyes of the organization—who takes time off for child-raising, works part-time, or displays less than complete devotion to the firm—will pay a price in terms of salary and advancement.

At the same time, Brenda Barnes' example demonstrates that it is possible to take significant time off from full-time work and still return to top leadership positions. Admittedly, she was not completely idle during those seven years; she served on six corporate boards and as interim president of a hospitality company. And neither is her experience by any means typical. Nonetheless, her path back to the executive suite shows that at least some women can do it all—even if they can't always do it all at once.