

Mission Accomplished: The New Values Equation for Professional Women

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Introduction

Increasingly experienced women professionals are declaring that their mission is accomplished. You see them around town. Not in their uniform of business suits and stately pumps, they are smiling happy and invigorated. These are the newly liberated women professionals who at the age of 55 to 60 have declared success and left their professional workplace to seek their own fulfillment. Having struggled through raising families and maintaining careers, been part of the vanguard of feminists who paved the way for the large numbers of young female professionals, female lawyers, doctors, and successful professionals are moving out of the office and on to create new lives distinct from their professional existence.

Several years ago, I noted that a few of my female classmates from medical school had left the medical workforce for another life. One had settled into the role of family caretaker, providing support for her aging parents, while at the same time traveling frequently to partake of courses in bird-watching, history, and whatever, while attending all the extended family events such as graduations, christenings, and birthday parties around the Eastern United States. Another “retired” at age 58 from a government position, initially to consult, but in actuality to indulge her hobbies in pottery and photography. I began to wonder what the story was, as I tended to my family and full-time job.

Is there a backlash to feminism and success?

Increasingly I recognized that the phenomenon of professional dropout was widespread among diverse professions including law and medicine. There was a story here, but what the story was and its meaning remained obscure. Then, by complex circumstances, my full-time job became less than full time and all of a sudden I had time to write, read, and think, as well as do all those things that I had put off for years. Despite my family’s worries, I was busy as ever, but setting my own pace and my own direction. And then I began to understand....

At first I thought this was burn-out from the rigors of medicine and these women physicians were disillusioned, like many of their male colleagues. However, there was the corporate lawyer for a large health care enterprise who decided to become a clothing consultant and market couture clothes; the IT-computer software expert who became an interior designer; the environmental lawyer who decided to devote her life to politics. Not just medicine, but other fields had the same opt out pattern! What was the message? What were we all doing? Why now when we had succeeded after years of juggling?

Equally concerning to me was the negative message being sent to younger women at the earlier stages of their careers. Young women looking at experienced professionals for guidance were questioning their own motivation to persevere through the rigors of demanding careers and family demands. Was this adding to the backlash against feminism, and negating the earlier efforts of those men and women who struggled for women's entry to the professions?

Is This Really Success for Professional Women?

For women, much more than men, professional job success does not provide sufficient rewards. This answer has gradually come to me as I have read, written, talked, and watched. We did it! We pushed through the barriers and felt that we had no choice but to accept the traditional male definition of success. We became heads of departments, titled and valued professional employees, and parents of successful young adults. However, we had never taken the time to reward ourselves and indulge those activities which gave us inner satisfaction outside the family and work world. All of a sudden we realized that the time had come. Now or never and we were entitled. We didn't have to fight to succeed because we had succeeded. It was our turn to do sometime for ourselves.

Some of us thought that our jobs would/could provide complete fulfillment. However as we got older we realized that work was not enough. Others always thought that the "extras" were essential, but had never taken the time. Whether part of this was due to pure "lack of time", or part was due to the active discouragement and public disapproval of "frivolous" or non-career-oriented activities of professional women is unclear. However, what is clear is with lesser financial demands we said I'm out, and left the profession behind.

What a waste of talent! How did we get to the point that highly skilled women with years of accumulated expertise and knowledge abandon their profession?

The Road From Here to There, And Back?

Dedicated focus on professional success allowed us to achieve our professional goals at a personal cost. We became successful by having a straight and narrow male-based career trajectory. In order to be successful these women had to pursue their career with the single-minded focus of their male colleagues merged with the family focus of their home-oriented friends. The cost was a loss of personal time, and personal fulfillment that allows inner recharging and nourishment of the spirit. Now, "when the spirit called" rather than continue to struggle they made a deliberate well-reasoned choice to focus on non-professional activities and rewards.

The answer is not to say "don't quit now", but rather to create a workforce culture that allows for nourishment as we proceed. Making more time available for non-

work and non-family pursuits during the younger years would allow these women to feel inner sustenance, and keep them going so they didn't get to the all or none stage with years of professional "life" ahead. Forty hours ought to be a limit, not a floor. Working smarter not longer should be the goal. Both men and women should be actively encouraged and rewarded for having activities in addition to their work and family. "Free" time should be compensated, rather than denied. Part-time and intermittent work experiences should be coupled with public policy which supports families with children.

Conclusion

The new values equation for professional women is more balanced with family, work, and personal rewards having more equal roles. A new workforce culture must be embraced to support the new values equation for both men and women. A shorter work week with fewer hours will allow those working hours to be more intense and productive, and not diminished by inner conflicts. Less work with more inner rewards throughout the span of a career will lead to a more productive and sustained professional career. Less emphasis on the straight and narrow career path, will lead to a more durable career with more ultimate social benefit.

Feminism was successful in allowing more women to become successful professionals. Now the agenda must shift to vigorously advocate for change in the workplace to allow women (and men) to have professional success without sacrificing family and personal fulfillment. Otherwise, we risk not just a backlash, but a retreat from the goals of independence and equity for women. Too many young women are saying to their accomplished mothers "Mom, I don't want to do what you do. It's just too hard."



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