Sylvia Ann Hewlett is an economist and the founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy where she directs the “Hidden Brain Drain” – a taskforce of 34 global companies committed to fully realize female and minority talent over the lifespan.

She is the author of six critically acclaimed non-fiction books, including When the Bough Breaks (winner of a Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Prize), The War Against Parents (co-authored with Cornel West), Creating a Life (named as one of the best books of 2002 by Business Week) and, most recently, Off-Ramps and On-Ramps (Harvard Business School Press). She is the co-author of Harvard Business Review articles “Leadership in Your Midst: Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives,” and “Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek.” Her articles have also appeared in the New York Times, the Financial Times, and the International Herald Tribune.

Many of the forward-thinking policies described in her new book Off-Ramps and On-Ramps were developed by The Hidden Brain Drain Task Force which Hewlett founded with Carolyn Buck Luce of Ernst & Young, and Cornel West of Princeton University to encourage 34 forward-thinking companies to become stakeholders in a research effort on second generation policy capable of keeping talented women on the road to success.

In the 1980s she became the first woman to head up the Economic Policy Council – a think tank composed of 125 business and labour leaders. Hewlett is well known for her expertise on gender and workplace issues.

Guru Interview: Sylvia Ann Hewlett

Legions of professional women step off the career fast track at least once to raise children, care for elderly parents, or manage other family demands. But when they’re ready to step back on track – just a short time later – they hit a wall...

Interview by Alistair Craven
In your new book *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps* you state that your primary target audience is business leaders – those who head up large leading-edge companies and those piloting growing companies. Can you tell us about the inspiration behind your book and what it has to offer?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

This book is centred on how to create alternative pathways to power for women who have non-linear careers. Companies are interested in figuring out how to retain and re-attach highly qualified, committed women because a “war for talent” is heating up. For reasons which range from a tightening job market to retiring baby boomers, employers newly understand that they cannot afford to throw away two-thirds of the female talent pipeline.

Half of the book is devoted to case studies – 18 models of emerging best practice which provides a blueprint of how to drive change. Indeed, I am particularly proud of the Toolkits that accompany the case studies which tell how to get started with these innovative policies.

You say that it is relatively easy to create a rich set of programmes and policies to help employees better manage their work and personal lives, but extremely difficult to create a corporate culture where these initiatives are actually used. Does this suggest that a seismic shift in corporate culture is required?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

One of the hardest challenges is reducing the stigma that often surrounds flexible work arrangements. A company can have state of the art policies, but high potential talent is not going to utilize these policies if they are considered illegitimate in the culture.

Here’s what to do. Several of the case studies in this book are devoted to this question of tackling stigma. For example, Ernst & Young has made headway by monitoring the work assignments given to flex workers – to ensure that top talent gets great work even if that talent is working flexibly. Unilever moved the dial by walking the talk at the top – senior male management modeled these policies and thus gave a green light for more junior employees. Lehman Brothers on the other hand positioned their virtual workplace as a strategic imperative in a world rife with terrorism and pandemics.

It is quite shocking to learn that up to 60 per cent of highly qualified women have non-linear careers. Can you cite some of the key reasons for this?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

The triggers are complex. 45 per cent of women take “time out” to deal with a childcare issue. But for 24 per cent of women the trigger is an elder care crisis.

Can you explain briefly what you mean by off-ramps and on-ramps?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

The data is dramatic. 37 per cent of all highly qualified women will take an off ramp (voluntarily leaving their jobs for a short period of time). Another third will take what I call a scenic route (a flex time schedule, a reduced hour job).

An article published in Emerald’s journal *Women in Management Review* quotes a survey of senior Fortune 500 executives. 84 per cent said they would like job options that let them realize their professional aspirations while having time for more things outside of work. In the same survey, more than half of the respondents also added that to discuss this with their boss would hurt their careers. How would you comment on this?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

Executive women are seeking more balanced lives, both to deliver on family commitments and to create “food for the soul.” Indeed, opportunities to “give back to community” and be involved in work that provides “meaning and purpose” are powerful motivators for women – trumping compensation. Money is #2 on the list for men, but #5 on the list for women.

What would you say were the most notable shortcomings of the so-called “traditional” career model?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

The “male competitive model” has two problems as a career framework for women. First off it requires lockstep, continuous, cumulative, employment record – hard for a working mother to produce. Secondly, it requires that the steepest gradient of the career path occur in the decade of one’s thirties. Again, tough on women because this is when child bearing and child rearing demands are at their height.

Can you tell us a little about the “Hidden Brain Drain” taskforce?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

In the spring of 2004 I helped found the Hidden Brain Drain Task Force – a group of companies committed to realizing female and minority talent over the life span. Today the Task Force
comprises 34 companies that operate in 150 countries around the world and employ 2.5 million workers.

Interestingly, you discuss the stigma which seems to surround alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting, job sharing and flexible working. Why does this stigma exist? What do you think can be done to tackle it?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

For many years flexible work arrangements have been “stigmatized” in corporate cultures. The data show that 30-40 per cent of employees are fearful of taking advantage of these policies – they tend to label a worker as unambitious or a “loser.” In this book I showcase three sets of policies around stigma – see case studies on Lehman Brothers, E&Y and Cisco Systems. One of the most effective approaches here is to have senior male executives actually walk the talk and model these policies.

According to the book, one of the strongest arguments for gender diversity is that it “links directly to a robust bottom line.” Can you provide some evidence for this?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

I deliberately spend a great deal of time developing a robust business case. At the heart of this analysis are the demographic shifts of our age. With 80 million retiring baby boomers and two “baby bust” generations coming on stream, companies are facing shortages and shortfalls in the supply of talent. Increasingly employers understand that they cannot afford to throw away two thirds of well qualified women merely because they have “interruptions” in their careers.

Your book is full of practical stories and anecdotes to illustrate your ideas. What was the most interesting story you came across in your research, and why?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

I find the GE story fascinating. Precisely because this company is seen as a “macho” company in a hide bound sector (engineering). However, driven by the fact that the “customer is queen” these days, over the last five years this industrial juggernaut has moved effectively to promote and accelerate female talent. Jeanne Rosario’s story – see chapter eight – brings the GE story to life.

In the book you talk about General Electric’s Women’s Network. Can you tell us about this?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

The GE women’s network has been particularly effective in accelerating women’s progress at this company because it is linked into the performance review process deliberately showcasing and grooming high potential talent.

“For many years flexible work arrangements have been stigmatized in corporate cultures. The data show that 30-40 per cent of employees are fearful of taking advantage of these policies – they tend to label a worker as unambitious or a ‘loser’.”

Finally, what interests you outside of your professional life, and why?

Sylvia Ann Hewlett:

Hollow laughter here. As you might know from my bio I have five children – so my life is very full. Not complaining. A huge privilege to have a career I love and a wonderfully complicated family, but definitely no “hobbies.”

By the way I do share my own off-ramping experiences in the last chapter of the book. I was both “pushed” off-track and took myself off track at various stages of my life. I share these experiences because most working mothers of my generation have first hand knowledge of off ramps.