

Family and Professional Life: The Limits of Time

Joseph Collin

Bachelor in Applied Economics from UFSIA, University of Antwerp, Belgium, and MBA from IESE, University of Navarra. He is married and father of five children. Apart from a management internship at Sabena and a job at a strategy consulting firm, he has mainly been active as an entrepreneur in such diverse industries as international trading, real estate investment and environmental management software.

It sometimes seems that the project of raising a family is incompatible with the noble and legitimate ambition to get the maximum out of a professional career. By raising a family, I refer not only to the financial effort to support a family, but also to the effort to educate one's children properly in line with the standards of responsible parenthood. The problem is really very simple: there are only 24 hours in a day. One could calculate that if we wanted to sleep eight hours, eat without rushing, devote optimal time to each of our children and, of course, to our spouse, triumph in our professional life, rest and take part in cultural activities, continue one's education and spend time reading, do a little exercise and keep in touch with relatives and friends, we would need forty hours each day. As it is impossible to make the day any longer, we must fight on two fronts: reduce, or at least control, the time spent on each activity, particularly professional work, and maximize the quality of that time, truly living "sixty-minute hours" as a friend of mine once said. If we take the trouble to look, we can readily find many minutes that are literally lost or wasted during our day.

It seems to me that both the professional and the familial aspects of life are important for our individual development and for achieving happiness. That is why I try to make them compatible by giving as much time as possible to each one, while trying to prevent one from overshadowing the other. My method: I try to get home before the children have gone to bed, so that I can spend some time with them each day, and better still if I can help my wife with baths and suppers.

I avoid sleeping away from home during the week for professional reasons. Whenever I can, I go home for lunch and I avoid having dinner without my wife. On weekends, I try to devote time to my family rather than work, usually including an outing or some other family activity. If exceptionally I have to work more hours than normal, I work at night (if possible, at home), taking the time from my rest instead of being away from my family. I organize myself so I am never prevented from attending one of my children's tutor meetings at school for professional reasons.

Working hours are an essential factor. It seems to take real courage to leave the office before everyone else, but if one really makes good use of the time for work and does all that is expected of one, there is no reason why one can't. To a great extent, the supposed need to stay longer at the office is a way of justifying a slower pace of work. I prefer to work harder for less hours, for example, skipping breakfast at the bar, so that I can spend that time with my family. Like everything else, it is a question of priorities.

I also try to apply the 80/20 rule. I spend most of my time on the few most important things and the least time on the least important things. Sometimes, the time spent on the rest tends to be 0% instead of 20%, but I have found that normally things work when one delegates properly. The temptation can arise to think that one is endangering one's career. I think that is not so: you have to take things seriously without taking yourself too seriously. What is more, I trust in Divine Providence. In other words, I place my trust in God when I am convinced that I have performed my professional duties well. And when the pressure from other people to stay longer builds up, I think about what Blessed Josemaría used to say about the need to carry one's own environment with one, in this case, to the workplace.

When conflicts arise, you must be very clear about your priorities. For example, on one Friday afternoon, my boss asked me to do a very important, urgent job. We arranged that I would do it as soon as possible and that he would check it over on Sunday "afternoon". I worked all night Friday, all Saturday and Sunday morning. I called him at 2.00 p.m. and he told me in a very annoyed voice that it was too late because he wanted to have reviewed it in the afternoon, "l'après-midi" in its literal sense, after 12 midday, while his baby was sleeping. He added that I should have some respect for people's weekends... But he would work every weekend.

My boss was a person from whom I have learnt an incredible amount in the technical sense of the profession. However, he had a somewhat aggressive character and tended to concentrate on the 5% that remained undone instead of encouraging or congratulating for the 95% that was well done. He was not a bad person but simply someone who was a bit short-sighted because of his character

and his upbringing: his parents had always demanded of him that he be the first and the best. And he really was smart. He easily won the country's only grant to study for a Harvard Business School MBA.

After working for a few months in his company, I decided to try to help him by writing in a letter the things that I thought "should not be done". This meant a big risk for me because he could fire me for just that (I was self-employed). Obviously, he was not very pleased to get the letter, but he did not get very upset and he even kept what I said in mind later on. However, it can be quite difficult for an adult to change. I drew my own conclusions and changed myself.

When my first child was about to be born, I notified my workplace that I would devote a week exclusively to my wife. In spite of the agreement existing on the matter, when the child was finally born, there was a terrible row at the company because a customer suddenly had an urgent problem at the same time. I did not back down and I almost lost my job because I broke the apparently sacred rule that the customer always comes first. My boss had been with a customer in another country when his two children were born. It seemed to me that that was not a good example to follow and I did what seemed best to me. I know that my colleagues think that I was right and, of course, so does my wife.

Due to events like these, I now believe that there are a few that for me are particularly difficult to combine with a fulfilling family life. Unfortunately, they are professions associated with a lot of social prestige and also very highly paid, perhaps to make up for the lack of time to have a private (and family) life worthy of that name. I am talking about professions like strategic consulting, corporate finance or investment banking, where people usually work minimum 65-hour weeks and almost always sleep away from home during the week. Although it may not be quite as bad, the situation of senior executives in many multinationals is very similar, particularly in those which have the policy where one should be prepared to change one's country of residence with only a few weeks' notice. I am not saying that it is not possible, but rather that I have reached the conclusion that I personally cannot do it and, therefore, have decided to cease steering my career towards those professions. This widely accepted situation makes me feel a bit sad because I believe that the individual is unity and that trying to look after one's family properly tends to improve one as a person. So it seems to me to be a shame for society that these leadership professions should have such a poor headcount of "vocational fathers". I cannot help thinking that these skilled professionals could make a really good contribution to society by improving their own human quality and devoting at least the same effort to their family as they do to their work.

Certain aspects of marriage are also very important in order to be able to reconcile family and professional life. My wife has preferred not to work out of

home while the children are young. It has been a choice freely made by her. This has a lot of advantages for family life but, at the same time, it has meant sacrificing greater financial well-being and some personal development for her. There is little time to be together, so it is very important that each one understand and accept the other spouse's situation. She must understand that I work most of the day outside of the home, that sometimes I get back late, and that when I return, I am tired and wanting to relax. And I must understand that she wants to know about my professional world, what goes on in it and, in some way, to share it and not feel like she is just the family's maid.

We always try to keep in mind that the household work is genuine professional work. Although it has not always been possible, it has always helped us to have home help or a girl who helps us with the children, in spite of the cost. We also try to take care of our communication, and to go out at night alone together or away for a weekend every once in a while.

I would say that the key is not to forget that on your wedding day, you gave yourself to the other person completely. So long as we do not forget that we are always giving ourselves, things work out. As soon as we start to look for something in return, the problems, frustrations, upsets and unhappiness start. It is also useful to remember what many retired entrepreneurs say: that now they realize that it would have been better to have spent less time at the office and more time at home.