

LIFE'S WORK; Blueprints for Plugging a Brain Drain

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TOMORROW evening, representatives of 33 major companies will gather to play a game that is a cross between "Show and Tell" and "Can You Top This?" The occasion will be the Hidden Brain Drain Summit, the latest step by a task force whose work I have chronicled in this column over the last three years.

The hidden brain drain refers to what Sylvia Ann Hewlett calls "the highly qualified women and minorities who are either leaving the work force or languishing on the sidelines." Or, to quote an article I wrote in 2003 for The New York Times Magazine -- one that helped spur the work of the task force in the first place -- it refers to workers who are "opting out."

By way of full disclosure, I was involved in the early meetings of the group when Ms. Hewlett, who runs the Center for Work-Life Policy in New York, first assembled it three years ago. But I have not been a member since those early months, and it is as an interested observer that I've been watching how the task force has translated amorphous discontent into concrete policy and practice. Ms. Hewlett, an economist trained at Cambridge University in England, knows corporations change through appeals not to their conscience but to their bottom line.

As Melinda Wolfe, managing director of the Office of Global Leadership and Diversity at Goldman Sachs, which will be making a presentation at the meeting, said: "The business argument for doing this is sound. When we train an employee and then they leave, it is a loss of investment. And that will only be compounded in light of the overall shrinking of the work force, when retention will become even more important."

Joining the task force means pledging to develop ways to achieve retention, and over the next two days participating companies will present all they have invented. The assembled employers will represent 2.5 million employees operating in 150 countries and generating \$3 trillion in market capitalization, making them "a force to be reckoned with," Ms. Hewlett says.

Looked at through their lens, there are two keys to plugging the brain drain. First, companies have to persuade their employees to stay, which is why so many of the plans are aimed at showing women they have a bright future.

At Ernst & Young, for instance, the career paths of "high potential" female and minority employees are regularly reviewed by a "career watch" committee, to make sure these employees get the assignments that keep them on the partnership track. Billie Williamson,

who oversees the firm's work on gender strategy, says that when the program was developed three years ago, turnover among women was 5 percent higher than among men, but is now on par.

Ernst & Young also has created a "face book" of its female executives, showing a family photo of each and describing her career path and hobbies, making the point that women with families can get to the top. "I don't wear on my sleeve that I've got one daughter and two stepchildren," Ms. Williamson says. "This is a way our young women can say, 'I'm kind of like Billie, so it's realistic that I can be a partner, too.' "

At Lehman Brothers, attention is being given to a common conundrum: flexible work arrangements are required to retain women, but many will not ask for them because there is a stigma associated with a benefit seen as applicable only to women. So the company is hoping to redefine flexible work not as a life versus work issue, but as a national security plan.

Lehman, which lost use of its Wall Street headquarters on 9/11, is running a pilot program in which a test group of both men and women are asked to work from home once a week, testing remote technologies to be used in a natural disaster, pandemic or terrorist attack. "Given it's a gender-neutral exercise with a well-accepted business purpose, working remotely becomes less of a women's issue," says Anne R. Erni, chief diversity officer at Lehman.

Keeping women from opting out is only half the challenge, however, and that brings up the second key to halting the brain drain: helping smooth the re-entry for those who have left and want to return. Goldman Sachs is one of several companies with a plan to actively recruit such women. Its first daylong seminar last month attracted nearly 100 participants.

It is too soon to tell how many of those invited guests will become Goldman employees, says Elana Weinstein, vice president for global leadership and diversity, just as it is too soon to tell whether the number of female partners will continue to rise at Ernst & Young and the number of men who telecommute will increase at Lehman.

"That will be the real test," Ms. Weinstein says, of whether plans like these are a true rethinking of the workplace or merely window dressing.

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week.
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