

ACHIEVING BALANCE AT THE OFFICE AND AT HOME

KPMG

Women today have gone beyond their traditional roles of wife, mother and homemaker, pursuing ambitious career goals like their male counterparts in various industries. Three women from KPMG, an international accounting firm specialising in audit, tax and advisory services, demonstrate how having the best of both worlds is possible with a good sense of balance and support from those who matter most.

Teresa Chong and Pauline Tam represent the everyday modern women who balance career and family life. Both established an illustrious career path at KPMG, rising up the corporate ladder to where they are today as Partners in the firm. Their challenging career, however, did not give them the reason to put family in the backseat. In fact, both women managed well with their familial responsibilities, despite a few bumps along the road during the initial stages.

Pauline, a Tax Partner and a mother of two, admitted that juggling both work and family demands was initially difficult. But thanks to her supportive husband, it was manageable between them. She is thankful for being in a firm that understands the needs of its staff.

KPMG, being “a people organisation”, gives the flexibility to its female employees to apply for time off from work to address family matters, or opt for a flexi work week. Even with such supportive measures, the individual employee herself must also take the initiative to prioritise and manage their time efficiently. Yet, with the flexibility provided by the firm, Pauline and Teresa revealed that they managed well enough on their own without the need to take advantage of it.

Teresa, an Audit Partner, believes that to achieve a good balance one must have discipline in one’s work and must know when to draw the line. *“For me, weekends are reserved as quality time with my family. I have a supportive husband who understands the nature of my work, which I see as very important for a career woman. Proper planning of work is crucial so that deadlines would not burden the team with unnecessary stress. My style of work is also to avoid any late surprises.”*

She also encouraged her staff to work on having a “Work-Life Balance”, a positive culture supported by the firm with an understanding of the importance of balancing a career and personal life.

“KPMG is very supportive in terms of personal development. The firm organises various programmes to help improve the technical and soft skills of its staff; including providing financial support to those who are pursuing, or interested in pursuing their professional qualification,” said Pauline, who has served in KPMG for the past 25 years.

She added that the firm practices an “open door” policy where staff who face challenges at work are always welcome to seek guidance or advice from their Partners, Managers or Seniors.

KPMG Malaysia is one of the best accounting firms nationwide, a “Big Four” firm with a global network of professional member firms operating in 145 countries. That alone and the opportunities it provides has attracted many, including Pauline and Teresa, to be a part of this firm.

“What enticed me to join the firm are the opportunities outlined for me in aid of my career advancements. I’m glad I’ve made the right choice,” Pauline went on.

Prior to joining KPMG, Pauline laid her career foundations with a renowned bank upon completing her high school education. A year later, she felt that banking did not satisfy her prowl for success and went on to join KPMG in 1983. Since then, there was no looking back. With the firm, she had laid a solid career foundation and progressed to where she is today, a Partner since 2002.

Teresa, on the other hand, started her career with KPMG as a fresh graduate 18 years ago. She has been involved in audit throughout those years with an impressive portfolio of clients that consists of public listed companies, multinationals and private limited companies.

“KPMG provides great exposure in all industries and we are practically learning every day. I would say in this profession you will always learn something new and keep boredom at bay each day,” said Teresa.

In Malaysia, an individual cannot call themselves an accountant if he or she is not a member of the Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA). Being associated with MIA and other reputable professional bodies is important to add on to the credentials. KPMG continuously invests in staff by having regular updates of the industry and training is a compulsory part of their continuous learning and development.

KPMG clearly does not compromise on their training activities. In this service industry, one needs to be equipped with the industry knowledge and updates to enable the provision of an effective level of services. Clients do pay more if they see added value from the firm.

Both women agreed that the training and updates they received through the firm, coupled with the professional accreditation and practical work experience, have driven them to achieve their career goals and led them to where they are today.

But the learning experience is not solely confined to technicalities. Teresa believes that dealing with people is the toughest part of the job, as one has to accept each other’s view and find mutual ground.

She went on to add that there are no gender issues within KPMG. Both male and female staff are given an equal amount of training and opportunities to expand their portfolios.

At KPMG, the industry is presently dominated by women and she believes the firm will see more female leaders in the pipeline soon.

Teresa advised women to stand firm on their views and demonstrate their capabilities. “Be honest, genuine and open. That should garner you appreciation and respect.”

In the context of balancing the demands of work and family, Pauline added that women have to be very focused in what they do and prioritise their work and personal tasks in advance. *“Of course, having a supportive and understanding husband helps to make it work too.”*

On the other hand, along with working mothers like Pauline and Teresa, single women have taken up a prominent part in today’s workforce. Leanne Koh, a Partner under the tax function of KPMG, is one example of a driven single woman who manages to juggle both a successful career and a fulfilling personal life.

Leanne originally came from a legal background prior to joining KPMG as a Tax Consultant in 2000. She discovered that the law background and practical experience gained through the legal field was helpful in interpreting tax laws and formulating defences. Six years later, she was made Partner.

Her progression up the corporate ladder, other than by hard work and determination, was also thanks to the firm’s supportive Partners and the many opportunities given to try out new assignments, new challenges. She added: *“KPMG has many fantastic mentors. Their passion and drive has provided me guidance not only in my career, but over the last eight years, has influenced my way of life as well.”*

To those single women who are striving for a success in both career and life, Leanne believes that being focused is the operative word. *“Just remember: know what you want and work for it.”*