

# OUR INSIGHTS

Practical advice on common business challenges  
direct from our International team of business experts

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## The Balancing Act

When I announced I was pregnant to a colleague of mine at BNP Paribas in Paris back in 1992 her immediate response was congratulations followed by, *“Now you can start feeling permanently guilty. When you are at work you will feel guilty you are not at home. When you are at home you will feel guilty you are not at work.”*, *“Harsh”*, I recall thinking. *“So true”* I realise now with the benefit of 30 years of hindsight.

Across my extensive coaching assignments, it is clear is that balancing a successful career with a happy home environment is a challenge we may all face to differing degrees at different times. This is true for all genders and yet seems to impact women in opposite gender relationships disproportionately. So, it seemed important to brave some learnings on this topic on International Woman’s Day. Please do share yours in response. Your experience may well resonate with others. It is a topic where we can benefit massively from shared learnings.

Of course, it’s not one long guilt trip trying to balance work and home commitments. Individual circumstances vary significantly and for long periods of a working life, we may feel we have mastered balance and on a really good day, even that we have the very best of life with fulfilling careers and happy, comfortable homes. Equally, many people reading this will recognise those days when you are feeling like you have cracked neither. The boss is unhappy, the inbox is overflowing, and you are already late back to that date night you had set up to give your significant other the time and focus he/she/they deserve.

This is not a gender specific challenge. Having spent the lion’s share of my career working alongside male colleagues, I have overheard far too many ends of the conversation along the lines of, **“I know I said I’d be home by x...”**, **“I’m sorry, its’ just that ... ”**, **“I’m on my way home now”**. And yet, the interesting element here is I rarely overheard the same conversations from my female colleagues because they’d already left! When the creche/ school/ carer calls it is still commonly the mum/sister/daughter that responds and as a result

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suffer from a higher sense of guilt that they are not able to be all that they need to be at work. Again, I underline here that there are exceptions and some families have cracked this and found a fair and equitable way of sharing the home's personal responsibilities.

However, [a recent article from McKinsey](#) clearly highlights how far we still are away from an equitable share in home/child & elderly care responsibilities. McKinsey's research finds women in opposite-gender dual-career couples are four times more likely than men to take on tasks at home. Even more interestingly, McKinsey also finds that 70 percent of men in opposite-gender dual-career couples believe they share household duties equally with their partners, whilst only 42 percent of women agree. Surprised? Not really, I hear the ladies say. Who notices the loo roll is running low or works out how to get the children to swim classes whilst ensuring mum is picked up from the station at the same time? Whilst this plan may involve calling on your partner to help, it is less likely that he will have laid awake anticipating the problem and finding the solution. In my experience, it is the anticipation and planning element which is often overlooked and contributes to the difference in perception about how equitably home responsibilities are shared.

Generally, when we are feeling in balance, it is because three important elements of our lives are in a good place, our work, our homes and ourselves. Picture a Venn Diagram with all three elements in green and happily overlapping in the middle. When one or more of those three aspects turn orange or red, they leave less emotional space for the other aspects, and we start to feel out of balance. Of course, there is no magic solution to the fact that life will keep chucking challenges at us. Our beautiful teenagers will do stupid things, we will suffer from occasional unrealistic work deadlines, we will have times when we don't feel entirely happy with our place in the world. Here's a few best practices gleaned from a whole host of fabulous women over the years.

## 1. Work

**Get flexible.** Flexible work environments don't mean everyone doing what they like. They are commonly super disciplined environments where people are judged on the quality of their work, using clear metrics to evaluate this. This enables people in turn, to find the flexibility in their working hours which suit them and take personal ownership of when they need to be where and with whom. If this doesn't describe where you work, ask if you can help define the metrics by which you want to be judged by and the flexibility you require in return.

**Accept there will be times you cannot be at work.** The best flexibility in the world, won't suffice when you are encountering a particular home challenge. Be open about any challenges you are navigating and clear about what short term support you may need the business to show. When my dad passed away unexpectedly, I struggled on for weeks doing a poor job, thinking I was doing the right thing for the business, where taking the time to mourn him fully with friends and family would have been ensured I came back to work in a better place to cope with the work pressures again more effectively.

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## 2. Home

**Make sure the family know.** Ever sat quietly muttering in a corner pulling together the Sainsburys online shopping order whilst the rest of the family go about their happy, weekend activities of choice and register genuine surprise when you snap back at their perfectly innocent question about what time lunch is planned for? The fact that our heads are filled with a multitude of dull but important home related things which need sorting is something they cannot know unless we tell them. Waiting until the pot is boiling over is unlikely to be the best way of having a balanced and productive conversation about what needs to be done and who can help.

**Get help.** If you are working a full-time job, you simply cannot also be the sole family cook/cleaner/chauffeur, dare I go on? If the family budget allows, pay for whatever help you can afford. If you are exhausted and frazzled from doing too much at home, your ability to go out and earn a wage is threatened so look on the cost of cleaning, ironing, childcare etc in the same way as you would commute costs or the cost of clothes for work. If the budget really doesn't allow for help and even if it does, agree who does what else at home. Don't forget in the divvying of tasks, what you do around the anticipation and planning of family needs also. That Sainsburys online order doesn't write itself!

## 3. Self

**Block out the noise.** Ever worried that you are not doing a good enough job as a parent/spouse/carer/ super career woman? My moments of dawning reality which helped me do this were the days I realised ;

1. My kids would always find something I did wrong as a parent even if I was at home 24/7 channelling an inner domestic goddess (assuming I have one which is questionable). Usefully, it doesn't mean they don't love me!
2. A boss will always find something they think I can do better. Its sort of their job to but it doesn't mean they don't value you for what I do already. If they don't, find a more supportive employer but do check first. Not everyone is good at articulating what they value about others.
3. My husband likes me warts and all. It took an autobiography to find this out which I accept isn't available to us all but have you tried asking?
4. The woman next door who doesn't work and waits for her children outside the school gates every afternoon with healthy, home-made snacks is fighting her own demons. No family is as perfect on the inside as it may look on the outside.

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**Of course, this is far from a comprehensive list. Please do share yours below. I would love that if the time comes when my daughter announces her first child, that her colleague's reaction is simply "congratulations!"**

**Sarah Beauvallet**

Partner

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