

How do successful men balance work and family? Strategies for success

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Having read hundreds of feminist books and articles over the years I was delighted to read about a new study from Pennsylvania State University, led by Sarah Damaske, which explores how successful men balance work and life.

Of the 73 successful male scientists interviewed, researchers identified 33 per cent of their sample as 'egalitarian partners'. They saw their partner's careers as important as their own. Some saw colleagues outshine them at work and Damaske expressed concern over academic science losing talented young men as well as women if more effort isn't made to overhaul institutional sexism.

Using the study as inspiration, I spoke to some successful men in various fields to find out how they manage work life balance so we can potentially model their approaches to success at work and happier home lives.

'I work irregular shift patterns,' says Chris, a pilot for a European short-haul airline. 'This means I am often working at weekends, or recovering from a very early

start or a very late finish.' He has been married for 12 years and has two primary school-aged children.

'I obviously have to be well rested for work, but it's important for home life as well. If I'm tired and grumpy, I feel like I'm short-changing my family on the time I spend with them.

'Get to know your strengths and weaknesses as a couple. For example, I'm pretty practical and a problem solver but I can be a bit disorganised. My wife is less likely to change a spark plug, but has everything organised and makes sure I never forget to do something important.'

'I try to bring some silence and stillness into my routine,' says Matt. He has been married for 17 years and has three kids. He is head of hospitality and facilities for a peace and reconciliation organisation.

He has been doing CrossFit for the past 18 months and cycles a 12 mile round trip to work. 'Making that space to do something extra is definitely beneficial, especially for my capacity to parent in the way I would aspire to. When things are difficult at work, one of those things crashes. I don't follow my daily practice, I don't get to the gym and I'm a bad parent. It really is about interdependence. So many things come together to make the whole thing work.'

'I was working too many hours as an architect, urban designer and master planner,' says Noah, who is married with two small boys. 'I was running a large team and increasingly struggling with the stress of not seeing the boys.'

After moving to New Zealand to be close to his family, his partner was offered a great opportunity. Noah became primary care giver and she became the main breadwinner.

'I'm a member of an organisation called Playcentre, a Kiwi institution. Basically, the parents are trained to be early childhood educators and we run a teaching organisation.' This means a lot of evening and weekend work but his son gets to play with his peers.

'My biggest tip for both partners is to be flexible and fair. Nobody likes to ask for

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time off but it can't always fall onto the shoulders of one person to be responsible for the kids or the breadwinning. If you're the breadwinner, don't fall into the stereotype trap of thinking looking after the kids is easy. They need encouragement, creativity, attention and patience – even when you're tired.

'Your worst client, on their worst day will never, ever, be as unreasonable as a four-year-old. If you're the full time parent, congratulations – you're living the dream. Your wife is battling gender bias, reduced pay and is having to work 50 per cent harder than her male colleagues to hold her own. That needs flexibility and support. She'll really be missing her kids so going out of your way to meet for lunch with the kids will be appreciated.

'Ladies, if you're the breadwinner don't forget that the mums' network is often a bit uncomfortable with dads. As such, we find it harder to make friends with the parents of other children. It gets lonely at times. Encourage a bit more socialising. Just because he's at work doesn't mean he forgets you and the kids. He'll probably miss you and want to make the most of the time when he's home so a little extra effort to maximise the time he can spend with you and the kids will really be appreciated.

'I love having the majority care of the kids. I want more time with them but that's not possible at the moment. They will soon both be at school and that will give me the chance to review my hours. More employers need to realise that part-time staff are an amazing resource. With a bit of conviction, trust and flexibility they will find people who will go the extra mile. After all, not all full-time staff will work evenings from home to get a problem solved overnight.'

'It's a challenge for my wife and I to both work full-time and make time for family and each other,' says Steve, an international development communications specialist for Amref Health Africa UK, an international health charity.

'I am married with two young girls. My firstborn is from a previous relationship. My wife, Erika, and I are involved in her life and we try to have the two girls grow up as siblings regardless of the dynamics. I travel a lot for work as well, which further complicates the situation.

'I prioritise. Weekends are for family – religiously so. I spend weekends with my wife and our two girls unless I am not in the country. We also try to support

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each other's interests, making sure they are all integrated within family time.

'The key is to embrace your occupation and enjoy family-orientated activities. I suppose you develop this once you have kids. There is no such thing as a perfect balance. We work incredibly hard during the week and earn those great family moments.'

'I have been with my partner for 18 years,' says Bob. 'We have two girls, aged two and three. I've been with my co-operative for 16 years. When we started a night shift, there was an opportunity to compress my working week into two long night shifts, so that's what I currently do. My children go to nursery twice a week so that I now have a day free each week.

'By working a nightshift, I help my employer cover an unpopular shift and help myself by concentrating my working week into a very short period. It means that I'm able to concentrate on my children without thinking about work for the remainder of the week.

'Stop giving undue importance to being male or female and what is expected of you based on that. Do what works for you and your family. Nobody gets a medal for feeling guilty so do what you can for people. If they have more unreasonable demands, remember that it is not your problem. Try to do unpopular/hard to fill jobs to show your commitment and work hard not long.' ■

Work
Career
Business

Life
Family
Health

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