

Thoughts on Balancing Work and Family



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I grew up in Malaysia. After completing high school in Malaysia, I received a scholarship to study in Japan. I studied Chemical Engineering at Tokyo Institute of Technology. After that I joined P&G's R&D department in Kobe, and have been working on product development of several types of consumer goods. Two years ago, I transferred to work in P&G Singapore Innovation Center. I am married (to another P&G employee) and have 2 boys (aged 16 and 12).

Having grown up in Malaysia, where women having a career were regarded as 'successful', it felt just natural to get a good education and pursue a career, and in my childhood it had never really occurred to me that there could be challenges. Only in my final years in university did I realize that things could be a little bit different sometimes – it was not as easy for graduating females in science and engineering to secure a job in Japan, and even tougher for a foreigner female. But that was 20 years ago, so things are probably much different today!

There are many women managers in P&G Japan – some were expatriates from other countries, but some were Japanese too. In the first few years when I'd started working there was a session on Work-Life balance where a few female managers (Japanese, American, Australian) were invited for a panel discussion to share how they managed the demands of career and family. It was quite interesting to hear the different perspectives. I was married then but did not have any children yet; I didn't have any work-life balance problems yet that I needed tips on how to solve. So I attended the session simply out of curiosity. That was a very long time ago and I cannot recall every tip shared, but there were a couple of interesting comments (from Japanese managers) I still remember.

"Since we get a pretty decent salary, use the money to buy time – buy all the electrical gadgets you can get to save time."

"My husband and I list down all the household chores, how much time is needed for each, and input it all into

an excel sheet. Then we divide the work evenly, 50 : 50, between the two of us."

It sounded to me a bit contradictory to work hard and then end up spending your salary to buy time. And what if you didn't earn that much? These were the thoughts I had immediately after the session. Nevertheless, a couple of years later, when I returned to work after having my first son, this did begin to make sense. We bought a bigger fridge so that we need only do grocery shopping on weekends, and we bought a dishwasher so that we could spend less time washing dishes. We started to use online grocery shopping and delivery services to save time and effort, even though it was slightly more expensive. And I must say that these did reduce some stress, and were small 'investments' to keep a career. And the good news is, we don't have to buy a new fridge or dishwasher every month, or even every year!

My husband and I have not been as disciplined in dividing all the household chores equally. Whoever had a higher sense of duty toward a certain chore would just do it. Sometimes no one did for a time... And the house is always in an eternal mess. I once joked that I need to wear sunglasses at home so that I will see less of the mess! I suppose this is another part we have to compromise.

I have tried almost all the different programs at work such as maternity/child care leave, reduced work hours, and leave of absence. Some worked well for me, some did not – nevertheless I am grateful that those programs are in place for us to try. I am also grateful to the managers who have supported me. At present I am making full use of flex work hours and work-from-home – it is very helpful when I need to drop by my children's school for a couple of hours for a parent-teacher conference, for instance. I simply catch up with the work at night or on weekends. At the end of the day I think we need to be flexible to try and see what works for us and our unique situation, according to what our priorities are, even if not everything seems perfect and totally in control all the time.