

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Father's struggling to 'have it all'

By Naomi Shragai

Published April 15 2013

A senior television executive is reading a bedtime story to his eight-year-old daughter. It is 10pm and he has just returned home from work. His phone rings – a work call – and he answers it, leaving the story unfinished.

His daughter shouts from her bed: “You’re a terrible father!” He returns to his daughter and tries to explain, with little success, why the call was important.

This executive works late and sees his daughter for only about two hours during the working week. Although he feels guilty about this and fears he is missing the best moments of family life, he seems unable to switch off from work.

This scene will be familiar to many men in senior positions who have taxing jobs and struggle to respond to the demands of family life.

It is common for working women to reflect, sometimes publicly, on the challenges of juggling the needs of family and work. In recent decades, the role of fathers has changed too, giving them greater involvement in family life.

But often men find it difficult to deal with the conflicting demands of work and home. As I have seen in my own psychotherapy practice, it is, for many executives, a continuing, unresolved battle. As one chief executive whose children are now adults told me: “It was often a tug of war, and work would always win. I was always better at switching off from home at work than the other way round.”

The problem can be exacerbated because men are often climbing to the peak of their careers during their children’s formative years. Instead of family life being a rewarding break from the pressures of work, too often it comes a poor second with the result that the family – and the career – suffers.

Men rarely seek help for such problems early on. They can be unwilling to confront it, and may fear that it will be regarded as a weakness and may harm their promotion prospects. Often, these problems only present themselves when the individual reaches a crisis point such as divorce, depressive breakdown or alcohol misuse.

Many men justify their long working hours as wanting to provide the best for their families. Work, however, offers psychological as well as financial rewards – it can be exciting, challenging and provide satisfaction from a job or deal well done. Family life can feel messier, mundane and even boring in comparison.

The danger is that work can become a convenient escape from the emotional demands of family life. Top executives often develop a sense of themselves through their professional achievements, not through emotional connections. In contrast, their wives may value emotional connection over all else.

For some men, work can even become an alternative family; where they can feel more successful, more in control, and turn to colleagues for connections that they are missing at home.

Kerry Sulkowicz is a psychoanalyst and founder of the Boswell Group, a New York consultancy that specialises in advising chief executives on the psychological aspects of their work. He describes men with the most extreme difficulties in this regard as being unable to put themselves in another person’s shoes. They often have little self-awareness, cannot empathise and lack emotional language, which frequently angers and distances family members.

As a reaction to a more distant wife, the executive may begin an affair. Or he may turn to alcohol or male-dominated activities that further exclude the family. Career and home life can quickly unravel.

Mr Sulkowicz explains why such men focus on their careers: “At work they don’t have to deal so much with people who are emotionally needy, or who miss them [when they are away]. They often find these problems either trivial or incomprehensible.

“The kinds of problems these men solve at work tend to be practical and tactical, and action is rewarded with compensation, professional advancement and praise . . . However, problems at home are more emotional, and listening rather than doing is often the best approach.”

When such men transfer the authoritarian stance they adopt at work to home, family members feel resentful and alienated. It is often easier to tell employees what to do than a toddler or a teenager.

Mr Sulkowicz says it is not only the man’s family that can suffer, but also his career in the long term.

“The best-kept secret here is that these bullying, arrogant men are much less effective at work than they think they are,” he says. “While they may get a lot done, they inspire fear and avoidance, and they find themselves increasingly disconnected from their colleagues and their organisations.”

Some male executives, however, have adopted strategies for meeting the demands of corporate and home life, often combining a conscious decision to prioritise the family with strict timekeeping. For Greg Hodder, chief executive of Charles Tyrwhitt, the men’s clothing company, the decision was instinctive and driven by the fact that he thoroughly enjoyed being with his children.

The time when they were young, and family life was most demanding coincided with a particularly successful period of his career. “Having something demanding but different, rather than relaxing, gave me a real break from work,” he says.

He established a rule that he would not work past 6pm or at weekends – and he stuck to it. He does not look at emails during evenings or weekends, or take work on holiday. Showing his wife his devotion to the family strengthened their marriage.

Mr Hodder believes he has been able to achieve this by being extremely organised. “People who work long hours are less able to achieve their goals . . . They are people who tend to say yes to everything and end up out of control,” he adds.

Another senior executive, who works in the media, ensures that he makes breakfast for his three children and is there for their bedtime stories. He has sought to work in organisations that are sympathetic to family life.

Mr Sulkowicz believes companies can help, with astute human resources officers playing a proactive role. Perhaps, however, executives struggling with the issue should reflect on the old aphorism: “Work, no matter how stimulating and rewarding, will never love you back.”

*The writer is a psychotherapist and this article is partly based on her clinical experience. None of the individuals named are her clients*

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