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TEN QUESTIONS

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## Women at business school – Ellen Kossek, professor

Compiled by Charlotte Clarke



Ellen Kossek: 'You can have it all. But you have to be willing to take risks and follow your heart'

Ellen Kossek is a professor of management at Purdue University's Krannert School of Management in the US. She is also the inaugural research director of the school's Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence, which focuses on advancing women's leadership. She has recently developed a new MBA class called Talent Management of Gender and Diversity.

Prof Kossek has a PhD in organisational behaviour from Yale University and an MBA from the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Before becoming a professor, she worked in human resources at IBM headquarters worldwide.

In her spare time, Prof Kossek volunteers at a summer girl's camp and enjoys hiking, playing tennis and trying new restaurants.

### 1. Who are your business influences?

Personally, I was touched by Ellie Reece, now deceased, who was my mentor and adviser at college. I went to college in the '70s and at the time, single sex women's colleges were (and positive gender affirmation still is) deeply important for developing women leaders. Prof Reece showed me the value of positive mentoring, strong support and high demands to help women succeed. I would not be the person I am today without having this wonderful teacher who believed in me.

### 2. What advice would you give to women in business?

You can have it all. But you have to be willing to take risks and follow your heart about how you want to craft a life that works for you. Think about 'career customisation' to allow you to follow your dreams. Reflect on your values and conduct a 'life bucket' analysis. By life buckets, I mean the different ways you allocate your time, energy and passions. Sometimes we get so caught up in work we forget to take time to self-reflect on what is most meaningful to us. Yet we are most likely to be happy when we are spending our time on what matters most.

Affirmative work environments are important. We need to be in a place that doesn't make us feel like we have to sacrifice our non-work identities and passions to have a successful career. Most of us are seeking rich lives with identities that are more than just one dimensional. It is easy for us to spend time on things we think will be good for our career because it looks good in public.

### 3. What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love being able to do research and teaching on employment issues that make a difference in people's lives. I am a member of the Work, Family & Health Network, a national network of US researchers who are collaborating on field experiments in dozens of worksites to improve the health of employees and their families.

### 4. What is your life philosophy?

Career (and life) is not a race or a sprint but a long journey and marathon. Take time to enjoy the scenery, be in the moment, and enjoy the ride. Relish and live in the present instead of always looking to the future. Rather than thinking "someday" I will do XYZ," stop, look, listen and realise that the moments we have now will never be repeated again. Ask yourself, "Am I enjoying what I am doing and spending my time where it is meaningful?"

### 5. What is the best piece of advice given to you by a teacher?

Find your own "great white whale" or Moby-Dick. This means identifying what really is your passion. It can also be passion bubbling up from what bothers or annoys you about the status quo that you would like to understand more or change. Too many people try to do what is popular instead of listening to their own drum and heartbeat. This advice came in my research method class led by one of my former professors at Yale, Richard Hackman.

He moved from Yale to Harvard after I graduated and just recently passed away. He also told us that to really do quality work, you need to "always handle your own rat". As a trained psychologist, this was a reference to behavioural Skinnerian psychology, where mice were used in positive reinforcement bar-pressing experiments. The message was, "If you really want to understand and solve something, don't send a substitute or delegate but learn about it firsthand".

### 6. What is your biggest lesson learnt?

Women's career success is as much about changing men as it is about changing women. My personal success is as much to do with having a supportive spouse as it was about me and my own efforts. I met my husband at business school in accounting class. This probably helped us see each other as equal peers as we were both pursuing graduate degrees. Personality also counts. My husband came from humble beginnings, as his parents emigrated to the US. He was probably ahead of his time in doing nearly 50-50 shared care while working for a demanding Fortune 500 company. He balanced his career with mine in ways I am not sure all men of our era would do.

### 7. What academic achievement are you most proud of?

I am currently the first elected president of the Work and Family Researchers Network, an international membership organisation of interdisciplinary work and family researchers. Working with the founder of WFRN and an international programme committee, I am planning a conference in New York this June where hundreds of presentations will be made by scholars from over 33 countries. The conference involves research across many disciplines, from psychology to sociology to economics to family.

When I first started writing about work and family issues several decades ago, there were few psychologists or managers in the mainstream business journals publishing on this topic. One exception to this was Rosabeth Moss Kanter, now at Harvard, whom I was lucky enough to have serve on my dissertation committee at Yale. The work-family field has since exploded. I am thrilled to help be a small part of leading the change in how workplaces view work and family.

### 8. What is your favourite business book?

I enjoy the autobiography called *Personal History* by Katherine Graham, the former editor of the Washington Post. She was one of the first chief executives of a large Fortune 500-like company. She was thrust into leadership when her husband died. Even though she was a leader by marriage and accident, she showed tremendous business savvy, poise and frankness. She was ahead of her time as an inspirational leader. This book won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for biography.

### 9. If you could do it all again, what would you do differently?

Life is about no regrets. We can't undo the past and shouldn't worry about things we can't change. That being said, if I had to do it all over, I would have maybe slowed down my career pace temporarily for a few months after each baby. I had four children while working full-time as a scholar and did not take maternity leave until after I received tenure.

When I first started out, women in business schools, academia and the workplace who took time off for family were often stigmatised. They sometimes even lost pay, academic fellowships, or jobs. These are issues that still, unfortunately, happen today. So I followed what is called a "bias-avoidance" strategy, where one prevents possible discrimination by not using available work-life policies to prevent any

possible backlash.

## 10. What are your future plans?

I would like to write a book about the truth that managers and organisations need to know about workplace flexibility and scheduling in today's 24/7 global and diverse world. I believe there is a lot of misinformation on flexibility and leaders need to know the truth.

Flexibility and work-life policies are effective when they are viewed as a motivational tool for talent and performance management. Their use must balance multiple stakeholder interests: the employer and manager, the employee and their families. Too many managers view workplace flexibility as an individual deal, and some users face a flexibility stigma.

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