WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Manage Your Work, Manage Your Life

by Boris Groysberg and Robin Abrahams

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ARTWORK DETAIL: LILIANA PORTER, MAN WITH STRING, 2009, STRING AND PENCIL LINES ON PAPER, 12 3/4″ X 15 3/4″

Work/life balance is at best an elusive ideal and at worst a complete myth, today's senior executives will tell you. But by making deliberate choices about which opportunities they'll pursue and which they'll decline, rather than simply reacting to emergencies, leaders can and do engage meaningfully with work, family, and community. They've discovered through hard experience that prospering in the senior ranks is a matter of carefully combining work and home so as not to lose themselves, their loved ones, or their foothold on success. Those who do this most effectively involve their families in work decisions and activities. They also vigilantly manage their own human capital, endeavoring to give both work and home their due—over a period of years, not weeks or days.

That's how the 21st-century business leaders in our research said they reconcile their professional and personal lives. In this article we draw on five years' worth of interviews with almost 4,000 executives worldwide, conducted by students at Harvard Business School, and a survey of 82 executives in an HBS leadership course.

Deliberate choices don't guarantee complete control. Life sometimes takes over, whether it's a parent's dementia or a teenager's car accident. But many of the executives we've studied—men and women alike—have sustained their momentum during such challenges while staying connected to their families. Their stories and advice reflect five main themes: defining success for yourself, managing technology, building support networks at work and at home, traveling or relocating selectively, and collaborating with your partner.

Defining Success for Yourself

When you are leading a major project, you determine early on what a win should look like. The same principle applies to leading a deliberate life: You have to define what success means to you—understanding, of course, that your definition will evolve over time.

Executives' definitions of professional and personal success run a gamut from the tactical to the conceptual (see the exhibit "How Leaders Define Work/Life 'Wins'"). For one leader, it means being home at least four nights a week. For another, it means understanding what's going on in the lives of family members. For a third, it's about having emotional energy at both work and home.

How Leaders Define Work/Life "Wins"

In their definitions of professional and personal success, executives highlight these elements:

PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS MEANS...
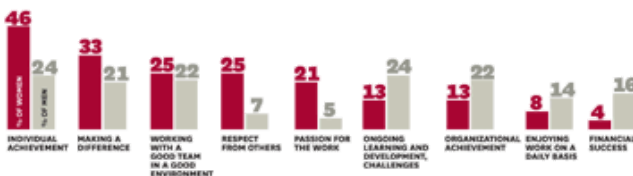
Some intriguing gender differences emerged in our survey data: In defining professional success, women place more value than men do on individual achievement, having passion for their work, receiving respect, and making a difference, but less value on organizational achievement and ongoing learning and development. A lower percentage of women than of men list financial achievement as an aspect of personal or professional success. Rewarding relationships are by far the most common element of personal success for both sexes, but men list merely having a family as

PERSONAL SUCCESS MEANS...

	% OF WOMEN	% OF MEN
REWARDING RELATIONSHIPS (FAMILY, COMMUNITY, "PEOPLE I LOVE")	46	59
HAPPINESS/ENJOYMENT	17	17
WORK/LIFE BALANCE	13	12
A LIFE OF MEANING/FEELING NO REGRETS	13	17
LEARNING AND DEVELOPING (NEW EXPERIENCES, PERSONAL GROWTH)	8	16
FINANCIAL SUCCESS	0	12

an indicator of success, whereas women describe what a good family life looks like to them. Women are also more likely to mention the importance of friends and community as well as family.

The survey responses consisted of short phrases and lists, but in the interviews executives often defined personal success by telling a story or describing an ideal self or moment in time. Such narratives and self-concepts serve as motivational goalposts, helping people prioritize activities and make sense of conflicts and inconsistencies.

When work and family responsibilities collide, for example, men may lay claim to the cultural narrative of the good provider. Several male executives who admitted to spending inadequate time with their families consider absence an acceptable price for providing their children with opportunities they themselves never had. One of these men, poor during his childhood, said that his financial success both protects his children and validates his parents' struggles. Another even put a positive spin on the breakup of his family: "Looking back, I would have still made a similar decision to focus on work, as I was able to provide for my family and become a leader in my area, and these things were important to me. Now I focus on my kids' education...and spend a lot more time with them over weekends."

Even the men who pride themselves on having achieved some degree of balance between work and other realms of their lives measure themselves against a traditional male ideal. "The 10 minutes I give my kids at night is one million times greater than spending that 10 minutes at work," one interviewee said. It's difficult to imagine a woman congratulating herself for spending 10 minutes a day with her children, but a man may consider the same behavior exemplary.

Indeed, women rarely view themselves as working *for* their families the way men do. Men still think of their family responsibilities in terms of breadwinning, whereas women often see theirs as role modeling for their children. Women emphasize (far more than men do) how important it is for their kids—particularly their daughters—to see them as competent professionals. One said, "I think that work is such a big part of who I am. I want my kids to understand what I do. I am a whole being."

Many women said that the most difficult aspect of managing work and family is contending with cultural expectations about mothering. One admitted that she stopped working at home after her daughter referred to the Bloomberg network as "Mommy's channel." Another commented, "When you are paid well, you can get all the [practical] help you need. What is the most difficult thing, though—what I see my women friends leave their careers for—is the real emotional guilt of not spending enough time with their children. The guilt of *missing out*."

Both men and women expressed versions of this guilt and associated personal success with not having regrets. They often cope by assigning special significance to a particular metric, such as never missing a Little League game or checking in once a day no matter what. "I just prioritize dinner with my family as if it was a 6 PM meeting with my most important client," said one interviewee. Another offered this suggestion: "Design your house right—have a table in the kitchen where your kids can do homework while your husband cooks and you drink a glass of red wine." Though expressed as advice, this is clearly her very personal, concrete image of what success at home looks like.

Managing Technology

Nearly all the interviewees talked about how critical it is to corral their e-mails, text messages, voice mails, and other communications. Deciding when, where, and how to be accessible for work is an ongoing challenge, particularly for executives with families. Many of them cautioned against using communications technology to be in two places at once, insisting on the value of undivided attention. "When I'm at home, I really am at home," said one. "I force myself to not check my e-mail, take calls, et cetera. I want to give my kids 100%

of my attention. But this also works the other way around, because when I'm at work I really want to focus on work. I believe that mixing these spheres too much leads to confusion and mistakes."

That last point is a common concern: Always being plugged in can erode performance. One leader observed that "certain cognitive processes happen when you step away from the frenetic responding to e-mails." (The history of science, after all, is marked by insights that occurred not in the laboratory but while the scientist was engaged in a mundane task—or even asleep.) Another executive pointed out that 24-hour availability can actually hamper initiative in an organization: "If you have weak people who must ask your advice all the time, you feel important. But there is a difference between being truly important and just not letting anyone around you do anything without you."

Strikingly, some people at the top are starting to use communications technology less often while they're working. Several invoked the saying "You can't raise a kid by phone"—and pointed out that it's not the best way to manage a team, either. Often, if it's logistically possible, you're better off communicating in person. How do you know when that's the case? One interviewee made an important distinction between broadcasting information and exchanging and analyzing ideas: "Speaking [on the phone] is easy, but careful, thoughtful listening becomes very challenging. For the most important conversations, I see a real trend moving back to face-to-face. When you're evaluating multibillion-dollar deals...you have to build a bridge to the people."

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When it comes to technology in the home, more than a third of the surveyed executives view it as an invader, and about a quarter see it as a liberator. (The rest are neutral or have mixed feelings.) Some of them resent the smartphone's infringement on family time: "When your phone buzzes," one ruefully noted, it's difficult to "keep your eyes on that soccer field."

Others appreciate the flexibility that technology affords them: "I will probably leave here around 4 PM to wrangle my kids," said one participant, "but I will be back and locked into my network and e-mails by 8 PM." Another participant reported, "Sometimes my kids give me a hard time about being on my BlackBerry at the dinner table, but I tell them that my BlackBerry is what enables me to be home with them."

Both camps—those who hate being plugged in and those who love it—acknowledged that executives must learn to manage communications technology wisely. Overall, they view it as a good servant but a bad master. Their advice in this area is quite consistent: Make yourself available but not *too* available to your team; be honest with yourself about how much you can multitask; build relationships and trust through face time; and keep your in-box under control.

Building Support Networks

Across the board, senior executives insisted that managing family and professional life requires a strong network of behind-the-scenes supporters. Absent a primary caregiver who stays at home, they see paid help or assistance from extended family as a necessity. The women in our sample are adamant about this. One said, "We hire people to do the more tactical things—groceries, cooking, helping the children dress—so that we can be there for the most important things." Even interviewees without children said they needed support at home when they became responsible for aging parents or suffered their own health problems.

Emotional support is equally essential. Like anyone else, executives occasionally need to vent when they're dealing with something crazy or irritating at work, and friends and family are a safer audience than colleagues. Sometimes leaders also turn to their personal networks for a fresh perspective on a problem or a decision, because members of their teams don't always have the distance to be objective.

Support at work matters too. Trusted colleagues serve as valuable sounding boards. And many leaders reported that health crises—

Great Leaders Who Make the Mix Work

Eight ways to create an inclusive culture, according to interviews with 24 top CEOs.

⤓ SAVE   ⤴ SHARE

their own or family members'—might have derailed their careers if not for compassionate bosses and coworkers. The unexpected can waylay even the most carefully planned career.

"When you're young, you think you can control everything," one interviewee said, "but you can't." Executives told stories about heart attacks, cancer, and parents in need of care. One talked about a psychotic reaction to medication. In those situations, mentors and team members helped leaders weather difficult times and eventually return to business as usual.

What about mixing personal and professional networks, since executives must draw on both anyway? That's up for discussion. The men we surveyed tend to prefer separate networks, and the women are pretty evenly split. Interviewees who favor integration said it's a relief to be "the same person" in all contexts and natural to form friendships at work, where they spend most of their time. Those who separate their work lives from their private lives have many reasons for doing so. Some seek novelty and a counterbalance to work. "If all of your socializing centers around your work life, you tend to experience an ever-decreasing circle of influence and ideas," one pointed out. Others want to protect their personal relationships from the churn of the workplace.

Many women keep their networks separate for fear of harming their image. Some never mention their families at work because they don't want to appear unprofessional. A few female executives won't discuss their careers—or even mention that they have jobs—in conversations outside work. But again, not all women reported such conflict between their

professional and personal "selves," and several suggested that the tide is turning. One pointed out, "The more women have come into the workplace, the more I talk about my children."

Traveling or Relocating Selectively

Discussions about work/life balance usually focus on managing time. But it's also critical to manage your location—and, more broadly, your role in the global economy. When leaders decide whether to travel or relocate (internationally or domestically), their home lives play a huge part. That's why many of them believe in acquiring global experience and racking up travel miles while they're young and unencumbered. Of those surveyed, 32% said they had turned down an international assignment because they did not want to relocate their families, and 28% said they had done so to protect their marriages.

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Several executives told stories about getting sidetracked or derailed in their careers because a partner or spouse needed to relocate. Of course, travel becomes even trickier with children. Many women reported cutting back on business trips after having children, and several executives of both sexes said they had refused to relocate when their children were adolescents. "When children are very young, they are more mobile," one explained. "But once they are 12 or 13, they want to be in one place."

Female executives are less likely than men to be offered or accept international assignments, in part because of family responsibilities but also because of the restrictive gender roles in certain cultures or perceptions that they are unwilling to relocate. Our survey results—from a well-traveled sample—jibe with student interviewers' qualitative findings. Almost none of the men surveyed (less than 1%, compared with 13% of the women) had turned down an international assignment because of cultural concerns. But for female executives, not all

travel is created equal: Gender norms, employment laws, health-care access, and views on work/life balance vary from country to country. One American woman said it requires extra effort in Europe to make sure she doesn't "come off as being intimidating," a concern she attributes in part to being tall. Another woman said that in the Middle East she has had to bring male colleagues to meetings to prove her credibility.

Though women in particular have such difficulties, international assignments are not easy for anyone, and they may simply not be worth it for many executives. Members of both sexes have built gratifying careers while grounding themselves in a particular country or even city. However, if travel is undesirable, ambitious young executives should decide so early on. That way they can avoid getting trapped in an industry that doesn't mesh with their geographic preferences and give themselves time to find ways other than travel to signal open-mindedness, sophistication, skill diversity, and willingness to go above and beyond. (Several executives noted that international experience is often viewed as a sign of those personal attributes.) "International experience can be helpful," one executive observed, "but it's just as important to have had exposure across the business lines. Both allow you to understand that not everybody thinks as you do." Some executives even question the future of globe-hopping, noting that carbon costs, fuel costs, and security concerns may tighten future travel budgets.

Collaborating with Your Partner

Managing yourself, technology, networks, travel—it's a tall order. Leaders with strong family lives spoke again and again of needing a shared vision of success for everyone at home—not just for themselves. Most of the executives in our sample have partners or spouses, and common goals hold those couples together. Their relationships offer both partners opportunities—for uninterrupted (or less interrupted) work, for adventurous travel, for intensive parenting, for political or community impact—that they might not otherwise have had.

About the Research

Since 2008 more than 600 students in Harvard Business School's second-year Managing Human Capital course have interviewed 3,850 C-suite executives and leaders (of whom 655 were CEOs, presidents, or board members) at companies and nonprofits around the world.

The goal? To gain greater insight into how today's top leaders make choices in their professional and personal lives. This project has been a true partnership between the students and the executives. Everyone involved wanted to deeply explore what it means for leaders to manage their human capital in the 21st century—and more specifically, in the wake of the recent global recession.

The executives were a diverse group (44% female, 56% male) and represented a wide range of industries, including finance, retail, energy, health care, and technology. They came from 51 countries, and 45% of them had worked in countries other than the United States.

The interviews were semistructured: As long as students related their questions to topics covered in Managing Human Capital, they were allowed considerable leeway in what to ask and how far to go in following up on responses. That way they could dig into the issues they found most compelling.

To supplement the interviews, we surveyed 82 senior executives who were attending a 2012 leadership course at HBS. We asked them about their experiences managing their careers and families. The sample consisted of 58 men and 24 women from 33 countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North and

Leaders also emphasized the importance of complementary relationships. Many said how much they value their partners' emotional intelligence, task focus, big-picture thinking, detail orientation—in short, whatever cognitive or behavioral skills balance out their own tendencies. And many of those we surveyed consider emotional support the biggest contribution their partners have made to their careers. Both men and women often mentioned that their partners believe in them or have urged them to take business risks or pursue job opportunities that were not immediately rewarding but led to longer-term satisfaction. They also look to their partners to be sounding boards and honest critics. One executive said that her partner asks "probing questions to challenge my thinking so I can be better prepared for an opposing viewpoint."

What Partners Contribute

Executives say that their partners and spouses share their vision of success, bring complementary skills, and provide the following types of support:

A partner's support may come in many forms, but what it almost always boils down to is making sure the executive manages his or her own human capital effectively. The pressures

and demands on executives are intense, multidirectional, and unceasing. Partners can help them keep their eyes on what matters, budget their time and energy, live healthfully, and make deliberate choices—sometimes tough ones—about work, travel, household management, and community involvement.

Men, however, appear to be getting more spousal support overall. Male interviewees—many of whom have stay-at-home wives—often spoke of their spouses' willingness to take care of children, tolerate long work hours, and even relocate, sometimes as a way of life. But by and large, they no longer seem to expect the classic 1950s "corporate wife," who hosted dinners for the boss and cocktail parties for clients. (Exceptions exist in some countries and industries. One male executive who works in oil fields said, "When you are living and working in those camp environments, it is indispensable to have your wife talk with other spouses.") Men frequently noted that their partners won't allow them to neglect their families, health, or social lives. For example: "My wife is militant about family dinner, and I am home every night for dinner even if I have to work afterward."

Women, by contrast, slightly more often mentioned their partners' willingness to free them from traditional roles at home. One explained, in a typical comment, "He understands the demands of my role and does not put pressure on me when work takes more time than I would like." In other words, male executives tend to praise their partners for making positive contributions to their careers, whereas women praise theirs for not interfering.

When we look at the survey data, we see other striking differences between the sexes. Fully 88% of the men are married, compared with 70% of the women. And 60% of the men have spouses who don't work full-time outside the home, compared with only 10% of the women. The men have an average of 2.22 children; the women, 1.67.

What Tomorrow's Leaders Think

The fact that the interviewees all agreed to take time from their hectic schedules to share their insights with students might introduce a selection effect. Busy leaders who choose to help students presumably value interpersonal relationships. Because they're inclined to reflect on work and life, they're probably also making deliberate choices in both realms—and they certainly have enough money to pay for support at home. All that may explain why many interviewees reported being basically happy despite their struggles and why few mentioned serious damage to their marriages or families due to career pressures. This sample is an elite group of people better positioned than most to achieve work/life balance. That they nevertheless consider it an impossible task suggests a sobering reality for the rest of us.

Our student interviewers say, almost universally, that the leaders they spoke with dispensed valuable advice about how to maintain both a career and a family. One interviewer reported, "All acknowledged making sacrifices and concessions at times but emphasized the important role that supportive spouses and families played." Still, many students are alarmed at how much leaders sacrifice at home and how little headway the business world has made in adapting to families' needs.

Executives of both sexes consider the tension between work and family to be primarily a women's problem.

Male executives admitted that they don't prioritize their families enough. And women are more likely than men to have forgone kids or marriage to avoid the pressures of combining work and family. One said, "Because I'm not a mother, I haven't experienced the major driver of inequality: having children." She added, "People assume that if you don't have kids, then you either can't have kids or else you're a hard-driving bitch. So I haven't had any negative career repercussions, but I've probably been judged personally."

Executives of both sexes consider the tension between work and family to be primarily a women's problem, and the students find that discouraging. "Given that leadership positions in corporations around the world are still dominated by men," one explained, "I fear that it

will take many organizations much longer than it should to make accommodations for women to...effectively manage their careers and personal lives."

Students also resist leaders' commonly held belief that you can't compete in the global marketplace while leading a "balanced" life. When one executive argued that it's impossible to have "a great family life, hobbies, and an amazing career" all at the same time, the student interviewing him initially thought, "That's his perspective." But after more conversations with leaders? "Every single executive confirmed this view in one way or another, and I came to believe that it is the reality of today's business world." It remains to be seen whether, and how, that reality can be changed for tomorrow.We can't predict what the workplace or the family will look like later in this century, or how the two institutions will coexist. But we can assert three simple truths:

Life happens.

Even the most dedicated executive may suddenly have his or her priorities upended by a personal crisis—a heart attack, for instance, or a death in the family. As one pointed out, people tend to ignore work/life balance until "something is wrong." But that kind of disregard is a choice, and not a wise one. Since when do smart executives assume that everything will work out just fine? If that approach makes no sense in the boardroom or on the factory floor, it makes no sense in one's personal life.

There are multiple routes to success.

Some people plan their careers in detail; others grab whatever opportunity presents itself. Some stick with one company, building political capital and a deep knowledge of the organization's culture and resources; others change employers frequently, relying on external contacts and a fresh perspective to achieve success. Similarly, at home different solutions work for different individuals and families. Some executives have a stay-at-home partner; others make trade-offs to enable both partners to work. The questions of child care, international postings, and smartphones at the dinner table don't have "right" answers. But the questions need to be asked.

No one can do it alone.

Of the many paths to success, none can be walked alone. A support network is crucial both at and outside work—and members of that network must get their needs met too. In pursuit of rich professional and personal lives, men and women will surely continue to face tough decisions about where to concentrate their efforts. Our research suggests that earnestly trying to focus is what will see them through.

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