

Women: Regain Your Professional Footing

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While both men and women may be struggling to balance work and family commitments during the unique challenges posed by the Covid-19 environment, the bulk of childcare and eldercare has tended to fall on women. In this article, we suggest approaches that might help women to move forward in the next few months, especially by creating personal boundaries that will offer vital flexibility in these uncertain times.

Introduction

As a [European consultancy](https://beaufortgroupconsulting.com) supporting women across the professional spectrum, we have watched, with ever-deepening concern, Covid-19's impact on wellbeing and professional confidence. Whether single mothers, women with partners, women without families, or women with responsibility for aging parents, the pressures are daunting. Research suggests that the 2020 pandemic threatens to set back the dial on gender equality by decades. Indeed, the most recent UN publication notes that "the impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and Covid-19 is no exception" ("From Insight to Action," UN Women 2020 Report).

A key example is provided by Amano-Patino et al (2020) who found that while Covid-19 has offered multiple research possibilities for economists to analyze its impact on social and economic change, the authors of papers have tended to be male, rather than female economists. This dearth of female publication reflects the pressures women face when combining research obligations, college administration and online teaching with family life, home management and often, home schooling. And make no mistake: the ensuing loss of professional visibility is something that our female clients fear most of all.

Scrambling to react

In March of this year, we were set to deliver a series of

workshops in Geneva but then learned that all academic institutions were closing, immediately. This left us scrambling to get one of us home to France before borders closed, and then moving our work online at a time when there was some skepticism about the efficacy of virtual learning. Yet we were lucky: our daughters are in their mid- and late-twenties, so working from home posed few challenges. For others in our orbit, it was a rather different story. Trade experts, lawyers, UN officers, academics, IT analysts, financial analysts, or single mother startup entrepreneurs all struggled as corporations and academic institutions extended remote working policies.

"How long can we sustain this? How do we cope?" were frequent questions we heard. It seemed that many women (and men, too) were experiencing "decision fatigue," a concept pioneered by Baumeister (1988), and one that increasingly figures in the coronavirus discourse. Decision fatigue, like sleep deprivation, can impact our capacity for clear and logical choices. As our energy depletes throughout a day, so too does our ability to make sound decisions and the more likely we are to make poor or impulsive ones, particularly if we are pushing ourselves and working without natural breaks. Levev et al (2011) found that parole judges who were in court early in the day made more favorable decisions than their peers who worked more intensive afternoon sessions without breaks. As our female clients adapted to the world of coronavirus - working remotely, battling mental and physical exhaustion, constantly making decisions about families, aged parents, and complex professional challenges - many found that their ability to concentrate diminished and key decisions invariably suffered. One client impulsively sent out a critical document to a key client without proofreading, which created enormous and stressful fallout. She said, "I just wanted to get rid of it, I had no energy to edit."

As Europe emerged from lockdown in June, some women opted for part-time contracts that would give



them some flexibility to manage family life, knowing that it would inevitably impact future career plans. Others feared that promotions were no longer attainable in the current climate. How often did we hear: "I am so lucky to have a job?" or "I am just doing what I can to keep the job, but haven't the time or energy to do more?" Put simply, women had to make decisions about their careers that they would never have countenanced nine months ago. Regardless of the context, there was consistency across their challenges. Perhaps you might empathize with some of them:

1. I am struggling with managing my time and where my attention is focused.
2. I am not certain how my performance is being judged and whether I am working as effectively as possible.
3. I am not certain I am making the best decisions.

Creating boundaries that can set you free.

The first steps towards helping our clients to address these challenges was to examine where the boundaries that had been in place pre-Covid might have changed. These boundaries had historically helped with managing focus, stress, time management, efficient working practices and effective decision making.

Here is the simple four step approach that we suggested they adopted.

1. Identify where boundaries have shifted and what has been the impact.

Has home life become a distraction, and a path to procrastination when addressing work objectives? The related question was often confronting: have you taken on too much responsibility, which therefore needs to be rebalanced? Or have boundaries shifted in the opposite direction, with work concerns and obligations absorbing days and evenings too?

In this scenario, we encouraged women to recognize personal/family stress points, and then to sketch out an ideal plan of how these might be accommodated, reduced or shared. This is a visualization exercise, so acknowledging what needs to change in order to make things work can offer a glimpse of what is realistic, and what is not. A helpful tool is Steven Covey's circles of concern and influence, where the key tip is to focus on the things you can influence and control (how you work,

organizing your workspace, family) and letting go of those you cannot alter (the duration of the pandemic, the future of your company etc.)

2. Consider pre-Covid boundaries that may have been lost: Do they need to be reinstated?

Are there clear demarcations between home and work? When working from home, have you replicated the boundaries that you took for granted at the office? The coffee and lunch breaks; the chat breaks to test ideas with colleagues; the commute home that enabled you to at least physically step away from work? Re-imagine these demarcation zones and try to respect them in your working day.

3. Decision fatigue: a slippery slope

Fatigue, impulse decisions and inertia regarding decisions can be signs of decision fatigue. Try to avoid making key work decisions at the end of the day when you are less fresh and more likely to make bad ones. Sleeping on it can be the best thing you do. Ensure that you take regular breaks during the day. Space out those Zoom or Webex meetings, and if you are working across multiple time zones, be brutal: create a cutoff time after which you cease taking calls or checking emails. If you absolutely must send out that critical document at 7 p.m., make sure that it is error-proof before pressing "send." If not, ask a friend or colleague to help you to proofread it. Remember the wisdom that we shouldn't restructure the company at the end of the day! Gaining clarity on where boundaries need to be repositioned -- or, if already lost, reinstated -- will help with the final step below.

4. What tools do you need to navigate this new environment?

Do you need to refresh your soft skills? This includes the communication repertoire, managing meetings, etc. Are you struggling with managing work deadlines and time management? Do you find it hard to say no, or to delegate? Of course, the two are often linked. Research conducted by a team of researchers at Stanford Business, Akinola et al (2018) indicates that there are gendered differences in the art of delegating: women can be reluctant to delegate because it might undermine perceived goodwill with subordinates. So the message is simple: learn to ask for help, because workplaces are changing and becoming more attuned to the needs of staff. Tap into that empathy and ensure

that your concerns are heard. If you feel that you need more support, ask your organization for a coach to help with the areas where you struggle.

Be kind to yourself; cultivate resilience

Finally, in these challenging times, make time to nurture your resilience. Resilience is not a personality trait, but a state of mind that can be nurtured and developed. Like any muscle, it needs to be used and strengthened. Keep connected with your personal and professional network, learn to recognize the symptoms of stress and fatigue, and above all, be kind to yourself. We genuinely believe that by thinking through some of these strategies you will be able to create boundaries that could, ironically, set you free.

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