



“I AM NOT A CAREER WOMAN”

Daria Borisova, Member of the Management Board – Managing Director at SIBUR, on support, outdoor activities and the work-life balance.

Choosing a profession

When I was a teenager, I dreamt of becoming a researcher, I considered it a wise, refined and respected career choice. The academic community in the Soviet Union gave off this impression. I had great role models and wanted to follow in the footsteps of my parents, who were researchers and soviet academic intellectuals in a good sense.

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It is hard to figure out what to do with your life when you are 17, something that is still true for young people today, but the 90s were a hard decade for Russia. It did not take me long to settle on the university route – I only wanted to go to Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU), and only to study a technical subject. The idea was to get a quality education and then look at where it would take me. My parents and grandparents were all chemical engineers, so my choice was driven by that. I developed a respect for, and interest in, their profession since I was a child.

Then, during my university years, the big change came – the Soviet Union collapsed, and a new economic system emerged. We were excited to see the world outside the Soviet Union, learn how business works and experience something other than research.

I graduated from MSU in 1994 and enrolled at the University of Toledo (USA) under a joint programme. Then I came to a crossroads. When faced with the choice to pursue research opportunities in Russia or go overseas, my research advisor helped me to pursue both and establish employment with MSU and the University of Toledo at the same time. He kept me from moving and pursuing a career in the USA, convincing me instead to get a handle on how science and education work in another country, while keeping the door open to return to Russia and develop here.



The Alps, a mountain crossing between Switzerland and France.

Finding a base

While doing my PhD, another step in my academic career, I was thinking about my next move. So, I took an evening business course at the same time to broaden my horizons. I knew I wanted to join a multinational company. Back then, business in Russia was actively adopting international practices. I had ample opportunity to upgrade my skills abroad, but I opted for job offers from Russia.

After graduating from the University of Toledo, I decided to try my hand at working for McKinsey in Russia. My main motivation then was to gain broad base of experience by working with different companies and functional lines. Why did I go back to work in Russia? I believed that my skills were more in demand and my incremental value would be higher in Russia, as I understood local people and culture, and therefore would be more useful to the Firm and my team. Besides, I had family, relatives and friends in Russia.

Work and family

I got my work ethic from my father – I always wanted to jump out of bed every morning, go to work and pursue my plans with gusto. I saw my parents discussing interesting topics and their research in the evening. When the line between work and home is blurred, it is easier to be yourself and pursue your passion. It is also great to have support from your family.

Passion

Like every dedicated manager or professional, I work hard. You will never get to the top unless you give it your all. Success requires focus and energy. I often think about my plans and ambitions even in my free time, not only at work; otherwise I would not be able to get everything done, but it is also critically important to swap focus and switch mental channels, or productivity dips. For example, great ideas come to me when I go jogging along the riverside.

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Family

Sure, I spend less time with my family than the average person, but I aim for quality over quantity. At weekends, we do something fun together, from playing sports to going for walk.

As life stages evolve, the desired balance changes. Now that my children are old enough, we do not need each other 24 hours a day anymore, but we still have shared interests and activities. My eldest daughter is 23, my son is 17 and my youngest daughter is 12. This age difference helped me balance career and family by devoting time to one child at a time, before returning to work.



With my daughter in Amsterdam.

Recreation

We spend breaks from work and holidays together. We picked up winter sports 20 years ago and have enjoyed it ever since. Us adults preferring skiing but the kids love snowboarding. We were invited by friends to go skiing in France and they showed us the ropes.

In summer, we go windsurfing. I spent a long time looking for a summer activity other than lying on a beach, and learning to control a sail and a board turned out to be a great choice.

Spending time in front of a TV tires me out, but outdoor activities fill me with energy. Going for a walk in a group or jogging alone can be very inspiring, and I love wandering around Moscow, its embankments and downtown side streets.

Favourite routes

The embankment along Vorobyovy Gory, starting from MSU's observation deck, then down through the Neskuchny Garden, Gorky Park, Krymskaya Embankment and into the city centre. Alternatively, you could start in the city centre at Pushkin Square and then head down the boulevards towards the river near the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. And, of course, a walk towards the observation deck on Vorobyovy Gory and around the MSU grounds – my alma mater always puts me in a good mood.

Energy balance

An essential life skill I practice is balancing my internal energy. You cannot live the rock and roll life 24/7. There is always something negative going on – things do not work out at work or home, the children misbehave, or a million other problems.

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I do not have a set recipe for striking a balance between work, people and circumstances. I know I cannot face my problems alone, I need to share my emotions and ask for advice from those who have already “been there, done that”. When the going gets tough, you do not always have to be strong and cope with things on your own, sometimes you just need to let it go and accept help and advice. This mindset is instilled through parenting and depends on the psychological makeup of an individual.

A leader must know their strengths and areas to fall back on, as well as be aware of their own limitations and gaps where they need advice and support.



Fishing and rafting in the Russian Far East.

Cooking

I used to love cooking, and my eldest daughter was lucky to grow up at that time. We used to cook together at weekends, but now we are not so passionate about it. My husband is actually the best cook, and sometimes my youngest daughter, when she feels like it.

Goals

My expertise has matured and developed as I immersed myself in and explored a particular topic. I am not a career woman – never was – I just do what makes me happy and adds the most value against the time spent on it. I usually set myself some goals and an agenda over a three-to-five-year horizon, adapting them as I go along.

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Women and business

Men and women are different. Diversity is essential for leadership, and it is not just about the gender balance but also cultural and ethnic backgrounds and many more. The philosophy behind this is very simple: from a business perspective, any project needs various leadership styles, different perspectives and approaches to the matter at hand to be sustainable. This makes a company more sustainable – and it's good for businesses to bring in leaders from a different country or industry, with a different background and different business approaches.

People and talent management are essential to any business. The war for talent, which is distributed equally between men and women, is raging. To win, a company has to recruit the best talent irrespective of gender.

Heavy industries where I have worked had a historically lower percentage of women in management roles. This is because of the lack of role models. Nobody wants to fight the bias, telling themselves, “I do not need this. That is not how life works. I will not make it.” Essential levers to make this go away involve building up the chain of command and fostering a strong culture of mentoring. At McKinsey, I focused on mentoring and supporting the younger generation so that they could fulfil themselves, find their place in the professional world and develop successfully.