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Phyllis S. Swersky

*Artificial Intelligence Corporation*

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# Another View of the “Facts of Life”

Phyllis S. Swersky

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*The “mommy track” has entered the lexicon of women’s career development, thanks to a controversial article in the Harvard Business Review in which Felice N. Schwartz recommended a dual career track for women. In this article, a senior executive, corporate director, and mother of three children offers another view of how working women might approach the demands of family and career.*

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**T**he cost of employing women in management is greater than the cost of employing men.” With this opening statement in her article “Management Women and the New Facts of Life,” Felice N. Schwartz unleashed a storm of controversy about women in corporations that has not abated.<sup>1</sup> Headline words used to describe her concept, the “mommy track,” have become a common slogan for the notion that a woman cannot have a career and children and do a good job with both. I would like to offer another view.

Schwartz, the president and founder of Catalyst,<sup>2</sup> is therefore an appropriate observer of executives and organizations and of how women succeed and enter into senior management. She quite rightly noted early in her twelve-page article that employers should not throw away the investments they make in talented women.<sup>3</sup>

Having made this statement, she then neatly stereotyped executive women into two categories, career-primary and career-and-family,<sup>4</sup> and suggested that employers view them separately, with separate interests, career paths, and needs.

The response was predictable. Her views were widely reported in the popular press, and the *Harvard Business Review* subsequently printed thirty-five letters to the editor from a diverse readership that included five feminist groups, who called her analysis “fatally flawed.”<sup>5</sup> Several college presidents also responded, and one called her two-tier system “bad for women, bad for men, bad for children, bad for business, and bad for American society as a whole.”<sup>6</sup>

Schwartz answered, admitting her essay stirred passionate debate, but she still did not seem to understand her readers’ dismay, dismissing responses which rightly cautioned that her approach would reinforce age-old stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>

*Phyllis S. Swersky, former senior vice president and chief financial officer of Cullinet Software, is executive vice president and chief financial officer of Artificial Intelligence Corporation.*

Schwartz failed to comprehend that by dividing female executives into two categories, she herself was guilty of stereotypical thinking. My own view is that there are as many different models of female executives as there are women, and this holds true for male executives as well. One does not have to be childless to be most energized by a career, and one does not have to be responsible for children to be only moderately interested in the business of an employer. Perhaps we could be most helpful to this wide range of working women by suggesting techniques, attitudes, and examples for how women deal with competing and conflicting demands on their time and energy, and allow women to pick and choose among them.

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### **One Person's Tale**

The following profile is not atypical of many executives in America: one of the top three senior executive officers of a multinational company; member of the boards of directors of public and charitable corporations; married for fifteen years with three children, ages seven, four, and three; committed to strong family values and community and philanthropic endeavors.

This profile, with some variation, is applicable to literally thousands of men in corporate America. However, in this case it specifically describes a woman: me. I am one of the few, but fortunately growing numbers of women who have broken through the "glass ceiling" while building and maintaining my marriage and family simultaneously with my career.

It was by no means easy, and as my children get older it is increasingly difficult, though possible. However, if Schwartz's proposed blueprint for tracking had been a reality in American business during the period when I was establishing my career, I believe the difficulties I faced would have been far greater than those I actually encountered, and what I have achieved might not have been possible at all.

To be where I am today has required a great deal of effort. It has taken much trial and error on my part, as well as the support of family and coworkers. Through the process, I have identified a set of key factors that make up a framework which permits me to have both a successful career and a strong family life.

Although the application of these factors must be tailored to each person's individual circumstances, I believe they can serve as a model for most women who want to "have it all." Conversely, if these key factors are not incorporated into the way a woman approaches a lifestyle of combining career and family, all the balls she is trying to juggle will not be in the air much.

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### **Assumptions**

Before discussing the four factors, I must enumerate a few basic assumptions that are implicit in my approach: the male culture of corporations is the norm; corporate organizations, as entities, will not willingly change much in the foreseeable future; women are still the primary caretakers of children and aged relatives; the woman truly wants a career, not merely a job in which her primary motivation is a paycheck (although I am not minimizing financial rewards); the woman truly does not want to keep house full time. If staying home full time is a woman's primary goal, with homemaking the woman's career, it is mutually exclusive with having a career outside the home. No one has been able to do it yet, not even with juggling.

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## Acknowledging Limitations

My mother, who is my worst critic and biggest fan, frequently looks at me with a mixture of respect and disdain and exclaims, “Phyllis, you want it all!” My response is, “Why not?” If I did not take that perspective, it would not be possible to juggle the superficial things that daily require attention. Utilizing this attitude, I have gotten it all; at least it appears that way to observers, close friends, and me.

There are trade-offs to be realized, however. Typically, I leave the house before 8:00 A.M. and return around 7:00 P.M. I am often gone longer, rarely shorter, than this number of hours. Many days I skip lunch. I am frequently too tired to tell my husband about my day, listen to him tell me about his, or play with my children. In fact, the housekeeper and baby sitters spend more hours with my children than I do. It was they who witnessed the first smile, the first step, the first word, and nursery school. I do not take my children to malls or museums or to other children’s houses with other mothers and their children. Just finding time to clothe myself and the children is difficult. It was a major challenge to figure out a simple hairstyle and makeup for myself.

I could continue the list of what is missing, but the things I do not have or do not do relate to a lifestyle which, first implicitly and later explicitly, I chose not to live. This is not to say that these things are unimportant to me. I feel the lack painfully at times, and periodically a sense of congruency seems to be missing. For example, among my closest friends are the wives of two company executives. During social occasions, when the men are talking about business or the stock market, I want to join in their conversation. I also care about nursery schools, day camps, and children’s birthday parties that their wives are discussing. Caught between the two, I seem to suffer from alienation schizophrenia. Am I a spouse or a businesswoman? But since it has been my choice to have my particular lifestyle, the problem is obviously not as important as the benefits I receive from what I have. This is what I mean by a successful trade-off. I may miss some of my children’s firsts, but in the scheme of things, so what? The most important thing is the influence and impact I have on the children. I can build a solid good relationship with them and still have a career. Fathers have been doing it for a long time with the full approval of society.

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## Determining and Maintaining Global Priorities

The term “global” is a deceptively complex factor. Priorities are constantly shifting; daily there are always crises or fires to fight, so that it is easy to lose sight of overriding priorities. If they are not clearly established on a global basis, if a businesswoman does not constantly keep them in sight, they will get lost.

Setting global priorities involves some tough decisions because a woman is dealing with major lifestyles issues: Would I be willing to relocate if my husband’s job required a move? How many hours am I willing to devote to my career? In essence, setting global priorities involves deciding where a woman is going to put her time and energy. Once having listed her priorities, she must live them.

My particular list consists of the “big three” and “everything else.” Family is one of the three, as is career. Much less obvious and overlooked by most who are juggling the other two is the category *me*. We women frequently forget that we are a priority or are ashamed to treat ourselves as such, yet I cannot emphasize this category enough. It is the one that gets lost most easily and most frequently.

Recognizing that career and family individually can drain all one's inner resources, how does the all-important "me" fit in, not to mention finding time for any of the "everything else"? How is it possible to manage career and family without one totally overshadowing the other?

I learned from (rather unpleasant) personal experience that the balls drop and the scale tips if a woman does not explicitly articulate her global priorities. For example, I am married to a man whose first priority is his family, and it is one of the things I love most about him. It would seem logical and simple for this to be my first priority also. However, there was a time when, because I was obsessed with building my career to the exclusion of all else, I lost sight of family. Things became quite unpleasant at home, and it was at this stage that I clearly established family as my first global priority. Rarely have I lost sight of it since.

Today "me" and "career" are tied for a close second, and "everything else" comes far behind, since I view things in this category as luxuries to be allocated among the other three priorities.

The list of things I have compromised in order to "have it all" — the eleven-hour workdays, travel 10 percent of the time, and so on — might give the appearance that there is no possibility of my family being first. In fact, during the time I was obsessed with my career, this is precisely the way I felt. I thought that the only way to place my family first was to reduce dramatically the hours I worked, something I was unwilling to do. I discovered, though, that this is not how it must be. Once I established the family as a global priority, there was little reason to change my working hours or travel obligations. What I changed was my attitude, which became evident in a range of little things and in a few major compromises.

The most important practical sign of my attitude change occurred in the area of communication. I now let my husband and children know that when I am late or away I would prefer to be with them, but my absence cannot be helped. My credibility is validated when I forgo marginal trips or delegate them to other staff and let my family know I have done so.

Another way I convey the importance of family is to avoid bringing work home. If something must be finished by a deadline, it is better for me to stay late at the office or go in Saturday morning. This way I reinforce the (accurate) perception that when I am home, I am giving my undivided attention to my family. Working late evenings and weekends is not a general occurrence; it is for dire emergencies only. So I resist the temptation to classify things as emergencies, because if I permit it in my thinking, crises have a way of multiplying, and then I could lose sight of my global priorities.

Keeping family and career as dual global priorities requires constant fine-tuning and the willingness to shift gears quickly from one role to the other. My assistant has called me out of top executive meetings because one of my children had a particular problem for which my counsel was needed. I was not angry. I viewed the interruption as important. I spoke to the housekeeper, gave her advice, and went back to the meeting, all within less than five minutes.

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### **Knowing Your Limitations and Not Feeling Guilty**

Even with global priorities firmly established, there can be problems. Many working women focus on what they are not doing, pushing themselves to do more or berating themselves for doing less. This is probably the biggest failure of juggling women, as well

as women who are full-time homemakers. We forget so easily that if we do not take care of ourselves, we won't be able to care for others.

I have found that I need uninterrupted time alone to read the newspapers, to have a cup of coffee, to nap, or to curl up with a good book. Without this time I feel as though I am not a person, and I cannot cope for long. In order to have this time, I am willing to give up all but the occasional "everything else." Still, it is seductively easy to get caught up in trying to do more and more. No one will stop us from being masochistic. We are the ones who have to know our limits and what we need for ourselves, even though others may not initially agree with us or understand.

When my husband and I adopted our first baby, I insisted on having a nurse to help me. My husband did not appreciate my need. This is where communication was so important. Eventually I was able to show him the importance of the nurse not only for me but for us and the quality of our time together.

Another area that requires careful attention in setting limits is the "everything else" related to work — the invitations for board membership, the committees to chair, the organizations to join, the professional meetings to attend. The more successful a person's career, the more prevalent the opportunities for such activities. I have learned to say no with the honest explanation that the demands of my career and family would not permit me to do justice to the endeavor.

Many of these opportunities are related to my profession, so I evaluate them carefully. If I am to accept, the proposed endeavor must have the potential of advancing my career sufficiently, since it would take time from my daily work, which would necessitate taking time from my family.

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## **Forget Supermom**

While it's difficult to stave off the obsession with being a superwoman, it's almost impossible to abandon the futile pursuit of the title "Supermom," especially without feeling guilty. I found this particularly troubling when we adopted our first daughter. Although I did not rush home from the office for her early-evening feeding, I insisted on giving her the middle-of-the-night feeding. I became overtired and irritable, unable to function at the level I needed. In trying to prove to myself that I was a wonderful mother, I had lost all perspective and was competing with our housekeeper.

Finally I determined what I felt was important for my daughter, what my obligations were, and what I hoped to achieve as her mother. I knew that she had to be well cared for, fed, changed, and played with, but not necessarily by me. I recalled the close and loving relationship I had as a child with my father in spite of the fact that he worked long hours and missed many of my school functions. Nevertheless, I always knew I was an important focus in his life; I never doubted his feelings for me or the stability of our relationship.

This is what I want with my children. I think it is the only realistic goal if a woman has a career. Periodically, I still get a twinge of guilt (and society is ever ready to reinforce it), but I am fundamentally comfortable with what I am doing and how I am accomplishing it.

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## **Find Sources of Support and Assistance**

When people ask me how I do it all, my standard response is, "I don't." I don't take care of the house; I don't cook, do laundry, or market. I have structured my time outside of work so that I have nothing to do except devote it to my family and me. This requires a

“staff” of support personnel, and my husband and I have made the decision to allocate a substantial portion of our income to maintaining such support at the expense of a number of other things. We do this because we believe it is one of the keys to maintaining our priorities.

I realize that many people could not afford the type of staff I employ, but there are ways to cut expenses: buy a house in a moderately expensive location; live with an empty living room for a while; put off buying a home until your career is established and financially rewarding. Instead of a full-time housekeeper, consider the options of day care, taking a child to a sitter’s home, recruiting friends and relatives, and utilizing cleaning services. It is not always easy to locate these resources, but it is essential to do so. Even if a woman enjoys housework, the demands of a house can easily drain her energy for family, career, and herself.

Not only is it important that a career woman/mother not try to do everything herself, it is simply not possible to live the mystical, mythical motherhood-and-apple-pie life while working at a career. Yet it is amazing how many women do not take this point seriously. Many give it lip service and then race home to pare the apples and get the pie in the oven before the children get in from school, wondering all the while why they feel exhausted and resentful.

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### **Focus On Attitude, Not Organization**

In my discussion of priorities I have purposely not included the usually ubiquitous “organization.” I defy anyone to organize three children under the age of seven. It is impossible to control home life in the same way one manages an office. I have excluded organization as a priority because advising people to be organized necessitates handing down an organizational plan containing concrete steps to follow. But people and their particular situations are all different, and the same steps cannot work for everyone. Managing a career and family is more than the simplistic following of steps. Primarily it is a positive attitude that welcomes problems as challenges and sees setbacks as starting points. All the organization in the world will not compensate for a negative attitude or priorities that are not clearly defined.

I have described briefly in a general manner how I handle a demanding and rewarding career simultaneously with having a full family life, but there are as many varied approaches to job and family situations as there are people. Some choose to emphasize one over the other; some, like me, want and believe it is possible to have both in equal measure; and some alter their priorities as their values evolve and their goals become clarified. For this reason, Felice Schwartz’s recommended early identification of an individual’s career path becomes impossible and highly undesirable, for it establishes barriers instead of providing the options talented and potentially contributing employees need.

Had early career path tracking been a reality when I was establishing my career and starting my family, I might well have chosen it when I came up against some of the hurdles and trade-offs I, as a female, was forced to consider. In so doing, I would have been but one more woman from the ranks of middle management who “proved” the perception that women in the workplace “have a greater tendency to plateau,”<sup>8</sup> thus turning the notion into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Is it any wonder that women on a slower track who are plateaued choose to leave a company or not return after maternity leave when they see their chances for advancement curtailed? What is the motivation to stay in such a corpo-

rate setting? The “cure” Schwartz prescribes is the very poison of limiting women’s choices, incomes, and possibilities. Hers is the sex-based stereotypical thinking that the Supreme Court invalidated almost twenty years ago.

If it were not for the reality that the bulk of child-rearing responsibilities still falls to women, Schwartz’s tracking proposal would seem merely shortsighted rather than pernicious. But this is not the reality, and women must still (inappropriately) defend lifestyle choices in the workplace, not only struggling to obtain flexible hours and affordable child care, but defending against the myth that a woman’s commitment and time spent with her family necessarily means a lack of commitment and serious intent toward her job.

Schwartz draws inordinate attention to maternity as the primary issue, when actually the issue is the same as it has always been: bias and a refusal on the part of the business establishment to give up cherished perceptions concerning women employees. Businesses and corporations have almost routinely made exceptions for talented male employees who require time off or flexibility in their work schedules for medical reasons or family matters. It is unreasonable to assume that only women are distracted and overstressed by the illness of a child, home responsibilities, or guilt.

Early career tracking as Schwartz describes it, even if implemented for both men and women, would result in the loss of valuable career momentum and the ghettoization of many talented employees to the future detriment of a corporation. Essentially it would give the message that a man’s or woman’s job must take priority over all else, that family is only of secondary importance, and that a person must confront this dilemma early on and make a choice.

It is tempting to debate this simplistic hypothesis as presented, but the very simplicity of the idea precludes such argument. There are too many exceptions — women who are doing outstanding jobs of managing both careers and families — and too many inherent factors that exert influence to try to find an either-or answer.

Women in upper management can usually afford at-home child care and other supportive services that enable them to go full speed ahead with their careers. Women in middle management have greater difficulty resolving these problems. Demographics, however, are helping to provide solutions, as the complexion of the work force shifts and the pool of available employees becomes increasingly feminized. Because of this, business leaders are becoming aware that ensuring a supply of employees more and more necessitates the implementation of supports such as flextime, reduced hours, work at home, maternity leave, and so on, that enable employees to continue working. Employers are realizing that failure to implement such policies reduces the pool of middle-management workers from which candidates for upper management are drawn, and that the cost in terms of time and monetary investment to hire and train new employees is greater than the cost of the supports necessary to keep current employees.

The same percentage of women as men want to have a full and rewarding career as well as a full and rewarding family life. I know from my own experience that it is possible and worthwhile. I also know that women, as well as men, must develop priorities and accept trade-offs. I am convinced, however, that the answer lies in the attitudes of both the employer and the employee and that the antithesis of success and “having it all” is Felice Schwartz’s new fact of life, the “mommy track.”👉

## Notes

1. Felice N. Schwartz, "Management Women and the New Facts of Life," *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 1989, 22.
2. Catalyst is a not-for-profit research and advisory organization that works with corporations to foster the career and leadership development of women.
3. Schwartz, "Management Women," 66.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. Letters to the Editor, *Harvard Business Review*, May/June 1989, 194.
6. *Ibid.*, 198.
7. *Ibid.*, 184.
8. Schwartz, "Management Women," 65.