

Balancing career & family depends on how you define success

What is success and how do you measure it? Those who know what they want, but at the same time are prepared to accept the trade-offs get the best results.

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Success can be both objective and subjective. With more people prepared to forgo aspects of the former in return for gains in the latter, it is more important than ever to understand the secrets to success in today's ultra-competitive work environment.

To this end, IESE's [Mireia Las Heras](#), together with Douglas T. Hall (Boston University), Mary Dean Lee (McGill University) and Ellen Ernst Kossek (Michigan State University), [tracked the experiences of a diverse group of high-level professionals over six years to see how successfully they managed to balance family and career success.](#)

Objective vs. subjective success

The authors divide success into two categories: objective success, i.e., the objective indicators of attainment that other people can observe, such as income and position; and subjective success, i.e., the individual's own perceptions of the quality and worth of his or her attainments.

Using these distinctions, they analyzed people who had negotiated a reduced workload to pursue personal and family priorities, while maintaining their professional demands.

Then, they analyzed to what extent participants were able to sustain these arrangements over time, and how they viewed their career and overall life outcomes.

The authors also examined the relationship between objective career success, pertaining to promotions, pay and status, and subjective career success, related to psychological well-being, so as to identify which factors and events, whether organizational, personal or familial, had the greatest bearing on general satisfaction.

Four case groups

Surprisingly, there was no clear correlation between subjective career success and objective career success. To explore why, the authors identified and analyzed four case groups.

Aligned Achievers (High Objective & High Subjective Success). This group consisted mainly of full-time managers with high levels of responsibility who worked more hours per week than any other group.

Most associated career success with upward mobility. However, over time, they said they did not want to go any higher than they already were. They knew what they wanted and worked hard to get it, but at the same time they were prepared to accept the trade-offs.

Alienated Achievers (High Objective & Low Subjective Success). While most wanted to work part-time, over time the majority ended up working for the same organization on a full-time basis. Only one person managed to stick to a reduced schedule, but even he was struggling.

Whether due to organizational or financial pressures, most felt obligated to work more than they preferred, with many of them expressing regret about the effects this was having on their personal relationships.

Happy Part-Timers (Low Objective & High Subjective Success). Unlike the previous group, these people managed to maintain a reduced workload, with some even choosing self-employment if they found the demands of their part-time jobs encroaching too much on their personal lives.

These people made a conscious choice to put their family or personal lives above their careers, and were fairly comfortable with that trade-off.

Hard-Luck Strivers (Low Objective & Low Subjective Success). At first, most members of this group were performing well, and half wanted to advance. However, over time, their fortunes soured. Some had lost their jobs, and two-thirds were self-employed and working part-time.

Job and financial insecurities were a common complaint, as were disruptive personal and

family-life events. Two people cited specific sacrifices they had made in their careers to deal with family crises, illnesses or special needs.

In short, these individuals sought the trappings of career success, but for reasons beyond their control, they were unable to achieve them.

Deconstructing the career mystique

This study provides a more nuanced view of the "career mystique," by which people get so caught up in their careers that they often make personal sacrifices that lead to negative outcomes.

Some career-oriented individuals — notably the Aligned Achievers — are able to balance a high commitment to careers with a high commitment to family, achieving success on objective and subjective measures.

However, it is worth noting that these individuals were also the chief breadwinners and, as such, had spouses highly involved in holding together the family side of things.

The Happy Part-Timers show it is possible to step back from the rat race and still experience sustained career success.

However, to define success on their own terms, they had to be prepared to challenge stereotypes about gender roles, parental status and job-related competence.

Indeed, even many of the Aligned Achievers had to be prepared to accept less upward mobility for the sake of personal priorities.

More work needs to be done to understand what enables some people to follow their own personal path with a strong sense of personal agency, and what leads others to submit to the career mystique.

The challenge for companies, meanwhile, is to help employees find ways of achieving objective career success without putting more personal interpretations of success at risk.

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