

Interview by Hugh Tranum of Susan Ascher

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HR Fact Finder: I'd like you to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background.

Ms. Ascher: My name is Susan Ascher. I'm the president and CEO of The Ascher Group. We are an HR contract staffing firm. That is to say that we place temporary executives in assignments within the human resources department. We've been in business for 25 years. At the beginning of the '90s we reengineered from an executive search firm, placing folks in finance, to an interim staffing firm, which eventually evolved into providing contract services to our clients.

HR Fact Finder: Okay, let me get started with a few questions. In the past, businesses have been used to the 9:00 to 5:00, 40-hour workweek. Recently, work days have lengthened and advances have occurred in technology. Have we permanently blurred the line between work time and private time?

Ms. Ascher: I think that the lines have become blurred. In a way it's very unfortunate, but the key is that we have to look for achievement and rent fun in terms of our work and family and friends. We can't be totally focused on the job. If we never come up for air to regroup or revive ourselves, then how can we ever really be productive at the job?

HR Fact Finder: The downsizing of companies has led to employee task responsibilities becoming more complex. How can someone who is trying to do a good job keep from being swallowed up by the job?

Ms. Ascher: For years we have used the term time management. A lot of people are very into base time, or alternatively, they are into doing whatever the boss requires or requests regardless of whether it impacts their personal life. Obviously, when the requirements don't match what employees can complete, people become extremely stressed and burned out. The problem is that companies haven't figured out that they can't tap their resources to such extent. Also, employees haven't figured how to turn to the boss and say, "Okay, you've given me four separate things that you need done by the end of this week. Please prioritize them for me, because if I'm to do a good job, then I may not be able to complete all four within that timeline." So people have to speak up and direct those types of concerns to their superiors so that they can prioritize and manage their time.

HR Fact Finder: You gave the example of an employer giving a subordinate four orders, and the employee wonders what to do first. Fortunately, that person probably received four orders from the person above them. So my question is, how do you short circuit this seemingly vicious cycle within an organization that is under competitive pressure?

Ms. Ascher: It's a very difficult question to answer. As an example, in this country this year alone we are going to give back five hundred seventy-four million vacation days. Do you have any idea what that means? There is a set of people out there who don't know how to remove these barriers. Some people are actually afraid to take a vacation or go home early and leave that project behind. How do we change that? How do we change cultures? How do we get people to understand that the generations coming behind the baby boomers are not going to put up with this? They are simply going to walk away. They're going to say, "I am going on my month sabbatical to wherever, because I am burned out." The generations (X, Y, and Echo boomers) coming behind the baby boomers are young people who are more

interested in their quality of life. There's going to be a huge, dynamic change within organizations when these people actually start to take jobs and positions in management.

Companies have to find a balance; they have to become more realistic and not ask people to work 60 or 80 hours a week, give up vacations, and expect them to be productive contributors to the company. As an example, what we are seeing as a result of this are young women of childbearing years in their 30's have a child, and it becomes another task that they have to put under their belt. We are seeing many of them dropping out of the workforce. Many of these women are becoming stay-at-home moms because it makes absolutely no sense to continue working with the stress. I don't think you saw that in women of the baby boom generation, because they had to have it all, and they had to be super mom and super woman and everybody else. Companies today have to become far more realistic.

Companies are restructuring and cost cutting, trying to make their bottom lines look good, but at the expense of what? At the expense of their employees lives and at the expense of the bottom line. We see more illness, more people taking off, they call in sick, but they're really stressed out. Unless they call in sick, they don't get a day off. There is something fundamentally wrong with a society that gives back five hundred seventy-four million vacation days in a year when our counter parts in Europe think nothing of taking six weeks and rejuvenating themselves.

HR Fact Finder: That's interesting, especially since we have so many American corporations that are operating in Europe and have to conform to those realities so they accept it in Europe that there's going to be time off, but then almost make it impossible for employees in this country.

Ms. Ascher: Exactly, you're probably better off going to work in your foreign office. You might have more vacation time to come home and spend with your family.

HR Fact Finder: That's ironic.

Ms. Ascher: I think a lot of this started with the downsizing and the restructuring in the '90s. People were afraid to lose their jobs, so more work was piled on them, fewer vacations were taken, and it became a cycle. What I envision is that the younger generations are looking at companies not just as places where they are going to earn a living, but also, "Has this company branded itself as a place where I want to go work?" And part of branding is being able to bring to the floor this work-life balance.

HR Fact Finder: Well, I think what you're saying is very interesting in that on top of what the values may be of the next generation, there's going to be fewer people in the workforce based on birth rates and the baby boomers moving towards retirement. So, losing someone out of the workforce of value is going to be even much more damaging as you have a smaller pool of people to choose from.

Ms. Ascher: Right, and they will be calling the shots. I recently read in The New York Times an article on young people in their 20s who have their first job, and now all of a sudden they decide they want to go to Australia see that country. Well, what they do is they leave their job--they find another job because their company won't let them do it. So, they find another job, but they say to that employer, "Listen, I'll be starting herein four weeks if that's okay with you," and they go and see their sight seeing, their sabbatical if you will, and then they start their new job. This is how they get around it. Would baby boomers ever have thought of something like that? NO, they were too busy climbing the corporate ladder.

HR Fact Finder: You talked about a book Chasing Daylight.

Ms. Ascher: What a frightening story that is.

HR Fact Finder: I wonder if you could expand a little on that.

Ms. Ascher: Here was a gentleman, a partner in a major consulting firm. He must have had 1,000 people in what he called his "inner circle." At the age of 53 or 54 he was diagnosed with brain cancer and was told he had just a few months to live. By the way this book was published posthumously. So he sat down and said, "I better really analyze who I need to say good bye to, etc." What he realizes is

he has never been to any of his daughter's soccer games, baseball games, school plays, whatever. He barely ever took his wife to lunch, and yet every single day his calendar was booked with breakfast, lunch, dinner, meeting with associates, clients, whatever. Part of what he was trying to drive home to these folks was the need for work-life balance. When he sat down and realized he had these 1000 people in his "inner circle," he began to realize how ridiculous that really was and how he had neglected some of the most important people in his life, his family. So he whittled down who were the really important people in his life, and said good-bye to those who were closest to him, but certainly the number wasn't a thousand people anymore. The point of that story is this guy was literally from dawn until dusk out with clients doing what he had to do, was promoting it to the people who worked for him, was okay with people job-sharing and doing stuff like that, but he himself could not see the flowers through the trees.

HR Fact Finder: That goes to the old saying that no one ever said on their death bed, "I wish I had one more hour at my office."

Ms. Ascher: Exactly. I'm a huge proponent of a vacation. I spoke yesterday with the woman who heads up the marketing firm that we use for a lot of our different publications, and we're writing something in the newsletter about work-life balance and also vacation deprivation, and she said, "Well, I haven't had a vacation in two years." I said, "Are you wearing that as a badge of honor? What is wrong with you? You are a business owner. You run your own show. In your business where you have to create and recreate every single day, don't you need to go off some where and stare into the sunset to get some new ideas?" She said, "Well, I'm going to do it this year. I'm going to take a week in the summer." I said, "That's great! If we're in the business world 15, 20, 25 years aren't we entitled to take two, three, or four weeks of vacation a year?" Many of the youngsters coming out of school are too independent, and they are independent largely because of their numbers, or let's call it lack there of. It's the lack of the numbers of people. Companies have to figure out a way not to lose these people, and the way you do that is you create work-life balance. I also want to say we are a small company. We are no where near the size of some of our clients. Why is it that if I have someone who's child is sick, or if they have to go to this, or they want to leave early for a soccer game, we as a very small company can allow for this, and our clients who are mammoth companies can't let somebody leave an hour early? It's because they can't let Johnny go because if they let Johnny go, then Sally will want to go, and then Tim will want to go, and on and on and on. That's the thinking.

HR Fact Finder: Yeah, and so what if they did? I mean if they are quality workers and are getting their work done. Does that extra hour mean that much?

Ms. Ascher: No, this is why if you talk about these things, the real crux of the matter is productivity. We have to also figure out who are the productive people. Those people have to be rewarded. Who are the people who are just cogs in the wheel? I think when companies look at productivity and they talk about productivity and the bottom line, they really need to assess where they are in terms of their human resources. What's the productivity of these people? If someone is not carrying their weight, we need to do something to retrain them or to help them maximize their capabilities. If they can't do that, then we need to find somebody who can.

HR Fact Finder: I'd like to move on to expand on something you mentioned a couple times, and clarify it for our readers. You talk about a work-life balance. Does that mean striking an equal balance between work and home?

Ms. Ascher: I think that would be very unrealistic. But, what I think it is you are working for a company. They do put the food on your table, so we do have to think about what we do and what we contribute. On the other hand, if an employee is not happy, then they're not going to be productive. So when you talk about work-life balance it doesn't mean we'll all work 40 hours this week, and then I'll take off 40 hours next week. No, what we're talking about is, "Hey, I completed this project. I even completed it a little bit early because I know that next week my daughter has a soccer game at 4:00, and I'd like to be there. So, now I'm going to go to the boss and say, 'Is that okay?'" That's what work-life balance is about. It's being able to shut the rest of the world off with a half hour for yourself. Maybe it means taking a walk at lunchtime, or when you get home from work. And I realize that everybody has children. Everybody's over scheduled, but somehow we have to carve out some special time. For some people it's daily. For some people it's weekly. But for those who say I never have time to do that, then they have to readdress this issue of time management. I had a financial advisor years ago when I was very young and we were first talking about saving and putting money away, and he said, "Susan you have to pay yourself first." Best advice I ever got. People in a 401k situation get it right off the top of their check. They pay themselves first. It's the same thing with work-life balance. Saturday mornings I get up and take a walk. Or, this is my day to get a massage, see a friend. You pick your choice. But don't say, "I don't have time."

You have to make the time because if you don't take care of yourself, who's going to? You have to take care of yourself. The company is not necessarily going to, although we do have clients who have gyms in the facility. They have special wellness programs. If your company provides that, then you must take advantage of that. You must say, "That's a wonderful thing. I'll be at the gym Monday, Wednesday, Friday on my lunch hour, or I'll come in early and use that facility." But, to say, "I can't do it." I can't, Hugh, often means I won't.

HR Fact Finder: I'd like to expand on a couple of things you just said. The work-life initiative seems to be a growing trend. Specifically, what are some of these initiatives that you have seen some of your clients put in place that really show a commitment to this balance?

Ms. Ascher: I think we are looking at companies that have fitness facilities within the organization, or they provide financial assistance to health clubs. We have to be on the page of the eldercare initiative, because these baby boomers are stuck in the middle. They have kids who are either youngsters or ready to go to college or in college, and on the back end they are dealing with parents who are sick or getting old and need extra help. So, eldercare is huge, because if we don't help these boomers, there's going to come a point where they're just not going to be there, or they're not going to be productive if they're not given that extra help. Flextime is huge as is telecommuting. There are a set of companies that get it. There are another set of companies that if they don't see your face in the office, they don't think you're working. If you're a recruiter, and you have to fill 10 jobs a week, well, did you fill your 10 jobs? I don't really care how you did it. I don't care if you did it at home. I don't care if you did it in the office as long as you know the client is happy and the jobs are filled who cares whether it was flextime, telecommuting or job-sharing? Childcare is a huge issue. A lot of companies are putting it onsite. A lot of companies are paying for it. But then there are certain sites that you have to be there at 6:00 pm to pick up your child--then that's part of the balance. You've got to be on the page when your people have children that they may have to leave. They may be charged extra. The child may be sitting there alone. Then finally, family leave, sabbaticals, any of these things. They all fall into the same category. I remember years ago I had an employee who was totally burned out, and I said what is the problem? "I don't have time. I can't go to the doctor, I can't do this; I can't do that." She had a laundry list of things she had to do. I said, "How long will it take you to do this?" She said, "It's going to take me a month, but I'll never have it." I said, "You got it." She went away for a month. Now some people do what I would do which is really go away somewhere and really rejuvenate, but in her case she got a month to get her life in order because she had never had a vacation ever in her life until she came to work for me. So, that paid off tremendously for me. When she came back she was rejuvenated. She probably worked harder and was more productive than I had ever seen her. So a lot of those types of initiatives have to be put into place or we're not going to be the global leader that I would like us to be.

HR Fact Finder: What are some of the downsides and problems that a company can have if they don't adopt some of these measures to help their employees keep their lives in balance?

Ms. Ascher: It can be very expensive. An unscheduled workplace absence survey that I read about found that only 35% of unscheduled absences are due to illness. Mostly people are absent from work because they have a family matter that they have to take care of. If they had been able to discuss it with their superior, they might have just taken a few hours, but now they take a day. They may have something that they have to do. Instead of saying to the boss, "Can I leave early?" They're afraid he'll say, "no." Stress is another reason for unscheduled absence--they are just totally burned out and they need a mental health day. And finally you have those that feel it is an entitlement issue. I just gave him 60 hours over the last 6 months every week, and my boss never once said to me go home early, take a day, whatever. And so they take it on their own and feel they are entitled to it. But the bottom line is that it is costing this country over \$600 per employee, per year for these types of absences. It costs millions of dollars for these companies. If big companies could have a little bit more of that golden rule and work with employees for work-life balance, they would save more money and have more productive employees. In reality, having happy employees is really what adds to the bottom line.

HR Fact Finder: Well, thank you. I think that's a good note to end the interview on. Thank you very much.

About Susan Ascher...



The Ascher Group is a human resources contract staffing firm, which is widely recognized as an industry expert in workforce and job market trends. Its roots reach back to 1981 when it was founded as an executive search company.

Since then, Susan Ascher, the founder, president and CEO has successfully transformed The Ascher Group to meet the ever-growing need in today's business climate for human resources professionals on an interim basis.

With clients ranging from Fortune 500 to emerging growth companies, The Ascher Group is the premier provider of HR contract professionals.