

**E-MAIL CONTRIBUTIONS****Cost-Benefit Analysis: Why the Pipeline will Always Leak**

CAROL ASHBY

There is a much more fundamental cause of the declining numbers of women as they advance in their career: an honest cost-benefit analysis of what we gain and what we lose from dedicating our lives to our professional career.

I have worked for 20 years as a research chemist for an R&D organization with a clearly stated Equal Employment Opportunity policy and my managerial line personally agrees with and follows this policy. I have achieved a satisfying level of professional success, including presenting four invited papers on my work last year. My comments are not based on bitterness over a thwarted career, but rather on a mostly positive personal experience.

Because of my professional dedication, I delayed starting a family until I was 39. I now have a 6-year-old son and a 4-year old daughter. Having children has radically altered my perception of what is most important in my life. To thrive physically and emotionally, children need to know that they are loved beyond measure by their parents, and for children, love is spelled "time". They can't understand why Mommy would work late all the time if she loves them. To them, that translates into "Mommy loves her work more than she loves me." I have a wonderfully supportive husband who does more than his 50%, but kids still want Mommy there when they are sick or play soccer or sing in the school program. So I am torn between my love of science and my love for my family.

Every professional woman with children is faced with this choice: do I put my career or my family first? Many vote for their family. The result is a downgrading of professional ambition and the pipeline begins to leak. Since many female scientists are married to well-paid scientists or engineers, there is minimal financial incentive to keep them from following their hearts in making the choice. No one ever says on their death bed, "I wish I had ten more seminal publications".

Perhaps we should not be so upset that the numbers decrease. We should continue our attempts to improve the opportunities so that those who choose to remain totally committed to their careers can realize their full potential. However, the fullest expression of opportunity for women is for us to be able to freely choose which path we will take.

Carol I.H. Ashby  
Sandia National Laboratories  
USA  
[ciashby@sandia.gov](mailto:ciashby@sandia.gov)

The author wishes to point out that the opinions expressed do not reflect an official position of the organisation she works for.