

Can a Woman Have it All? – Ten Tips for a Glorious Career!

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Introduction: This past summer I read an article in the Atlantic Monthly by the brilliant Princeton University professor Anne-Marie Slaughter titled: “Why women still can’t have it all”. This article I heard was one of the most widely read articles and attracted a great deal of attention around the world. Dr. Slaughter talks about how she was torn between spending time with her sons back at Princeton and having an extremely high profile stint at the State Department. I was reminded of Dr. Slaughter’s article after my one hour conversation today with my PhD student. Her husband has a well established prestigious job, she has a daughter in grade school and the family is well-settled in Dallas. She has worked as a lecturer in the country where she was born and after her MS degree at The University of Texas at Dallas, under my supervision, she worked in the DFW Industry for almost three years before she started on her PhD. She would love to have a tenure track faculty position in a research university, but she is limited in her options as she is confined to the DFW Metropolis area. Here is the advice I gave her which is applicable to many women who try to have it all – marriage, motherhood and career.

First, it is not possible for anyone to have it all: Having it all is just a myth. Even a man does not have it all because most often he loses his connection with his children. I have had men who are exceptional scientists and engineers tell me “I cannot understand why my children do not want to study math and science”. Although I don’t tell them this, I say to myself “the answer is simple - you likely did not spend time with your children listening to their day-to-day issues at school when they were growing up and your wife is likely liberal arts major.”

Second, so what if you don’t have it all: It’s not the end of the world. Please read my motivational article “My Story: From Industry to Government to Academia”. Contrary what you may believe, my career did not come easy for me. I had to work very hard every step of the way. Also, we are women born in the third world countries. We both had arranged marriages. Therefore we have to accept that we do not have as many choices as men or women born in the first world. It does not mean that we cannot have career ambitions and set goals. It means that we have to be realistic.

Third, maximize what you have make use of every opportunity ahead of you: For example, back in the early to mid 1980s I was working as a developer at Control Data Corporation. I learnt everything I could on developing software. At the same time, I collaborated with a professor at the University of Minnesota and continued to publish in top tier venues. I also did my own research in the area of my PhD. These publications then helped me land a research job at Honeywell. I had to juggle it all – my son was between 5 and 7 years old at that time and so I tried to spend a lot of time with him, playing both indoor and outdoor games with him and also teaching him Math, making sure I met my deadlines at work for the product release, and during my spare time do my research. I had one advantage – I was in my late 20s, early 30s at that time and so I had lots of energy.

Fourth, Build your professional network: I have benefitted a great deal through organizations such as IEEE, ACM, IFIP, SWE among others. Have a strong web presence without sacrificing your privacy. Form a network to discuss topics like “Data Mining for Malware Detection” or “Social Network Mining”. A strong network will benefit you throughout your professional life.

Fifth, never ever dwell on the past or worry about the future: Yes, you can set goals. But if you cannot meet your goals then don't worry; learn to adjust your goals. Never say I should have done this or that except when you want to learn from your mistakes. Prepare three plans, Plan A is to apply for tenure track positions at local universities, Plan B is to work as a research scientist at our university and possibly join my start-up company if it does well. Plan C is to look for positions in the DFW industry. However, whatever you do, continue with writing papers, expanding your knowledge with technology and convert your thesis into a book and possibly write more research monographs.

Sixth, develop a thick skin: Your relatives and friends may say “what a waste of time doing a PhD since you don't have a tenure track position” or “you should have done medicine” - which is a typical comment people from the third world make because they often cannot think beyond medicine. It will be extremely upsetting. But you absolutely should not be bothered about it. Just ignore such comments or tell them t “I have it all – an accomplished husband with a secure job, wonderful daughter and a PhD in Cyber Security/Computer Science with a highly intellectual job I like – and as for doing medicine, the last thing I want to do is poke my finger into people's body parts.”

Seventh put your child/children first: Do not move out of town even if you get a great job, because it will affect your children's education and in the end make you miserable. I strongly believe that a child needs both parents to be together while growing up. The insecurity that a child has if parents live in different cities, even if they are not divorced and have a good marriage, is significant and would impact the education and possibly the life of the child. Remember children from broken families often end up in divorce. So do your very best within the constraints she has.

Eighth, Never compare with others: I see many of my colleagues always comparing their progress with that of others. This is something I almost never do. I usually could not care less of what others do. I set my own goals and follow my plans with a razor-like focus. While a certain amount of healthy competition is good for you, always looking over your shoulder at what the others do will make you miserable.

Ninth, always be positive: Look forward to your work every morning. There will always be opportunities for you if you have produced good work. For example your daughter would go to college in about 7-8 yrs and at that time you will be in your early to mid 40s with some solid experience and excellent technical credentials. At that time you can move to the National Science Foundation to be a program director for 3 years and that will open many opportunities.

Tenth, It's all about Focus: Be focused all the time. I have colleagues who are so focused that they accomplish a lot in a short time while other work very long hours and have very little to show. Organization and focus are crucial for a glorious career.

Conclusion: I have used the word *Glorious Career* instead of *Successful Career* because having a successful career does not mean that one is happy with one's career. My goal is to have a career that is personally rewarding and it's not about how you are perceived by others. From that point of view, I have had a glorious career. Even at my age I am still planning my career. For example, my next major milestone is when I am 65 in 2020 as I will be eligible to retire with full benefits then. At that time I will decide the work I want to do for the next 15 years. Along the way I will have to make adjustments such as taking care of grandchildren or taking time off to care for a sick relative. Regardless of what happens, as long as I am healthy, I will continue to teach, learn new technologies, develop software, publish papers and books, obtain patents, have startups, do stints in Washington and consult for the government. So in the end you need just one thing and that is health. Everything else will then fall into place.