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Cornell Hospitality Report Female Executives in Hospitality:

Reflections on Career Journeys and Reaching the Top

by Kate Walsh, Ph.D., Susan S. Fleming, Ph.D. and Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D.

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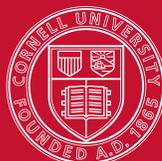
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Structured interviews with twenty women who are top corporate executives or entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry revealed the talent, resourcefulness, and support required to achieve such a position. During the interviews, these successful women cited these three keys to career advancement: (1) the importance of taking thoughtful risks, including non-linear assignments; (2) the criticality of networking; and (3) the significance of finding a sponsor. Two notable challenges for these executives were the possibility that they would be regarded as a token and the need to integrate their work and family life. They noted that keys to meeting work and family responsibilities were having flexibility and autonomy in their schedules and engaging a strong support network, which usually included a life partner. Eight of the twenty had stepped away from corporate roles to run their own businesses. These entrepreneurs acknowledged the considerable work responsibilities resulting from their choice; however, gaining control of their careers made the effort worthwhile and the experience meaningful.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Kate Walsh, Ph.D., is an associate professor of management at the School of Hotel Administration. She received her Ph.D. from the Carroll School of Management at Boston College and her M.P.S. degree from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. Her primary research is in the area of services management. She also conducts research examining the role of strategic human resource initiatives on organizational performance. In addition to contributing to numerous books, her articles are appearing or have appeared in such outlets as *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Human Resource Management Review*, *Organization Science*, *Research in Management Consulting*, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *The Learning Organization*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* and *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*. Her industry experience includes positions with Nikko Hotels International, the former Bristol Hotels Company, and Loews Corp. She is also a Certified Public Accountant.



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Surround yourself with people who are committed to help you grow. That includes employers, friends, and above all, your life partner. With employers, look for companies that have a track record of developing talent and promotion from within. With friends, spend time with people who rejoice in your success and want to help you get wherever you want to go. And finally your life partner: someone who really understands your goals and will share with you the burden of achieving them... So that is my advice to my twenty-two-year-old self.

The career journeys of top female leaders in hospitality is a research area that has yet to be fully explored and understood. Most likely, this is due to the fact that while women constitute half of new professional entrants to the hospitality industry, they encompass a much smaller percentage of top hospitality executives, and as a result, they have not been the focus of much study.¹ For these reasons, we wanted to give voice to a talented group of professionals and also provide direction for our own young graduates. Using a qualitative methodology, we examined the career paths of twenty accomplished and successful women hospitality executives and entrepreneurs. By documenting their successes and challenges, we sought to provide greater insight into their careers that would not only help young professionals entering the industry, but also guide organizations wishing to develop talent and retain future leaders.

¹ For an exception, see: J. Boone, T. Veller, K. Nikolaeva, M. Keith, K. Kefgen, and J. Houran, "Rethinking the Glass Ceiling in the Hospitality Industry," *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, Vol. 54 (2013), 230-239.

Despite recognition of the value of women leaders in hospitality, the data suggest that the industry has made little progress in developing this potentially powerful pool of talent. Companies such as Carlson Rezidor, Denihan, Fairmont, and Four Seasons have had or currently have women in the CEO or president's role, but these are the exceptions. Instead, the industry's progress in developing its leadership pipeline with female talent has been sluggish. Indeed, a 2013 report from Catalyst indicated that while women make up 52.4 percent of the labor force in *Fortune* 500 hospitality companies, they constitute only 15.5 percent of executive officers.² This percentage is comparable to data for all *Fortune* 500 companies, where women hold just 14 percent of executive-level positions.³ In addition, representation of women at the board of director level is also sparse, with women holding 17 percent of director positions within the *Fortune* 500 in general, and 15 percent within *Fortune* 500 hospitality companies.⁴ These percentages persist despite numerous studies showing that companies with the most women on their boards financially outperform companies with no women directors.⁵ These statistics suggest that there still exists untapped female talent that, if more fully deployed, could enable professionals to develop meaningful careers and simultaneously enhance companies' performance. With the goal of uncovering how to more effectively tap this talent, we explore the career journeys of women who have successfully advanced to top leadership roles in the hospitality industry, and give voice to their perspectives.

Study Methodology

We identified twenty senior or top-level female executives, based on our knowledge of the industry and our respondents' recommendations. To uncover perspectives about their own career progression, the challenges they face at various stages in their advancement, and their ideas about

² See: R. Soares, J. Combopiano, A. Regis, Y., Shur, and R. Wong, "Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Executive Officers," Catalyst, 2012; and U.S. Bureau of Labor. "Current Population Survey: Table 18: Employed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," 2012. Note that the 2013 *Fortune* 500 hospitality companies comprise Marriott International, Las Vegas Sands, MGM Resort International, Caesars Entertainment, Starwood Hotels & Resorts, and Wynn Resorts.

³ Soares *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁴ R. Soares, J. Combopiano, A. Regis, Y., Shur, and R. Wong, "Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors," Catalyst, 2012.

⁵ R.D. Adler, "Women in the Executive Suite Correlate to High Profits," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 79, No. 3 (2001), pp. 30-32; N.M. Carter and H.M. Wagner, "The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards (2004–2008)," *Catalyst*, 2011; Catalyst, *The bottom line: Connecting corporate performance and gender diversity*: Catalyst, 2004; and N.L. Erhardt, J.D. Werbel, and C.B. Shrader, "Board of Director Diversity and Firm Financial Performance," *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, Vol. 11 (2003), pp. 102-111.

I think that international experience is going to be critical and somewhat a requirement for an individual who seeks to run a part of a multi-national business, or even any of our businesses, because the reality is your customer is a global customer.

ways their companies can retain them, we conducted semi-structured in-person or phone interviews, using the rubric shown in Exhibit 1. All three researchers participated in these interviews, which lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, and which were recorded and transcribed. We next content-analyzed the 255 pages of transcriptions, noting where ideas converged along key themes. Finally, we substantiated our identified themes, using Atlas.ti 7, a qualitative software tool designed to assist in analyzing large bodies of text.

Using the Atlas.ti software word count function and coding process, we searched each theme identified through our initial content review. This search enabled us to locate all quotations within the transcribed documents that used key word families. Thus we were able to substantiate our identified themes and ensure they were represented throughout our interviews. A review of the word count also enabled us to uncover any ideas not captured through our initial content analysis. Thus, our analysis of the highlighted word families strengthened the validity of the themes generated through our initial content analysis, and ensured that interviewee responses were accurately represented.

Sample

Not surprisingly, the respondents in our sample were similar in demographics. Except for two interviewees (10%) who were in their late 30s, our respondents were in their 40s or older. All but two respondents were married, and fifteen (75%) were mothers, with an average of two children. Nine of these professionals (45%) were alumnae of the Cornell

Interview protocol

1. Thinking of your career progression to date, what stands out for you as some significant milestones or achievements?
2. How have your aspirations changed over time?
3. What challenges specific to being a female professional in a predominantly male environment did you face early in your career? How have those challenges changed over your career? What are they now?
4. What do you see as the biggest challenges new graduates starting out face? Those mid-career?
5. What advice would you give to your 22-year-old self?
6. If you could create the ideal work setting for women to succeed, what would it look like?
7. What do you see as the state of the industry in paving the path for women leaders to make it to the executive level? Do you see the pipeline of rising women growing, contracting, or staying the same?
8. What advice would you provide your company, and the industry, to keep talent such as yourself?

University School of Hotel Administration. Eight of the twenty women (40%) had started their own hospitality-related businesses. Ranging from a solo proprietorship to firms with more than 20 employees, their businesses included financial consulting and investing, as well as consulting in the marketing, human resource, and food and beverage domains. The remaining twelve held corporate positions with high levels of responsibility. Their titles included president of a division, executive vice president of development, senior vice president of human resources, senior vice president of operations, senior vice president of sales and marketing, vice president food and beverage, regional director of marketing, and general manager. These executives were employed by companies such as Starwood, Marriott, and Hilton, to name a few, but four smaller, high-end hospitality companies were also represented, as well as an airline and a food-service company. All in all the successful women studied in this project comprised leaders from a wide variety of hospitality companies, with responsibilities that spanned all disciplines, and who were working at the corporate, regional, and property levels. Their career journeys were marked with significant promotions and increasing levels of responsibilities. All but two interviewees had spent their entire careers to date working within the hospitality industry.

Findings

Our findings are organized into two sections, beginning with keys to success reported by these executives. As part of this reflection, we discuss their advice to graduates just beginning their hospitality careers. Next, we highlight some of the challenges these women faced as they progressed in their careers, whether they advanced within organizations or chose to start their own entrepreneurial ventures. In this context, we

focus in particular on challenges that arose when integrating careers with non-work lives, as this was one of the most prevalent themes drawn from our interviews. We also highlight strategies for overcoming barriers that they encountered. Finally, we conclude with reflections on the experience of building a professional career in hospitality.

Keys To Success

Three keys to success stood out in our interviews, both because they were consistently mentioned and because they received special emphasis as being critical. These keys are (1) the importance of taking thoughtful risks, including non-linear assignments; (2) the criticality of networking; and (3) the significance of finding a sponsor.

Taking intelligent risks, including non-linear assignments. Our respondents stressed the value associated with going outside of one's comfort zone to take chances with different types of work. While these professionals were clearly focused and driven, they also recognized the importance of seizing opportunities that were not part of their original plans. These opportunities often became the foundation for significant and meaningful career shifts and they helped these professionals to build their core skills, while simultaneously differentiating themselves. The women observed that even when careers make sense retrospectively, they can appear random and disjointed as they unfold. Our respondents cautioned against allowing an unsettled feeling to keep a young professional from trying something new, as confronting challenge is how one learns and grows. Thus, while planning is necessary, seizing and adapting to opportunities is essential. As one respondent phrased it,

I think it's great to have a plan, and great to have an idea of where you want to go, but there's a lot of different ways to get there, and if you don't open yourself up to the different opportunities or different paths, you could miss something even better than what you imagined.

Supporting that idea, another respondent commented about recognizing opportunities, noting that,

Out of school I think you feel this drive to succeed. You've had to strive to get good grades, strive to graduate, strive to get a job. And so, out of school the thought was well, you're going to go into a firm and then you'll get this position, then you'll get the next position, then you'll get promoted to this level. And I was looking at working in operations so I thought, Okay, you get to be a GM, then you go to regional, maybe corporate. And here's what the progression is and here's what the ladder is and it looks so neat and orderly. But I think you realize that along the way you're presented with different opportunities and it's up to you to make the most of those opportunities and shape the direction of your career...it's not always linear.

Still a third respondent focused on intelligent risks saying new managers should,

...ensure that they're willing to take risks, albeit they should be intelligent risks. I mean, don't take a risk in terms of taking a move or a job that just truly doesn't make sense, but ensuring that you're pushing yourself to make the moves that potentially take you outside of your comfort zone. I think there might be a tendency that some people have to think that they're kind of on this one path and they can't get off it to realize they can shift gears and they can take classes and they can expand their horizons and try different things and not be afraid to put themselves in a situation that might be slightly outside of their comfort zone.

One executive commented that because many of her direct reports are married and have families, they are hesitant to try new opportunities that have the potential to upset or cause them to reconfigure their work-family balance. While we explore this issue in greater detail later, in the context of risk, this interviewee noted,

I think that younger women, at least the younger women that I'm working with, they expect more, they're not as flexible or willing to take as many risks. And that may keep them from seeing—or realizing the possibilities.

In helping young professionals to map out potential career paths, this respondent was asking them to consider the value associated with moving off a traditional linear career track to obtain broad levels of foundational experience. This included accepting international assignments, field operations leadership roles (e.g., general manager), and lateral moves. This theme emerged multiple times. Respondents believed that taking lateral assignments widens one's skill

I often stress the fact that I think some of the lateral moves that I took were more beneficial than my promotional moves, because they really broadened the foundation of my knowledge of the business. By the time I then was ready for a promotional move, my foundation was much more solid than had I just simply done it on a straight path.

set and increases potential future success. With regard to international positions, one respondent noted,

I think that an international experience is going to be critical and somewhat a requirement for an individual who seeks to run a part of a multi-national business, or even any of our businesses, because the reality is your customer is a global customer.

This respondent went on to highlight the importance of lateral moves:

A lateral move is something on an organizational chart—it doesn't tell you what you're going to learn, experiences that you're going to have that you wouldn't have had had you stayed on a single career path. That's how I talk about taking a risk—in terms of something that's very, very different than what you've done before, but also it's going to build a foundation...One, it will make you stronger, but two, potentially could also differentiate you. I do talk a lot about what it means to personally differentiate yourself, and how do you go about doing that—including my decision in the middle of my career to go back and get my MBA.

Another participant also noted the potential value of sideways moves:

I often—very often, actually—stress the fact that I think some of the lateral moves that I took were more beneficial than my promotional moves, because they really broadened the foundation of my knowledge of the business. By the time I then was ready for a promotional move, my foundation was much more solid than had I just simply done it on a straight path.

Sponsors are indispensable, because those are the people who open the door and say to somebody on the other side of it, “This is the time for her to have this job. This is the time for her to have this responsibility.” I was very fortunate to have people I worked with [as sponsors]. And like I say, it was men.

In addition to broadening one’s skill set, challenging assignments also provide opportunities for professionals to work with a different set of associates and widen their networks. This idea leads to the second theme that wove through our interviews: the power of networks.

Developing powerful networks. Time and again, our respondents referenced the value of their personal and professional networks. Their advice to new graduates is to be strategic about how they let others know about their talents and to focus on increasing their visibility in the industry. Yet they also cautioned that the process is not “glad-handing,” but rather, about building long-term professional relationships. One respondent shared advice that one of her previous mentors provided. She commented,

One of the things he always said was, ‘It’s really important to network and I don’t expect an analyst to, you know, reach out to the CEO of [X Company]. I expect you to reach out to people at your level because some day they’re going to be the CEO of [X Company].’ And that’s something that I always tell everyone that I work with. You’re not here just to analyze data or to do market research. You also need to develop connections. I know I really go back to those first jobs but it was really where I made my greatest connections and learned the most and from there kind of went on to have a career that [was what I wanted to do].

A critical point raised by our respondents is that they did not realize how important their early networking would be to their eventual success. They acknowledged that the

process of reaching out to others may be awkward and appear unnatural or even disingenuous. That said, they were clear that young professionals should not give up trying to build connections; becoming involved with organizations is a trial and error process. As one respondent said,

I’m still very active with the Cornell Hotel Society, and I think that the power of that—and no matter what school you go to, everybody’s got their own internal networking—is a great place to start. And then you have all of your professional networks that you can reach out to, and I think exploring those and finding the right fit [is what you should do]...I think you have to look at it as what’s going to be most effective for you. What organizations, in addition to an alumni association, would be the best bet? And sometimes you have to try a few of them on....I think there’s some people that look at networking as ‘Let me put down all the names of these organizations so I have them for my résumé,’ without really understanding the benefit and the power of that network.

Another respondent advised,

Have the gumption, be able to step up and say, ‘I know you.’ We call it chutzpah, let me have the chutzpah to go and ask for just an intro. The intro is not going to get you the job, but the intro is going to get you the conversation that your credentials can then sell someone on the job.

Building credentials was connected to sponsorship, which is the third key to success our respondents shared.

Earning sponsorship. Our respondents pointed to the importance of actively seeking out sponsors and gaining their support by working hard to do their jobs extremely well. Doing so reaped important benefits, as their sponsors acted as advocates who promoted them within and often beyond their organizations. Respondents pointed out that their sponsors were different than their mentors, who provided support, advice, and ideas. One executive commented on these differences as she remarked,

I think we can mentor ourselves by looking at all of the things we admire and understanding why we admire them and how to do those things authentically in our own way. But sponsors are indispensable, because those are the people who open the door and say to somebody on the other side of it, ‘This is the time for her to have this job. This is the time for her to have this responsibility.’ And I was very fortunate to have people I worked with. And like I say, it was men.

A second respondent reflected in a similar way. She commented,

Someone who really believes in you sets their own ego aside to help you or propel you to move on. It’s really important and for me they’ve always been a sounding board and they still are. A couple of them I call all the time just to check in

and see how I'm doing kind of thing. Seek out, seek to develop those kinds of relationships where you can find them.

Many of our respondents made themselves invaluable to their direct reports, who often became their sponsors. In fact, most commented that they worked hard to do their jobs well, so that those in positions of power and influence would come to rely on them with increased job responsibilities. Thus, our respondents advised that to earn sponsorship, one must "be excellent and work incredibly hard." As one executive said,

It might be an old fashioned view, but I do believe that if you work hard and you have the right attitude, that will be returned and people will recognize that. I think the hotel industry is one of those businesses where that can happen.

It is about having the right underlying attitude, noted one interviewee.

Maybe it's because I'm in the hotel industry, but I think you get out what you put in, in terms of effort, hard work, attitude. I also think, to some degree, you're in charge of your own destiny...understand that you can influence it at any time, you can change it at any time.

Overall, our interviewees commented that having sponsors was critical to their career progression, particularly during their formative initial years. This observation is consistent with research on sponsors, which shows that individuals with a sponsor are more satisfied with their rate of advancement, more likely to ask for a stretch assignment or a pay raise, and, not surprisingly, less likely to leave their organizations. However, the women in our sample are unusual in this regard, as the same research showed men are more likely to have sponsors than are women.⁶ Further, research suggests that women are often subjected to unconscious bias about their suitability for high-level management roles, and as a result they often need the endorsement of a sponsor, even more so than their male counterparts.⁷ Although not explicitly identified by most of our participants, it was apparent that much of their success was attributed to exceptional talent, hard work, and commitment to their careers and organizations. Our interviews reinforced for us how valuable it would be for organizations to identify, support, and sponsor professionals just like these.

⁶ S.A. Hewlett, K. Peraino, L. Sherbin, and K. Sumberg, "The Sponsor Effect: Breaking through the Last Glass Ceiling," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 80 (2010), pp. 66-73.

⁷ H. Ibarra, N. Carter, and C. Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 88 (2010), pp. 80-85.

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Of course, the failure to advance can result from other factors. Two major challenges involve being viewed as a token and the need to integrate work and life, as we discuss next.

Challenges to Advancement

Being the token. In addition to asking our participants to discuss factors that had contributed to their success, we also asked them to comment on the barriers they encountered, as well as reflect on how they had overcome them. Strikingly, when explicitly asked about these challenges, our respondents typically discounted them, instead expressing a "can do" attitude and stories of how they had worked past adversity. As one respondent explained,

I grew up in kind of a no-victim mentality environment in my home, so we never really spoke about the things that get in the way; it was sort of a "just do it" mentality.

It is clear that our respondents had experienced career roadblocks, and our interviews were littered with casual references to instances of feeling different, being 'the only woman in the room,' and even a few cases of intentional bias and discrimination. However, it seemed clear that our participants had simply chosen to ignore these barricades in favor of focusing on the opportunities in front of them. This is illustrated in one interviewee's comment,

I will tell you, though, I did witness boys' clubs early on ... And you know, you hear terms like "bossy" or "pushy"

There are a whole set of challenges in mid-career and it's meant a lot of gifted leaders go off track or leave the workforce... That first flush of enthusiasm and maybe some early promotions are behind you and you're working very hard, but you haven't yet reached a level where the really bigger psychic and financial rewards start to kick in... You may be constrained by your circumstances, trying to balance.

when they're applied to women and I was called "bossy" or "pushy" or those kinds of things on occasion. And I was the only female leader at many of the meetings. And that is one of the challenges that the company I worked for so many years continues to face. But, the result always trumped the negative remarks. I had great teams, great industry success, and I didn't really take any of the bait on the pushy or bossy.

Similarly, another senior woman commented,

If you go towards things, then things open up. If you look at the opportunity in things rather than, 'Oh there's this difficulty and that difficulty,'...so again, if you come back to women in management, if the thing I had in my mind all the time was, 'Oh, I'm a woman... When I started, I'm going to be the only woman on this 17-man graduate team—how's that going to be? Oh, I'm the only woman on this board. I'm the only woman in this group.' If I thought about that, for me it would've gotten in the way. So it's very important, but it's not important, so I don't give it that importance, because you don't want it to stop you from being successful. Then when you are successful, you can then influence.

At the same time, our participants were not suggesting that the strategy of ignoring gender barriers and just pushing ahead should be expected of women or that gender bias should be tolerated. In contrast, many of them reported advocating for women in their organizations and the industry so that future generations of female hospitality leaders would not have to encounter the same barriers they did.

Despite their overall focus on the possibilities, a few specific challenges for women did emerge from our interviews. These included an inability for women professionals to see a path to the top (given some of the subtle cultural biases within their organizations) and a lack of female executive role models to emulate. Most critically, they identified a dearth of support, flexibility, and autonomy needed to successfully integrate career and family demands, as we discuss next.

Integrating work and life. Although we did not explicitly ask participants about their experiences pursuing a high-level career while simultaneously having a family, nearly everyone in our sample identified this as a challenge that wove in and out of their lives, particularly when they were mid-career executives. This is because many had taken on operations roles that required a consistent on-site presence and irregular hours. Respondents also identified frequent travel as particularly demanding, especially for mothers. One participant poignantly told us,

I travel a bit. I think one of your questions was what's kind of the most rewarding, and then what are the biggest frustrations. I think the travel piece probably fits both of those buckets. It's definitely the most rewarding, but at the same point and time you have to look at a six-year-old girl (her daughter) and say, 'I'll see you in a week.'

Many of our interviewees had experienced the inevitable tension between excelling at a demanding job and meeting personal and social expectations to serve as a parent to children or caregiver to aging parents. Some saw it as a significant factor causing women to exit the hospitality sector. For example, one respondent explained:

There are a whole set of challenges in mid-career and it's meant a lot of gifted leaders go off track or leave the workforce... That first flush of enthusiasm and maybe some early promotions are behind you and you're working very hard, but you haven't yet reached a level where the really bigger psychic and financial rewards start to kick in... You may be constrained by your circumstances, trying to balance. Both women and men who have families or want to have them, and want to be personally involved with their children or with older parents or their communities, I think, get especially squeezed in mid-career. And they deal with it in different ways. Women who step out of the workforce at that time have a variety of things to contend with. If they don't make a lot of money and childcare is expensive—if they have two or more children—they may literally not be netting a lot at the end of the day when they've paid all their work expenses and their childcare. Depending on how the emotional and logistical burden of having a household is shared, it can be challenging. And it is socially more acceptable for women to leave the work force.

Our participants' observation that the challenges of integrating work and family has a disproportionate impact

on women is consistent with existing research. Studies show that while both men and women do opt-out permanently or take career breaks, women do so at a higher rate than men. One study found that 37 percent of high-level women executives had taken a break during their careers, versus 24 percent of men.⁸ This number increased to 43 percent for mothers, but did not change for fathers. Further, when asked about their reasons for their career break, 44 percent of women identified caring for children or parents as significant factors, while only 12 percent of men did. Other reasons women cited for leaving were to earn a degree or other training (23%), because work was not satisfying or enjoyable (17%), to move away (17%), and to change careers (16%).⁹

The women in our sample—who had survived their mid-career years to become senior executives in the hospitality sector or entrepreneurs—employed a variety of strategies to respond to work-family challenges. Four of the twenty women simply elected to not yet have children.¹⁰ Others delayed having children as late as possible; they believed that having both a high level career and a family was extraordinarily difficult or simply impossible. As one woman explained:

I always had the impression or took the position that you really can't do it all and do it all well. So I consciously put the family and children thing on the side to focus on the career aggressively. And then at a certain point and time, in my mid to late thirties started to relook at those decisions and say, I've accomplished a lot and I'm proud of what I've done, but the one thing that I haven't done that I want to do is focus on family and I'd like to have children.

This respondent, and others, simply delayed having children until they were at a point in their careers where they felt they could successfully manage both. For example, as one participant explained,

One of the things for me, which was so important in trying and having a family, was to accelerate my career and get my career in the place where I could basically create my own schedule and, have enough support around me, that is, people working for me, that I could balance having a young family with my job.

In all, respondents gave thoughtful attention to how they could integrate their work and family lives. As research

⁸ S.A. Hewlett and C.B. Luce, "Off-ramps and On-ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 83 (2005), p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ It is worth noting that our sample was atypical in that sixteen of the twenty women we interviewed have children, as compared to one prominent study that found only 58 percent of high-achieving corporate women had children (versus 75 percent of comparable men). See: S.A. Hewlett, "Executive Women and the Myth of Having It all. *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 80 (2002), pp. 66-73.

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in work-family integration and facilitation indicates,¹¹ this is not a new area of challenge. These studies consistently point out that the ability to schedule work flexibly and have control over work and home schedules is associated with greater job satisfaction, emotional well-being, and overall life satisfaction, as well as lower turnover intentions. This is especially true for women professionals, including the ones we interviewed, as we discuss next.¹²

Overcoming Challenges

Autonomy. Interestingly, whether the mothers in our sample chose to have children early in their careers or waited until much later, virtually all identified two components as abso-

¹¹ D.S. Carlson, J.G. Grzywacz, and K.M. Kacmar, "The Relationship of Schedule Flexibility and Outcomes via the Work-Family Interface," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 25 (2010), pp. 330-355; E.E. Kossek, B.A. Lautsch, and S.C. Eaton, "Telecommuting, Control, and Boundary Management: Correlates of Policy Use and Practice, Job Control, and Work-Family Effectiveness," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 68 (2006), pp. 347-367; Z. Chen, G.N. Powell, and J.H. Greenhaus, "Work-to-Family Conflict, Positive Spillover, and Boundary Management: A Person-Environment Fit Approach," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 74 (2009), pp. 82-93; L.A. McNall, J.M. Nicklin, and A.D. Masuda, "A Meta-analytic Review of the Consequences Associated with Work-Family Enrichment," *Journal of Business and Psychology*, Vol. 25 (2010), pp. 381-396.

¹² S.L. Boyar, C.P. Maertz Jr, A.W. Pearson, and S. Keough, Work-Family Conflict: A Model of Linkages between Work and Family Domain Variables and Turnover Intentions," *Journal of Managerial Issues*, Vol. 15 (2003), pp. 175-190; P. Moen, E. Kelly, and Q. Huang, "Work, Family and Life-course Fit: Does Control over Work Time Matter?," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 73 (2008), pp. 414-425.

Today, for example, I could have worked at home, but it was more conducive to what I had going on to be in the office. The organization provides me the flexibility on a day like this... I'm going to get the same work done for [the company] today if I'm in this office in [X city], at my house in [Y city], or sitting at the car dealership waiting for my car to be fixed.

lutely critical to successfully integrating a demanding career and family. The first is autonomy in how and when they got their work done, and the second is family support. Repeatedly, we heard from interviewees that it is possible to balance the long hours and heavy demands of an executive position in the hospitality industry with the demands of a family, but only when they had two critical components of autonomy: flexibility and control over their schedules. For example, one participant explained,

I could not imagine not having the flexibility when I need it. You know, here I regret what I did when my son was an infant [taking almost no maternity leave], but I don't think I ever missed a school play or a significant game... I can make my schedule.

Other respondents commented on how they work to maintain control over schedules in ways that organize both their work and home lives. As one executive explained,

I am a rabid scheduler, much to the distaste of my family. And so it had to do with making sure that I paid as much attention to my home schedule as my professional schedule. I tried to schedule my travel around—once you get the cadence of the school year down it's kind of like the cadence of the talent review process at work, that I knew I wouldn't travel the first week of school. I knew that we were going to take family vacations over the holidays. I went through my calendar and really blocked it out that way.

Another respondent shared a similar philosophy. She explained,

My home life is super, super structured. On Sundays I do a grocery-shopping list. I do a meal plan of what we're going to eat every night that week. It's 6:00... we sit down as a family for dinner. Whoever cooked gets our daughter ready for bed while the other person does the dishes. When that's finished up, and she goes to bed at 9:00, then we both kind of catch up on some emails or this or that, and then it's sleep. The weekends are mostly just family time with the exception of here and there if one of us has to do some work or this or that. But the structure for the weeknight dinners and all that is real, real important to us....So the home life is, like I say, very regimented and structured. And for that, looking at somebody like me who's a little bit on the creative side—so for me work is not the antithesis to that, but...they complement each other but they're not the same....my demeanor is very different within the two situations.

Generally speaking, the women we talked to followed one of two strategies to attain the flexibility and autonomy they needed to manage their careers and lives. They either found hospitality companies to work for that would provide the necessary autonomy (eight out of the fifteen mothers), or failing that, they started firms of their own, effectively becoming their own bosses (the other seven). Interestingly, aside from the path that these two groups of women had taken to achieve flexibility and autonomy, their comments on how to achieve success and the challenges they had faced as women in the industry were strikingly similar, with no notable differences between the two groups. One woman in the corporate group was a general manager working for a high-end international resort company. As she explained,

I was very lucky because I worked for a company that allowed us some flexibility with having children, and we lived in a resort where we had obviously a lot of help in the resort and you know it worked out...when my daughter was a baby I could greet guests in my lobby with a baby in my arms. This isn't any more in many companies but we were allowed to do that, and it was a way of making that work.

A second woman, currently working in sales and marketing for a hotel company, described the flexibility her employer provided:

Today, for example, I could have worked at home, but it was more conducive to what I had going on to be in the office. The organization provides me the flexibility on a day like this... I'm going to get the same work done for [the company] today if I'm in this office in [X city], at my house in [Y city], or sitting at the car dealership waiting for my car to be fixed.

It is important to note that participants were careful to make clear that there was trust—and responsibility—associated with flexibility. They recognized that they had to deliver on outcomes or results to gain credibility and earn flexible

schedules. So they set results as a top priority. As one executive, who was new to her position and company, commented,

You had to create that buy-in and make sure there was nothing neglected. I might get up and leave from the hotel at 5:30, but I'm also on my emails at 8:00 at night until 11:00, if need be.

Notably, several women working within supportive and flexible corporate settings explained that these practices were not just beneficial to the executives, but they also benefited the company by contributing to a virtuous cycle of exceptional loyalty and commitment to the organization. As one woman noted,

The thing that happens when you work with somebody through that kind of phase of their lives is you engender such loyalty and commitment.

A second executive explained,

So I lucked into a company that recognized that you have to balance your family and your profession. And admittedly when I first started, the demands of the job were different. Now I'm traveling a lot and it's easier at this time in my family life to do that. But I do have the confidence at [my current firm] that look, if I can get my job done on Sunday and I need to do something on Wednesday with my kids, I can do that. And because of that response that they'd given with me, it's really important to me that I don't mess that up. These companies underestimate what all associates are willing to do. If you give them a little freedom and you trust them, they'll repay that with strong loyalty.

Their own boss. As we noted above, all of the women in our sample began their careers working in corporate settings, but eight of the twenty—a substantial percentage—had either not found a corporate setting that provided them with the culture of support and flexibility they desired, or simply preferred to be out on their own. Therefore, they had started their own companies. While this strategy could meet the desired goal of having autonomy in their work lives, one entrepreneur explained that she still worked just as long hours and traveled a great deal. She highlighted the difference with corporate careers:

If I want to go to school for lunch, or if I want to be sure that I'm home at four o'clock when he [her son] gets home, or if I want to be the one who tucks him in...so the nanny takes him to basketball and soccer and all those things and then I'm home right at eight thirty and I get those last five minutes. Those last five minutes are very important to me. Those are my times, and I can leave when I want to, and I can plan my vacations on the school vacation schedule, and I can be at school for the play, or for the musical, or for the Christmas party. I don't have to ask anybody. I can plan my schedule. I can tell my clients, 'I'm available these dates. I'm not available these dates,' and that's what I do.

I always cringe when someone says, "Oh, you have it all and you're doing it all." Well, no, there's always some sacrifice somewhere.

The decision to leave the corporate environment to attain greater flexibility and control over their lives was not without cost. Many entrepreneurs explicitly traded money for freedom and time. As one participant noted,

I don't think you can put a value on that...I mean, that independence, as a mother—maybe when my kids are in college I might think differently. Maybe I'll make more money... That's just invaluable, the freedom.

A second entrepreneur summed it up with the following comment,

Life is a simple equation. Nobody has it right, so my kind of solution is time plus money equals what you have to spend. Some people have a lot less money, but they have a lot more time. So they have more time to cut coupons or get a book from the library. And I don't. I have to buy the book at the airport and I don't even know where to go look for coupons, because I don't even get a chance to read the newspaper. So everyone can have a great life, and they just have these different components of what you get to spend.

Support. The second element critical to working through work-family challenges was having support at home. All twenty respondents emphasized that they could not manage without a high level of personal support. This typically came in the form of a spouse or partner acting as the primary—or at a minimum, equal—parent to their children, excellent full-time childcare, or a combination of both. Many of our participants cited their spouses or partners as utterly

You have much more wisdom and strength than you may realize. Listen to yourself. Take the time to do that in whatever way works for you. So that's the first thing. The second one is, don't worry if things are very hard, even for long stretches of time. It is not your fault and the world is not being unfair.

critical to their success and four of the fifteen mothers were married to stay-at-home husbands. One noted,

My husband's the full-time, stay at home, home-based parent. I mean, he does my bookkeeping for my business but his primary job is to take care of the kids. And I couldn't do my job. I couldn't travel, I couldn't drop everything and jump on a plane or a train if I didn't have him at home.

A second executive, with a stay-at-home husband also reflected:

I'm the first to tell you, I have an amazing situation. Not everyone can do some of the things that I've been able to do. And yes, I've created some of that, but my husband and I talk about it all the time. There's also a constant reevaluation that has to go on from a personal perspective of, "Is this working for us?" It'll be interesting when both kids are in school full time—full day. I'm still not convinced that's full day, especially with all the holidays they seem to have. Gosh, I look at that and again that's where my husband and I look at it and say how lucky we are because the random Wednesday in-service day, we're not scrambling. We know how many of our friends that have dual career incomes that are like, "That Wednesday's an in-service? Heck! What are we doing? Who's taking off?" How do you cobble together...or even how summer comes. So I think that takes constant reevaluation, and so I understand that, and I'm really hesitant to judge anyone for making the decisions they're making, obviously. I think everyone has different situations.

Many of the women we interviewed, however, had husbands who also worked, sometimes in equally intense careers. In these cases, they typically outsourced childcare, often to a full-time nanny, as in this case:

For me, it was having a full-time nanny that took care of all the stuff for me... If they [my children] were sick, she would come; I didn't have to. But she also did the laundry and she did the grocery shopping. So when I'm home, I'm home. And when I'm at work, I'm at work. And that is a big deal. And if I'm able to afford it...not everyone can do that. But the pressure of knowing that you have to leave at five o'clock to go pick up your child at day care is—you probably, you may have experienced it. That's a real pressure, and I had a lot more flexibility.

In summary, most of the women we interviewed had combined or were still successfully combining an intense career with raising a family. They were using a variety of strategies to do so, but the common themes across their experiences involved having attained a relatively high degree of autonomy in their jobs combined with considerable personal support at home. As many noted, even with these required elements, it was not easy. As one woman succinctly put it,

I hope to prove to any of the skeptics out there that you can, you can do personally, have a life that you would like and you can also do professionally what keeps you competitive with your other colleagues—which for me at that time were all men... But it is not without sacrifice.

Another added,

I always cringe when someone says, 'Oh, you have it all and you're doing it all.' Well, no, there's always some sacrifice somewhere. I think you can in the grand balance of life, but you can't on a minute-to-minute, day-by-day basis. There's something that gives, whether it's my daughter the other day deciding she didn't want me to leave for work that morning or it's the fact that Monday I totally said, "I have to walk out of here at five o'clock.

And finally,

So other than the travel, I think I've managed to take a bit more of a rounded view on this whole can you have it all, can you do it all? Can you be a good mom who works? But I figured it out myself and figured out that I can be a role model for my daughter by showing her how you can balance your life. So I think I'm a better mom because of it.

Reflections and Conclusion

Through this study we came to appreciate the hard work and dedication of the successful women with whom we spoke. When listening to them reflect on their career journeys, we were reminded of the importance of reaching out to connect with others. Whether it was through leveraging the

depth and breadth of personal and professional networks, or cultivating the support of sponsors (not just mentors) to promote and champion their advancement, these women acknowledged that they did not work alone. They were mindful to act as and surround themselves with positive, effective, and supportive colleagues, employees, employers, and life partners.

A particularly noteworthy finding from these interviews is the importance of having the personal courage to take risks and stretch into new and challenging assignments. Our respondents commented on how they were more effective in their current roles because of the chances they took. For these professionals, seizing new opportunities, whether it was with companies who employed them, or through their own entrepreneurial ventures, reaped meaningful benefits. They encouraged young graduates to believe in themselves and understand that in the end, as they carve meaningful careers, things do work out—and work out well. When reflecting on advice she would give to new graduates, one respondent thoughtfully replied,

You have much more wisdom and strength than you may realize. Listen to yourself. Take the time to do that in whatever way works for you. Write things down, if it helps. A habit of reflection is going to help you now and in the future to fulfill your fullest potential to lead others and to have some peace of mind while you're doing it. So that's the first thing. You have more wisdom and strength than you realize. Please, listen to yourself. The second one is, don't worry if things are very hard, even for long stretches of time. It is not your fault and the world is not being unfair. When things are bad, take the time to comfort yourself. And also take the time to understand what is really happening here. What are the facts, what are your feelings, what can you control?

Finally, as the academic literature substantiates, raising a family while simultaneously progressing to senior-level responsibilities made for particularly challenging periods in the lives of the women in our study. For those that chose to remain in their organizations, autonomous work arrangements and continual career and leadership development were critical to enabling these remarkable women to continue to be high contributors to their companies and take on increasing leadership-based responsibilities. So too was having an organizational sponsor who would champion and encourage them, even and perhaps especially, as they moved through their mid-career stage.

These professionals recognized that in some ways, their organizations took risks on them. They interpreted these risks as signals of their organizations' commitment to them and they responded with hard work, loyalty, and dedication in ways that deeply benefited their companies. Their organizations were astute enough to recognize the value of investing in long-term work relationships with these talented professionals, but we as noted, not all of them remained on a corporate career track. For those who did stay

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