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Women executives talk about their continuous efforts in dealing with work stress and handling their life and families at the same time, in order to maintain a work-life balance.

By Arva Shikari

juggling work and life

The dynamic work environment and high pressures at work is putting increasing stress on working women. Workplaces are becoming more competitive, and women are now not just a part of an enterprise for namesake, but, also they are expected to keep raising the bar to keep their jobs in place. For Simran Oberoi, Asia-Pacific chemicals sector leader of Hay Group, work stress is any pressure - mental or emotional that is created due to either excessive work load or the absence of a conducive work environment, which leads to an internal pressure in her affecting her family life. The imbalance that this stress creates at times is severe and due to lack of time and energy a woman is unable to lead a fulfilling family life. She says, "This pressure need not be only in terms of an infringement on my time which my family has a right to, outside of work. It could be a stress which remains within my mind due to an environment at my workplace."

Apart from work, women have to look into their home and family responsibilities as well. This continuous

job of performing dual responsibilities at times leads to increased levels of stress in women as they fear that family members may be annoyed with them for not spending time with them or taking care of the home. Due to this, they wind up feeling guilty of their negligence towards home and family. "As a lady", concurs, Aparna Ranadive, VP & head - HR of Sony Entertainment Network, "it becomes a little more pronounced, when it comes to striking a balance between work responsibilities and home front, that one is expected to manage, and deciding which one is of more importance, and at the same time, being in the rat race with an equally high competitive spirit, coupled with the aspiration to grow and succeed. Sometimes, toggling between the different facets of leadership, and striking a balance between getting work done, sometimes, rarely though at the cost of being a task master, and some other times letting the softer side of the personality surface, and balancing that, is stressful." Also, women if not in commanding positions, are often a subject of a lot of other types of stresses,

“We have many more choices today and rather than letting ourselves feel overwhelmed by them, we need to be selective about what we are able to do in a day, a week, a month, or a year.”

ANITA GUHA

GLOBAL DESIGN TEAM MEMBER ■ IBM INDIA LIMITED

notes, Ranadive, some silent, and not so visible, and some others which are more visible. The meek ones get subjugated or pressurized to deliver more, at the cost of personal time, or health. Due to work stress, Oberoi says, also sometimes one is not emotionally present with the family even while at home. The resultant effect is a kind of detachment that sets in since the woman is unable to provide the nurturing that she inherently wants to, to her family. If work becomes the central focus of one's existence the quality of life is impacted.

Of course, depending upon the field, industry and position different women experience different work stressors at different levels and times. For example, Madhumita Basu, the senior vice president, marketing at Lafarge India, says, "A job in marketing requires a fair bit of travel. I have not always been there for children's birthdays, festivals, examination times, etc. Continuous travel also breaks into exercise routines, which sometimes affects the feeling of physical well-being. Conflicting deadlines, extra-professional responsibilities (management associations, professional bodies etc) are additional aspects to juggle." Ranadive agrees that sometimes when one is working on something extremely critical, it is difficult to leave that half done or incomplete and run only to meet requirements on the home front, which is just as important, or sometimes even more. At such times one is in a quandary, since both are equally important, and cannot be neglected. But, then one cannot always exercise a choice, and work often takes precedence. Describing her experience, she says, "The position I work in sometimes demands that I give most of myself at work, even at the cost of my personal life. However, I have never faced a problem during any crisis situation or health related issues, and my organization has always been forthcoming and helpful."

For Oberoi the key drivers for work stress is when



the work load increases due to lower level of activity planning on a daily/weekly basis, too many unscheduled meetings in a week or extremely demanding clients, tight project timelines. Other key drivers could be thinking of next steps in career development, how to achieve certain milestones and so on. Job related stress has increased significantly in the last decade due to the fast changing business and economic cycles demanding workloads, and job insecurity.

Iti Kumar, vice president, human resources at GlobalLogic, too, faces similar job stress drivers like high workload and short deadlines, random interruptions and meetings, delegation of sudden important tasks and sometimes the inability to plan work on time or prioritize. Oberoi adds, "Since I work in the consulting space and I manage two roles, one at the India level and the other at the Asia Pacific level, the above drivers are occupational hazards, and one needs to be able to work through them. Hence, my industry and role does tend to increase my work load if I allow either or both of them to. However, the organization I work in enables me to keep my work stress at decreased levels."

Expectations from certain roles (both work and personal) and living up to it causes stress, opines Alka Tiwari, senior general manager, HRM group at 3i Infotech Limited. The reason being, the increasing equal opportunities for women which place them in positions where they need to deliver while maintaining an appropriate work/life balance. Despite, Tiwari feels that some amount of stress is required to push ourselves towards bettering our performance. This gives a sense of urgency and determination to go beyond expectations and fulfill the challenges.

Due to long hours at work, Ranadive feels, or the fact that her workplace is far away from her home, there is not much time left for any personal work or life other than on weekends, which of course she makes

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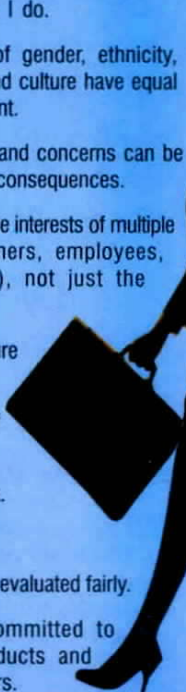
most use of. Well, clearly it's not always easy to keep the two compartments of work and life separate. In fact, the nature of work worldwide is making the term work/life balance somewhat irrelevant as the reality is there are no two distinct compartments anymore. Three key trends around the world are creating what IBM calls, reveals, Anita Guha, the global design team member, leadership development programs at IBM India Limited, Mumbai, is a 'new world of work' - where work/life balance is transforming into work-life integration: first, the increased global contacts result in the disappearance of '9 to 5' and fixed continuous schedules. "For most of us", she shares, "early morning and late night conference calls have become a norm. Second, evolving family and social structures drive employee needs, perceptions and expectations, like, both parents working has become more of the norm rather than the exception. And third, the ubiquitous low cost technology enables and generates work 24x7x365 from any location. Thus, we can be 'connected' to work during vacations and take time off for personal matters during what were the official working hours."

Well having said that, technology makes it easy to work from any location, then the type of industry that one is working in definitely helps in reducing work stress, particularly the IT industry. Reasons Kumar, "The primary reason for this is that, in an IT industry many processes are automated and with the help of online systems and technology advancements we are able to manage work and family life both. Being in this industry I get the opportunity to work from home when I cannot stay long hours in office with the help of a laptop and VPN connectivity." Blackberry phones also help in managing work since it provides the benefit of accessing emails from anywhere and taking calls through Skype facility helps to stay connected at time of need. Though, it helps to manage both home and office, however, this should be well balanced so that it does not eat up one's personal life. Since these days technology has made life a lot easier than before, and geographical distances or absence from the work front does not hamper work, says Ranadive, making the most of it, is one of the best ways of coping with work stress.

Specific work stressors

Although, many women do not think work stress is substantively different for men and women, there are some specific work stressors that raise the levels of stress in women. For instance, in general for the female working fraternity work stress increases due to lack of support from bosses/subordinates, not much of an exciting job, preferences given to male counterparts because of the pre decided bias about the capability of a lady, gender related biases, favourites played or comparisons made, by bosses, subjugation in any way, opportunities given to male counterparts or any indication of lagging behind in the competition. Also, lack of appreciation of a job well done, office politics, and too much competition are some of the drivers that can lead to work stress in women. Guha feels the

Work stress drivers for women

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- ▶ I am paid fairly for the work I do.
 - ▶ All employees, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and culture have equal opportunities for advancement.
 - ▶ Where I work, ethical issues and concerns can be discussed without negative consequences.
 - ▶ My company strives to serve the interests of multiple stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees, suppliers and community), not just the shareholders.
 - ▶ I feel there is a promising future for me at my company.
 - ▶ My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.
 - ▶ I get excited about my work.
 - ▶ I excel at my job.
 - ▶ My performance on the job is evaluated fairly.
 - ▶ Senior management is committed to providing high quality products and services to external customers.

(SOURCE: KENEXA RESEARCH INSTITUTE)

same. She says, "If I have put in a big effort and delivered what I believe to be outstanding results, but, my manager and colleagues don't recognize this in any way that would be extremely de-motivating for me and probably lead to work stress." Also, she adds, politics within one's team and within the organization can also result in work stress as they make decision making less transparent and reduce clarity around one's mission and objectives. Too much competition within a team without sufficient collaboration can also be detrimental to a positive work atmosphere and result in work stress." In fact, according to Kenexa Research Institute (KRI), women in the India report they are more likely to achieve balance when their stress level at work is reasonable, they enjoy, get excited about their work, they feel there is a promising future for them at the company, the company values their contribution and their manager makes a personal investment in their growth and development.

Besides, there are other particular conditions that may lead to some particular kind of stress in women including pregnancy, menopause and domestic conflicts. Basu, for example, had faced a miscarriage, while traveling with an 'all-men' group for a series of customer meets, across a few mini-metros. Although, it was stressful for her, she recollects with ease the promptness with which medical help was arranged, the support and absolutely non-patronizing attitude of her colleagues and the important decision that she

took to continue with the rest of her tour, made her conscious of the fact that we are human beings as officers and vice-versa. She adds, "At a certain moment - you are an equally contributing member in the organization and the organization cannot be over-occupied with the thought of you being a woman. Also, it is simply not fair to the male colleagues. Sometimes the ability to handle personal stresses and yet balance work, can also be a driver for stress, if the personal stress at any time takes over the mental or emotional state, the corporate is not as forgiving at all times, which again cause stress."

Coping to achieve work/life balance

From the point of view of IBM's reality of the new world of work, where you can be available anytime/ anywhere can add to stress if one is not sufficiently creating time and space for switching off work, says, Guha. She believes, "We have many more choices today and rather than letting ourselves feel overwhelmed by them, we need to be selective about what we are able to do in a day, a week, a month, or a year."

Besides, to achieve a work-life balance, it is important for an individual to get involved in activities which help to reduce stress and spend ample amount of time with family as well. Kumar spends a lot of time on reading books, listening to music and goes for family outings which help her to rejuvenate and have a good time. This helps in getting back to work with greater zeal and enthusiasm, share ideas and be innovative.

Also outings and being part of fun games with teams at work helps Kumar balance out work. Kumar even prioritizes and plans work in the right manner which not only results in quality work, time with family, but, also ensures that her career goals are met. Research conducted by the KRI shows that in India, only 69% of women state that they can meet career goals and still devote sufficient attention to their personal lives.

Basu takes her family into confidence, especially children. She shares with them the stressed out phases of the year - say month/quarter/year-end pressures, conferences, product launches - those time demanding activities, which might also entail staying away from home, as children, she feels have a tremendous capability to plan with you, but, do not like surprises. Basu also plans her social engagements well like she prioritizes on invites; invites friends over, rather than be away from children on weekends. In addition to coping with work, family life, Basu believes in having a hobby. She feels exploring something one can share with one's spouse or child like swimming, gym, yoga, playing an instrument, etc. This involvement is important, she feels and helps one's family understand that they are not on a 'rationed' time with you.

For Ranadive, the ideal way of coping with some stresses is to handle them prudently, plan well, and have a clear thought process, and a cool mind. Very often than not, she feels, women tend to aggravate their problems by getting rattled by them, or over reacting to them. Here, having a mentor or a trusted

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individual/s with whom one can bounce off thoughts, frustrations and problems, and who can give an unbiased view, sometimes empathize with you as well as show you a different perspective helps tremendously. At work, she believes, creating a level of dependence on people whom you can fall back on, for help, such as your team/peers helps greatly. In this manner, even in a situation when one has to rush due to an unavoidable reason or problem, and if the boss and the team is aware as to what is being handled by you, or some loop that needs to be closed or job needs to be completed, there is that knowledge in the system and dependence on the team, whereby work does not suffer and your personal crisis or commitment is also handled.

In Oberoi's view, the most important first step is to define work and life boundaries clearly and respect or manage these boundaries as diligently as possible. By boundaries she means demarcating time requirements for both these areas. For example, she explains: "When I reach work the first thing I plan is when I will be leaving for the day and which are the aspects I need to complete within that time. After that one can prepare a list of activities to be completed, sub-categorized into the work areas, for instance, in my case, by projects or by the two roles performed or make a mental note

of covering critical areas in the first half of the day and the remaining things in the second half. This process has helped me manage my work better and within the time that I spend in office. The days I am in client meetings, I try and work on mails while traveling since travel time is significant and I want to keep my time free for the evening for family/personal life. In my project planning I keep sufficient buffers and when the timeline seems unrealistic I share the same with the client to come to a realistic deadline, so as to ensure that both my team and I do not have to compromise on our work life balance due to increased work stress."

Further, Oberoi describes a time of the year (every year) when both her roles required her urgent involvement - the first year this situation created a high level of work stress. There was a critical global client for who she was managing a highly complex project with tight deadlines and simultaneously she was planning and rolling out the annual regional forum for the Asia HR Directors. Hence, the work stress levels were extremely high due to two key deliverables which required totally different orientations. In order to manage the work stress and also to prevent the work from spilling over into her personal time, since Oberoi knew about the overlap in advance, she worked out the daily schedule of activities and resource allocation for the two aspects months in advance. Tracking the progress of activities on a regular basis kept the work stress within limits. Also, since switching from the role of a project manager to that of an Asia Pacific sector leader was not a smooth shift (since the activities vary significantly), she had planned for one half of her work day to be allocated to completing activities related to the project and the second half for the forum work. This split helped her in completing her work faster and in a more organized manner. The other practice that she included was to ensure that all the other people involved in the process were clear on their deliverables and timelines, so as to save time on repeated follow ups.

Normally, after leaving for home, Oberoi keeps her official mail closed so that the mails that are received later in the evening are checked the next day. For those who use phones for official mails, she usually switches off that once with family. Beyond the office hours, she believes, there is rarely anything that is more critical than spending time with your loved ones or doing something that you truly enjoy.

At work, Tiwari adapts to the workplace, maintains good working relationships, practices proper time management and creates an atmosphere conducive to better working which helps her in reducing stress levels. Also, she feels a good mix of team and individual contribution is ideal. On the personal front, Tiwari takes out time for morning walks and spends some time at the gym. Catching up with some interesting reads in the form of novels, autobiographies, business magazines, etc helps her get into a relaxed mode.

Guha puts coping into two categories - the physical/tangible coping and the mental/emotional coping. She feels they both require attention! On the physical/

Global Outlook

Although there are competing pressures from both work and home, in the United Kingdom, 62% of women state that they can meet career goals and still devote sufficient attention to their personal lives. Also, in UK 56% of women report their company supports employees' efforts to balance work and family/personal responsibilities.

In the United States, 61% of women state that they can meet career goals and still devote sufficient attention to their personal lives. And around 61% of women in US report their company supports employees' efforts to balance work and family/personal responsibilities. Breaking it down industry-wise, in United States, the highest percentage of women reporting that they can achieve work/life balance is in the hi-tech industry (69%), followed by those in the financial services (66%), healthcare services (63%), government (61%) and manufacturing (57%) industries. The lowest percentage of women (53%) reporting work/life balance work in retail.

In another survey across occupations in different countries, more often women reported unreasonable amounts of stress than men did, with the largest difference between men and women being in front-line supervisory roles (10% more women rate their work stress as unreasonable), service and production jobs (8%) and middle and upper management (6%).

(SOURCE: KENEXA RESEARCH INSTITUTE)



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APARNA RANADIVE
VP & HEAD - HR ■ SONY ENTERTAINMENT NETWORK

tangible side, she thinks that women need to create support systems to ensure that they can cope with some of the stresses and strains of work and life like a working mother would need a range of support systems - from a having a doting grandmother who is ready to baby sit at short notice to a neighbor who can step in to help. Also, a reliable servant to take care of the household requirements and the children is a real bonus. In addition, a cooperative spouse who is able to adjust his travel plans to ensure that both are not traveling at the same time and who, at least occasionally, shares some household tasks. The strain is in coping with the mental/emotional part. The image of the supermom who is both an outstanding leader at work and a fantastic homemaker and is great at child care has wrought tremendous harm to the self-esteem of many women. That's because many women still believe that it's possible to live up to that image over a sustained period of time. Guha was one them to believe that it was possible and those high expectations naturally raised her stress levels. Thus, she thinks the first step in achieving work-life balance or integration concerns is to accept the fact that you cannot be everything to everyone. Also, the word 'perfect' is the enemy of the good. As far as I'm concerned, she admits, "I've come to accept that in spite of coming from a family that, for generations has prided itself on its delectable cooking skills; I am a zero in the kitchen. And, instead of beating myself up about it, I've hired a decent cook for that. I am not that great at detailed measurement work and I usually get a team member to help me out on that front. On the other hand, I have discovered that I'm good in certain areas and I try to build on those strengths - both at work and at home."

It is important to remember is the responsibility of a well balanced work-life scenario lies as much with the working women as with the organizations they work in. To ensure that a work/life balance is achieved organizations have flexi work time policies and/or relaxation policies especially for women employees. Like Oberoi narrates: "There was a time when due to some urgent personal work that needed to be completed I was unable to come to work. However, since it

required only part of my time, I could work for the remaining part of the day. It was due to my organization's supportive policy in terms of work from home, that I was easily able to manage the situation. Had this kind of policy not been in place, I would have had to take leave that would have moved the work to the next day. Transferring the work to the next day would have significantly increased my workload since I already had pre-scheduled meetings and it would have also delayed certain client requirements. A highly increased workload and an unhappy client would have increased my work stress. However, my entire work stress was neutralized since I could manage my work as well as have my personal commitments completed without any pressure being created."

Guha shares how her organization has a range of programs to help her deal with work stress. IBM has Wellbeing Services that specifically focuses on offering a variety of employee assistance programs, among them, a program called MiTR, which offers confidential counseling services if in need. Also, it has an online education program on the area of stress at the workplace that is especially targeted to managers who need to set the right example for employees in this area in order to help us avoid burnout. The company also genuinely believes that no one size fits all and for this purpose there is a wide variety of programs that can be availed depending upon ones circumstances and needs as well as the needs of the business. Although, Guha thinks the company should concentrate on educating more people about the various flexibility options available and how to leverage these to create a productive work environment.

KRI's research reveals that it is encouraging to see that women can find a balance between work and home, since in India 66% of women report their company supports employees' efforts to balance work and family/ personal responsibilities. However, some organizations can do more as almost 35% of women in India report inadequate organizational support. Companies that build a supportive infrastructure and processes stand to attract and retain talented employees and also strengthen their marketplace advantage. HC