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INFORMED. INDISPENSABLE. IN-HOUSE.

I Want It All ... And So Does My Husband

Skills and Professional Development



I want a fulfilling career. I want to be a leader. I want to influence the legal community and lead cultural change to enable both men and women to work flexibly and be fulfilled at home and at work. I want to rise through the ranks to senior management, to executive level, to be on a board. My husband wants these things for me too. He also wants the equivalent in his line of work.

We are both working parents. I want to be a wonderful mother and my husband wants to be an impactful dad. We want to raise healthy, happy, independent children who know their worth and are provided the opportunity to fulfill their potential. We want our children to grow up in a household that models balance and equity. So, we tackle each week by attempting to share the load.

Guess what? My husband cooks, cleans (occasionally), and loves to do school pickup. I know, it's outrageous. I am one lucky lady. We know lots of men love doing these things. So why aren't there more men at the gate when school pickup rolls around, or volunteering to help in the classroom for reading group? This strikes me as odd.

Fifty-seven percent of executive women say they take more responsibility than their partner does in making childcare arrangements compared with only one percent of the men.

[Leaders in a Global Economy: A Study of Executive Women and Men](#)

Surely every parent should have the same opportunity to participate in the lives of their kids while continuing to pursue their career? Surely it is every parent's right to indulge in the sometimes-mundane trips to the park, the tedious birthday parties, or the over-excitement of an under-six soccer game? Does wanting to be there for your kids automatically mean you're less serious about your job? Absolutely not. So why haven't we made more progress?

Executives who put the same priority on work and their personal/family life feel the most successful at work.

[Leaders in a Global Economy: A Study of Executive Women and Men](#)

My husband and I have tried for seven years to strike that perfect balance. Occasionally, we think we are nailing it. Most other times we are mired in feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Even this evening, as I was constructing a last-minute email before leaving work, I was aware of a gnawing guilt in the pit of my stomach, reminding me that the sacrosanct tradition of Taco Tuesday was awaiting my presence. So, the endless cycle of feeling like you are neither killing it on the work front nor succeeding at home base continues. Perhaps overhearing comments from well-meaning parents contributes to these feelings.

“Gee, that book week costume leaves a bit to be desired.”
“He’s always leaving work early. I guess his family is the priority.”

I should let you know I am fully aware of the incredibly privileged situation I find myself in. I have choice. I have delightful, healthy children. I have a partner, a flexible workplace, and a supportive boss. I am grateful for all these things. But (there is always a but, right?) I don’t think that absolves me from the responsibility of trying to change a system that perpetuates the myth my generation has been sold.

The Myth: You can have it all

Somewhere along the line we missed the fine print. The fine print details the hurdles and pitfalls. As a lawyer, I should have been a little wise to the darn fine print!

Yes, sure we can have it all — but only if we change cultural norms, break stereotypes, embed different social structures and get the buy-in of our employer and our partner’s employer, as well as block out the self-talk that perpetuates guilt and inadequacy.

She hears, “Oh, you have to work on Friday?”
He’s told, “It seems your wife is ambitious, but you should know you are required to work from the office every day. If your kids are sick, you will just have to figure it out.”

Yes, a boss of my husband’s past explained that if his wife wanted a career, perhaps he should consider stepping down from a leadership role to enable that. Cue disgust and anger!

This attitude blew my husband away. For me, it garnered no more than an eye-roll. Even though my husband and I had considered ourselves the bastion of modern family life, we had never really got into the nitty gritty of how our worldview correlated with the rest of the world. His boss’s comment precipitated an honest conversation we had not previously had. It was telling. My husband was appalled by the comment whereas I felt unsurprised. We discussed how the guilt and judgement I felt when he attended a school function while I worked was the opposite for him. He felt guilt and judgement when leaving work to attend the school function.

Men with employed spouses are more likely than men with at-home spouses to have reduced their aspirations (36 percent versus 19 percent).

[Leaders in a Global Economy: A Study of Executive Women and Men](#)

The wrong conversation

As it turned out, the comment sparked a lightbulb moment for us. We were able to articulate a disparity we'd both felt before but never been able to articulate. We were each affected by the invisible force of guilt, innate in those social norms. And this was a perfect example of the kind of comment that kept us locked into feeling diminished as parents and diminished professionally.

"Oh dear, that child always has tuckshop!"

"Is he out of work at the moment? I've seen him around the school at pickup every day this week!"

So, what's the answer? Well, maybe it's in those conversations we've been having. Perhaps all this time, as a society, we have been having the wrong conversations, or at least, only half of the right ones. Yes, we need to enable women to transition into the workforce after having children, but we also need to encourage and enable men to step out of the workplace and through the school gate.

There is an alternative to keeping us in an endless cycle of stress, feeling the pressure at work, at home, in our marriages. It is outrageous to accept that most women at school pickup love that routine to the exclusion of career fulfilment, or that men are not driven by the same instinct to be part of their children's lives.

The best of both worlds

To have it all, we need support within the familial, social, economic and employment structures in which we exist. Without this, we will surely fail in our quest for the perfect balance. We will have to choose which one of us can pursue the lofty heights of leadership, management, and career fulfilment, while the other becomes the part-time or full-time career and domestic manager — ergo, neither of us has it all.

The buck stops here

The in-house legal team I am privileged to work in is committed to gender equity in all its forms. We are empowered by our company and enabled by our general counsel to promote work — life balance and respect boundaries — our own boundaries and those of others.

We have decided if our industry is to change, the buck stops with each of us. One of our goals as an in-house legal team is to understand the priorities of our business partners, our colleagues, and our external providers so we can play our part in ensuring everyone has an opportunity to live fully outside of work while reaching their potential in employment — to help everyone to indeed have it all.

So, double down, people! Live your values unrelentingly. #Choosetochallenge the gender stereotypes that are rooted in last century. If you are a dad, proclaim with pride that you are taking time out to attend a reading group in your child's Prep class or leaving early to meet your child at the school gate. If you are a mother, shed the guilt of missing some of those events to take the time to attend an industry event or deliver a presentation.

As an in-house legal community, we can build a new normal! There is power in simply living our values, even in the face of criticism or cynicism. As in-house lawyers we have the power to make change in our teams and companies, as well as foster and encourage it in the wider legal community.

So, the next time a boss or a colleague leans over and chides your wife for her ambition or questions your commitment to the company because you're ducking out to watch someone receive an award on assembly — SPEAK UP.

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Greer McGowan is a proud member of the in-house legal team at Queensland Rail. She is passionate about finding ways to ensure everyone at work can live fully, both at home and in fulfilling their career aspirations.

