

Women Head for the Top

Efforts are being made to promote women to top executive posts. While many remain frustrated, citing lower pay and discrimination, they're not about to give up.

By Lynn Wasnak

It's hard to define a transition when you're in the middle of it. That's why it's not easy to measure the status of women in Ohio's workforce. Data is coming in, but things are moving so fast that statistics, especially from the Department of Labor, have an annoying habit of lagging behind progress so much as to be virtually meaningless.

Despite that, we will show you what some (but not all) Ohio business women are thinking, doing, asking for—and in some cases, receiving.

Thanks to a 1986 study by the Women's Division of the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services (OBES), we know that 53 percent of all Ohio women were employed or looking for work in 1985, compared with about 38 percent in 1970. Women hold 44 percent of Ohio jobs. Sixty-five percent of all married couples in Ohio are two-income families, up from 36.7 percent in 1970.

The U.S. Dept. of Labor reports that most of these women work because of economic need. Nearly two-thirds of all women in the nation's labor force in March, 1985, were single, divorced, widowed, separated, or had husbands whose annual earnings were less than \$15,000.

Unfortunately, the OBES study shows no major improvement in pay status for Ohio women as opposed to those nationwide. Women in Ohio largely work in low-paying sales, service and clerical positions, and continue to earn 65 percent of a man's yearly earnings. On the average, Ohio women who have attended college earn the same money as men who have only an elementary school education.

"Women are flooding the work force as waitresses, nurses' aides, and workers at McDonald's," says Judith Sealander, women's history professor at Wright State University in Dayton. "A large number of women have fallen right off the economic ladder into abject poverty, especially single women with children," she adds.

But this is not a situation unique to Ohio. "I don't believe there are any problems that Ohio business women have that are not national issues," says Bea Wolper, a partner in the Columbus law firm of Emens, Hurd, Kegler and Ritter. Wolper is co-founder of the Women's Business Board.

Cleveland's Karen Nussbaum, executive director of 9to5, the National Association of Working Women, agrees. She says the 12,000 members of her

organization (1,000 in Ohio) still want “pay, promotions and respect,” and that their concerns are national in scope.

Nussbaum also founded a labor union for clerical workers, District 925, separate from the 9to5 organization. It presently represents about 2,000 Ohio women, all of whom joined in the past five years. “I don’t think we’ve lost a single election [for union representation] in Ohio,” says Nussbaum.

She believes the top issues for women are pay equity, work/family issues such as child care and parental leave, and automation/technological change. The first two issues are obvious, but why is automation singled out? “Most office workers will be using automated equipment in the next five years,” says Nussbaum. “The change from traditional to automated clerical jobs is most often done by increasing the skill to perform the job, but lowering the pay.”

She stresses that her group does not oppose automation, but wants operators to be encouraged to learn the full capacity of the equipment, rather than be limited to performing an isolated task. Also, those who add to skills and responsibilities should receive higher pay.

“I wish management would understand the real wealth that employers have in their clerical workforce,” Nussbaum adds. “One major complaint among our members is that young men are hired in off the street to be their supervisors, and that the clericals are expected to train them.” To not promote from within “is a tremendous underutilization of current employees,” Nussbaum adds. “It creates a lot of bitterness.”

She believes the worst industries for women are “banks and insurance companies. That’s where pay is lowest, where working conditions tend to be most rigid.”

Women fare better in corporate headquarters, or places where unionized employees set the standard that is then applied to clerical workers. High-tech companies also get high ratings for treatment of clericals, she says.

But in Ohio, some of the highest-ranking women executives are found in banks and insurance companies. In addition to Karen Horn and Katherine Bryan, whose profiles accompany this article, there are many more women in finance industries moving steadily through training programs on their way up. Gem Savings Corp. of Dayton lists 18 women vice presidents. Mary Ann Overhold of Cincinnati is vice president and general counsel for Union Central Life insurance Co., and other Ohio insurance companies are moving women forward as well.

Then there are women like Zuni Corkerton, a founder of RefCheck Inc., a Columbus firm that verifies resume information for employers. Before she became an entrepreneur she was director of employee relations at Bank Ohio, and was responsible for the bank’s affirmative action plan. She was also on the executive board of the National Association of Banking Affirmative Action Directors.

“Banks are federal contractors,” says Corkerton. “That means they are aware of their responsibility to promote women and minorities. I think for the most part, banks are doing something about it,” she says.

Top to Bottom

Other occupations also employ Ohio women in both the low-pay, low-status jobs and in the executive suite. These include advertising, airlines, real estate, retailing and food service.

Gloria Weber, manager of investor and public relations at Comair Inc. in Cincinnati says the airline business has many opportunities for women. “We have a woman vice president, several women company directors, and women station managers in seven cities,” she says. “As a service business, airlines use people skills, where women excel. We also have women pilots and captains,” she adds.

Weber was self-employed as a vice president in a market research firm before she joined Comair. She stresses many traits women can bring to the corporate environment. “They seem to be better at working with details and organizing than men are,” she says. “They make people feel at ease. They’re more considerate. They reach out to other people and have empathy. It’s probably all conditioning but if it’s there we might as well use it,” she suggests.

Ohio retailing employs many executive women, including Verna Gibson, president of The Limited stores division of The Limited Inc., based in Columbus; Phyllis Sewell, senior vice president of Federated Department Stores Inc., Cincinnati; Barbara Barkan, president of Keidan’s Jewelers, a nine-store Toledo chain, and many more.

Another industry that has offered opportunities to women is real estate. Nadine Raffurty, group executive-development for Linclay Corp., Cincinnati, is a fine example. She started with Linclay nine years ago as a marketing secretary. Now 33, Raffurty oversees the development of Linclay’s commercial property—from acquiring a piece of ground, through the design and marketing phase, to the financial analysis, property loans, and ultimate sales.

“I don’t think about it a lot, but I have a pretty strong voice in the division’s plans for the future, as well as having a voice in planning for the company overall,” she says. “I’ve been fortunate. I stepped into a company when it was young and just grew with it,” she adds.

Raffurty is unusual in that she has prospered in the construction and financial side of the real estate business. “Typically what’s assumed when a woman is in real estate is that she’s in residential, selling homes,” says Raffurty. “But more and more I see that the women in marketing are natural salespeople, and are very successful in leasing office space, too.”

Great Weld

Raffurty has also seen women infiltrate the construction crews. “We recently had a female welder on the steel erection crew,” she says. “It was great.”

Services businesses in the U.S. offer the most opportunities to women, employing 84 percent compared to 16 percent in manufacturing. (Ohio’s figures parallel those figures.) As Ohio leans more toward a service based economy, more opportunities for women will surface.

But there will always be those women who make their own opportunities: the self-starters and creative types who want to run their own show. At least one out of four

new businesses in Ohio are owned by women, says Wolper. According to *American Demographics* magazine, by 1995 half of all new businesses in the U.S. will be launched by women.

Wolper believes Ohio offers two distinct advantages for women business owners. One is the Women's Business Resource Program at the Ohio Department of Development. That organization, headed by Melody Bean, works with women business owners and entrepreneurs. In addition to holding seminars and offering advice, it packages loans from state and other financial sources, provides procurement information, and lobbies for legislation that affects women-owned businesses. In 1986 the program responded to 1,500 inquiries for Ohio business owners.

"The program is terrific for start-ups," says Wolper. "There really aren't many programs in the country as good as this."

In addition, "Ohio is in the forefront of any state in director liability protection," Wolper notes. "That helps women business owners get outside directors on their boards."

What is the motivation behind women's entrepreneurship? For Corkerton, her decision to leave Bank Ohio was prompted by a need "to see more direct compensation for my efforts that just doesn't happen in corporations," she says.

Constance Gorman, a Cincinnati mail-order entrepreneur, says she was "too independent to climb the corporate ladder" in the chemical industry where she worked. She also believes women have a tougher time getting ahead because "a man will more likely chose a man as his protege. They share much more in common." It's hard to find a mentor in an industrial-type business, she believes. "Men are very reluctant to have lunch with a woman associate, or meet with her outside the office boundaries. They're afraid of gossip," she says.

It's not altruism that challenges corporations to become more aware of disaffected women workers. From now through the mid-1990s, two-thirds of the 15 million new workers in the U.S. will be women. If the predicted labor shortage of the 1990s occurs, women will be very much in demand, and companies with progressive policies will get the best of the female work force.

Business benefits designed to attract and retain competent corporate women include child care assistance, maternity leave, time off for adoption, job sharing programs, and more flexible schedules to permit family problems to be solved during work hours. There is also a growing willingness for companies to employ married couples, and to help with the spouse job-search in relocation situations.

Yet despite these efforts, many Ohio working women remain frustrated with the status quo:

A 27 year old market analyst says "Putting up a statement about equal opportunity is a joke." When her boss prepares his monthly highlights report, he always mentions the one male analyst on the team, and invariably ignores the three women who do the same job. "I was told I was hired partly due to my typing ability," she complains.

A 44-year-old law librarian earning \$40,000 annually says, “My directors never tell me I’m doing a good job. And men in my position would be paid more than \$40,000.”

A 40-year-old publications manager says “I feel I am in a pink ghetto where I have a manager’s title but no authority in my role, and little chance to advance. My company can sit back happily because they have a ‘woman in management’.”

A 32-year-old data processing manager is glad she took a drastic cut in income, from \$60,000 to \$28,000 to leave private employment with a computer firm for a job in city government. “I was a vice president, but the workaholic style was too stressful after I had my son,” she says. “Business must recognize that people can’t work 60-hour weeks all the time, and shouldn’t be putting in those hours unless there’s a tight deadline,” she states.

A 31-year-old senior product manager clearly loves her marketing job, but is uncertain of her future. “Equal opportunity has assisted my advancement,” she says, “but now that I’m ready to enter senior management, I’m concerned that being female may be a detriment.”

A 43-year-old advertising/public relations manager says her personal life affected her work choice. “I stayed in Ohio rather than taking good job offers in Chicago and Dallas, because of my husband, kids, and property we own,” she says.

A 43-year-old systems analyst claims that “Being female slowed my progress. Taking time out for maternity leaves at the ‘wrong’ time, career-wise, has caused career stagnation.”

And there is poignancy in the words of a 41-year-old display designer who likes the small company where she works, “because anyone who takes initiative and responsibility can move up.” Though she has strong ambitions for her career, “My life is my business,” she says. “My social life is very curtailed. My children have gone to live with their father.”

It’s debatable whether these frustrations and the resulting poor morale are felt more by corporate women, or if they are truly common to all.

“The biggest problem of women business owners and corporate women is the same, though it is expressed differently,” says Wolper. “It’s the problem of balancing your life. Women who work full time have pressures unlike their male counterparts, balancing the responsibility for the job or company ownership and the responsibilities at home. From what I see, that is still the prime issue,” she says.

The best-programmed computer can’t produce a solution to the working woman’s major dilemma. It can’t transform society overnight.

“As working women, we’re coming out of the ice age,” says Clare Walsh, a public relations entrepreneur from Cincinnati. “We’re in a new era, but there’s still a long way to go.”