

WORK & FAMILY

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MARKETPLACE

Keeping Your Career A Manageable Part Of Your Life

LONG AGO, I thought juggling work and family was like anything else in life: It would all work out if I tried hard enough.

Several years and two babies later, I felt as though I had been hit from opposite directions by two speeding trains. My kids had experienced all sorts of day-care traumas, I had a bad case of burnout, and my career track, through no fault of my employer, looked like a dying man's cardiogram.

Could I have used a few more skills in managing work and family? You bet. Would I have listened if someone had tried to teach them to me in advance? Maybe, maybe not.

But the idea that self-management skills — all the rage in career planning — can be taught in a formal way to ease work-family conflict was powerful enough to draw 20 business-school professors and corporate work-family managers to Merck headquarters at Whitehouse Station, N.J., recently to discuss it. The group, named the Wharton-Merck Work-Life Roundtable for its organizers, University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and Merck, includes Xerox, Johnson & Johnson and Marriott International, among other employers, and Northwestern University, the University of Virginia, Seattle University and other schools.

To identify "work-life balancing skills" shared by successful people, roundtable members did case studies of 36 professionals and managers. Some common abilities they discovered: clarifying and acting on your values; building trusting relationships at work; asking for what you need from bosses and family members and (heretical though it may seem) learning to accept from yourself "less than 100% some of the time" — a corollary to "working smarter," says Stewart Friedman, director of the Wharton Life Interests Project and a roundtable organizer. Wharton and Merck plan to publish a guide on the skills next year.

THE FOCUS ON self-management is long overdue. While corporate work-family programs such as child-care aid and flexible scheduling are important, a huge majority of Americans work for companies that offer no such supports. High-pressure jobs increasingly force people to pull out all the stops to manage personal and family responsibilities, yet few feel free to talk about it at work. Encouraging organizations to elevate successful examples to a level worthy of "forced time and attention," Dr. Friedman says, can break the silence and get people thinking about life balance earlier in their careers.

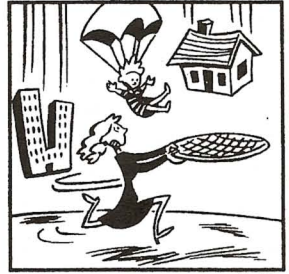
Indeed, learning from the stories of the Wharton-Merck research participants could help many of us make the kinds of midcourse corrections in life that forestall career derailment, burnout — or waking up on our deathbeds realizing we blew it.

For most of us, a few days in the life of Wendy L. Lewis, for example, a 39-year-old single mother of three who is human-resources manager for the Chicago Cubs and studies weekends for an M.B.A., would feel like

swinging a leaded bat before stepping up to the plate. Ms. Lewis trains like an athlete for her 19-hour days, watching her diet and often rising at 4 a.m. to work out.

She has learned how much her body can take. She tried sleeping only four hours a night, only to start dozing at the wheel of her car in broad daylight, she says. The lesson? "We have to take care of ourselves. We can manage the heck out of our time, but our bodies will only give up so much," she says.

Another learned skill: Ms. Lewis doesn't shrink from talking about her role-juggling with anyone affected by it. Though she sometimes uses vacation time or takes work home to meet commitments, she frequently



Carol Lay

discusses her schedule with her boss so he knows "I'm going to get the job done," she says. At home, she talks "constantly" with her daughters about their feelings and needs.

ANOTHER NECESSITY: Delegate, delegate, delegate. Ms. Lewis's 18-year-old twins have learned to pay household bills and plan meals. At work, she recently gave a staffer the task of interviewing job candidates.

And in perhaps the toughest challenge, she reaches out to others. After suffering "a lot of guilt" because she can't always pick up her youngest daughter, 10, from after-school care, she asked another mother to drive her home a few days a week. To Ms. Lewis's relief, the mother was happy to help.

In other cases, work-family successes were constructed on a foundation of past failure. One manager said he bowed early in his career to pressure to take an overseas assignment without his wife and children. Though he came home for a long weekend every few months, the separation "was just too much" for his family, he says. A painful divorce followed. Chastened, the manager, now remarried, finds ways to devote more energy to his second wife and family.

Why should employers care? Perry Christensen, Merck's director of human resource strategy and planning, paraphrases noted author and consultant Peter Senge of MIT: "You can't build an effective company on a foundation of broken homes and strained personal relationships." Self-management skills are the building blocks of good management, says Mr. Christensen, a co-organizer of the roundtable. Just as cross-training or a stint abroad can increase an employee's value, the ability to savor a rich personal and family life also affords "depth, perspective and skill."

Next week: The lives of two professionals show how integrating work and family is a process — not an event.