

BOOK REVIEW

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Ellen Ernst Kossek and Brenda A. Lautsch. (2008). *CEO of Me: Creating a Life That Works in the Flexible Job Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Wharton School Publishing. 176 pages.

How to better articulate work and life is not a new quest. Advice abounds. Brooke Derr (2002) offered five effective strategies to do so (alternating, outsourcing, bundling, tech-flexing, and simplifying); Cali Williams Yost (2004) designed a three-step process for finding the right “fit” (change your mindset, create a strategy, and negotiate); and Brad Harrington and Tim Hall (2007) identified two meta competencies to navigate work and life through protean careers (identity and adaptability). So what are the distinct contributions of Ellen Ernst Kossek and Brenda Lautsch’s *CEO of Me*?

The first is the typology of three different “flexstyles” that constitute the core of the book. In a noteworthy effort to think about work and life in a positive way and true to the concept of enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Rothbard, 2001), Kossek and Lautsch move away from the balancing-act rhetoric. They observe that, after all, work is part of life. They propose the term *flexstyle*, which they define as a strategy to handle one’s life as well as an understanding of what is driving one’s work and life relationships.

Basing their research on hundreds of interviews conducted in the United States and Canada, Kossek and Lautsch identify three different flexstyles: the *integrators*, who physically and psychologically blend work

and life; the *separators*, who maintain barriers; and the *volleyers*, who switch back and forth between integration and separation. As the authors explain, flexstyles are not personal preferences, but behaviors that stem from personal preferences and the resources and constraints of each individual’s specific circumstances. Some of the interviewees chose their flexstyle, while others cope with one that has been imposed on them, notably when they do not have access to flexible working arrangements.

The importance of control has long been noted in work-life research, as underlined, for instance, by Staines and Pleck (1983) and Karasek and Theorell (1990). One of the strengths of *CEO of Me* is that it steps away from the mainstream idea that flexibility is all good and that flexible jobs automatically benefit employees. Flexibility also can be a trap and it requires monitoring—what Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate (2000) have termed *boundary work*. Kossek and Lautsch elaborated on this idea in their previous research on telecommuting, noting that teleworkers have to face the endless challenge that work and family are always available to them (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). Therefore, there is an “in control” and an “out of control” configuration for each flexstyle: integrators in control are “fusion lovers,” while those who are out of control are “reactors”; separators are “firsters” (work

or family first) or “captives”; and volleyers are “quality timers” or “job warriors.”

Fusion lovers blend work and life and multitask in response to their own internal cues, such as “the need to clear one’s head between projects,” or to another external cue that they welcome. Reactors, on the other hand, do so because they have no other choice—for example, the single mom with no support system who has to pick up her son from day care when he is sick—or because they haven’t been able to design a more suitable flexstyle, such as the programmer who writes code with his two-year-old on his lap. For the volleyers, the very task of managing work and life is a third major life task in itself.

The authors introduce each flexstyle with real-life vignettes, pinpointing the underlying articulation of work and life, summarizing the pros and cons of each style, and providing assessment tools so that readers can identify their own operating mode. The format is very interactive, inviting readers to make selections that affect the course of the narrative. Once they have identified their flexstyle in Chapter 2, they are invited to read the corresponding chapter on trade-offs of the chosen flexstyle and assess whether it is currently satisfying. Depending on the self-assessment score, readers may be advised to read the chapter on another flexstyle that might be more suitable. This combination of real-life stories, self-assessment tools, and a realistic approach to change turns a discussion of an old topic into an engaging, personal, and interactive guide for handling life.

Another strength of the book lies in its endorsement of a life-cycle approach. Flexstyle is a dynamic concept. Major life changes require a reexamination of one’s flexstyle to ensure it fits well with new circumstances and people, as demonstrated in Erin’s case study. Once an early-career work-first, Erin now has two children and is overwhelmed by the misfit between the high-pressure pattern of overachievement that once used to work for her and her new needs and aspirations. As the authors explain, unlearning one’s habits is part of the change process needed to realize personal and professional goals.

Kossek and Lautsch provide comprehensive coaching on how to monitor one’s flexstyle and achieve a better fit with one’s current environment. They suggest changes that everyone can make, tailored to each flexstyle, and explain how to make these changes sustainable by engaging the stakeholders both at home and, in particular, at work. Kossek and Lautsch explore three options: gaining control, reducing the disadvantages of one’s flexstyle, and exploring new flexstyles. Specific examples and summary tables help readers grasp the range of possibilities. For example, quality timers who wish to separate more so that they can be more efficient at work and more relaxed at home can try to work set hours each day, handle personal matters at the beginning or end of the day, have separate work and personal e-mail accounts, and resist the urge to check work-related e-mails after the workday has ended. Readers may also be guided and inspired by Larry’s documented and successful request to work from home one day a week, Jeff’s creative tools to structure emergency IT support in the weekends, and Sally’s talks with her family to build in personal time as she stepped down from an Ivy League university.

Highlighting the societal roots of the challenge of integrating work and personal life, Kossek and Lautsch note, “the media would have us think of the work-family conflict as an individual problem, but it is a collective issue” (p. 95). The case of Marian, an information technology consultant, demonstrates how difficulties can stem from the convergence of norms and values in the work and nonwork spheres. Marian manages her family as a business. She is disciplined, task-focused, and organized, as is the rest of the family. To Marian, “the keys to managing family and household commitments are the same as those required to manage one’s career” (p. 74). As a mother, Marian would probably recognize herself as a “manager of parenthood,” in Hochschild’s terms (1997, p. 232). Marian’s words powerfully echo Kanter’s analysis of the transfer of professional norms into the family (1977): the division of “labor” into precise tasks that are planned in an efficient way and the

measurement of performance of children, parents, husbands, and wives against objective indicators such as school grades, income, cleanliness of house, and frequency of sexual intercourse. If readers find themselves ticking Marian's checklist for improved family management, then they are one step ahead in understanding the roots of their struggle: increasing similarities in working and loving processes (Kanter, 1977) that call for a redefinition of the sectors in our life and how to combine them.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the book espouses the American "habits of the heart" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996)—that is, the self-reliance, autonomy, freedom, and personal growth values that Bellah and his colleagues hold as core American tenets. Moreover, the flexstyle concept is distinctly individualistic in the sense that the person who follows a particular flexstyle is the one who decides how much time and effort to contribute to work and family. How then, one might wonder, would the flexstyle concept work in a collectivist setting? For instance, researchers have found that Asians are more inclined to work hard to ensure their family's well-being than to achieve personal goals (Poelmans et al., 2003). In Kossek and Lautsch's framework, are they integrators, even though they may set strict physical and psychological barriers between work and life?

Although the authors' typology is very convincing and grounded in robust fieldwork, their effort to keep their underlying message clear occasionally leads to oversimplification. In particular, separators are depicted as either work-firsters or family-firsters. Is there a dual-centric separator? Also, work and family may be less homogeneous than they are presented in the book. In some instances, people may think differently about given parts of each bucket. Might there not be an "everyday quality timer" flexstyle for those who do not use time cues, such as different days of the week or different times of the year, to decide between integration or separation but, rather, their relationship to the people and projects at hand? Everyday quality timers welcome

interruptions from their partners and children only, or from day care/school only, and keep focused on work if friends or other stakeholders are calling. They gladly work on some projects at night or during the weekend but not on others. Cognitive and affective processes regulating perceptions of urgency, control, and commitment could explain the coexistence of such contrasted flexstyles. Is this pattern too scarce or too complex, or is it a subcategory of the quality-timer flexstyle?

The second question that this book triggers is whether all individuals are equal with regards to choosing flexstyle. Certainly, the book acknowledges that not all workers experience "the flexible job age." Yet the focus on providing individual coaching advice as to one's flexstyle may leave some readers with a desire for a more in-depth sociological perspective.

Granted, flexible jobs are not only found in offices and the service sector. Indeed, Kossek and Lautsch found that some workers in manufacturing environments can envision flexibility. For example, Paul, a materials manager who would like to make phone calls and handle paperwork from home (p. 61). But strictly speaking, Paul cannot work from home. It is true that some employers have devised flexible work options and leave policies for hourly workers. But overall the working class has much less access to flexible jobs. How could the workers depicted in Williams's *One Sick Child Away From Being Fired* (2006) have a choice of flexstyles when they have little awareness about the Family and Medical Leave Act or existing employee assistance programs, cannot make a phone call at work, and are fired for being three minutes late?

All in all, however, anyone looking for an optimistic and constructive self-help book that offers insights into the relationship between work and life will find much of value in *CEO of Me*.

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