

# It Can Be Done!

## Combining Family And An International Career While Working From Home

by Heather Hiam-White

*L'auteure raconte comment elle a commencé son propre commerce d'importations avec la Chine lorsqu'elle était au début de la vingtaine. Se basant*

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*Pregnant with my first child, I needed to reassess my commitment to building the business.*

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*sur sa propre expérience, elle réfléchit sur les problèmes particuliers qui se posent aux femmes lorsqu'elles essaient de combiner famille et carrière surtout si, comme elle, elles veulent faire un tra-*

*vail socialement conscient au niveau international.*

I started my business, Pacific Trade Group, when I was 23 years old. An East Asian Studies major, I was out of college only a year and a half and had held two jobs, neither of which offered me the kind of opportunities that I was looking for. I wanted to travel all over China to learn about the state of its manufacturing sector and find products suitable for the U.S. market. I wanted to be an import agent linking Chinese sellers with U.S. buyers. It was a job I had a clear vision of and had to create for myself. Twelve years later I'm still building upon my initial vision which has given me a level of independence not usually offered by conventional jobs.

When I started out I was seriously undercapitalized. I had less than \$400 in savings and an American Express card. The American Express card paid for a plane ticket to China. I planned to attend a trade show where I hoped to connect with many Chinese suppliers and get enough samples and catalogues to show to U.S. buyers and hopefully get my first orders. I succeeded in getting about \$20,000 worth of orders, but because of the nature of delayed payment terms in the import business as well as the

lengthy production lead times in China at that time (things are very different now), it was almost eight months before I got paid for those first shipments. Unable to pay the American Express bill on time, my card was taken away, but by then I had developed more customers who paid for my plane tickets from then on. I still credit Amex for helping to get my business started.

I was working as an intermediary on all of the early contracts for the first two years, which were for arts and crafts, textiles, and housewares. I facilitated the production and shipment of the goods but took no financial risks. My customers liked having direct access to Chinese sellers because they obtained lower prices and it enabled me to slowly build a capital base for the business. Because I was under 25 and owned no property, not even a car, I was not a candidate for any kind of business loan. I also did not have several years of business experience that many entrepreneurs (especially men) have. But my ease with the Chinese language and knowledge of Chinese culture was in great demand at that moment of new interest in trade with China. Furthermore, I was one of few Americans in this line of work who spoke Chinese, which made me memorable with my Chinese contacts. I'm still working with many of my earliest friends from those initial trips today, and enjoy a network of connections in the U.S. and China that have been well developed over the last 12 years.

Another helpful factor in getting the business off the ground was that there was an element of newness to our relationship with China at the time and an absence of major players who dominated the market I was trying to focus upon. This helped me to overcome the disadvantages posed by my age and lack business experience. I am also a woman of color

working in a sector in which I continue to be a distinct minority. Yet, because of my knowledge of the Chinese language and my skill at connecting buyers and sellers, I was able to develop an advantage as a small, independent agent. And, as there were still relatively few U.S. firms trying to do what I was doing, I didn't face a level of competition that consistently emphasized my weaknesses: lack of formal business training, lack of capital, lack of credit, etc. I was able to develop a "niche" specialty by focusing on clients in the upscale housewares market and by producing new products based upon their designs which they paid the manufacturers for directly. My earnings came from the commission I charged on the sales I generated between buyers and sellers.

I shared an office suite in a beautiful Victorian building with a group of other women entrepreneurs that provided an environment of camaraderie and support. My friend, Janet Cobb, who ran that business was an inspirational role model and friend. She had an attitude toward her work that required adherence to a high standard of beauty and elegance in every presentation, no matter how mundane the product. It was a unique and very successful strategy that helped me to create a similar standard for my own work. Although it is more costly and requires a level of creativity in addition to the work itself, it is worth the extra effort because unique aesthetic statements sets a company apart from the mainstream in a positive way and helps smaller firms build a competitive advantage over larger, generic competitors.

The business started to grow rapidly. Two years later, when I was 25, I had orders worth over \$1 million, and two employees who worked for me as independent contractors. I worked 85 hour weeks and had little

time for anything else. I travelled to China every few months on long trips that averaged four to six weeks. I handled well over 50 contracts by then, and found that things had settled into a level of routine problem solving punctuated by major production or shipping crises every couple of months that might require an unplanned trip to resolve.

Newly married and pregnant with my first child, I felt the need to

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*My goal was to reduce the work I was doing to accommodate the challenges of being a new mother.*

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reassess my commitment to continuing to build the business. What I enjoyed most about my work was traveling in China and working with the numerous friends

I had made there. But, with a new baby, I was no longer going to be able to do that. I tried hiring a manager to take over the majority of the work load but I was not able to find someone with the specialized skills I was looking for. My goal was to reduce the amount of work I was doing as well as to reduce the level of stress to accommodate the challenges of being a new mother. I realized that in order to continue working at my current pace—which was something I did not wish to do—I would need more than a full-time, live-in babysitter. So, instead, I chose to reduce my client load. I moved my office into my home and worked with about half of the number of clients I previously had.

I realize this is not a choice most entrepreneurs would have made and it certainly does not fit the model of the ambitious entrepreneur who puts developing the business before all other competing needs, including family. Let's face it: the subjects of traditional entrepreneurial profiles are usually men, who often exhibit qualities of extra independence, risk taking, and what has been described as big egos. I do not believe this model can be generalized to most women, especially those who are also actively involved in raising families. The cur-

rent "gazelles" phenomenon of fast growing entrepreneurial companies are primarily owned by men who have as much as 15 to 20 years work experience in their field prior to starting on their own. Due to glass and cement ceilings for women in numerous industries, the importance of self-acquired skills for women entrepreneurs becomes paramount if they wish to advance outside the traditional work environment. I was fortunate that my husband held a full-time job and was able to support my decision to reduce my work and travel load in order to spend time with our son.

During the next two years I kept my Chinese language skills active by doing an independent research project, stayed in touch with my suppliers in China, and networked continually during my extended maternity leave in order to remain connected, if not fully engaged, with my career. And, I continued to earn a full-time salary working from home.

With the birth of our second child I reduced my work load further, down to a single client, but one who was big enough that I was still able to earn the equivalent of a well paid full-time job, while working from home only part-time. I also began to pursue my interest in women in development by starting to build a network of contacts. My goal was to work with women's organizations in developing countries who need business training in order to sell their products in new markets. Again, I placed my emphasis on building and maintaining networks instead of trying to mold myself into the model of the classic successful entrepreneur.

I think for most women in business it is realistic to try to succeed based upon who you know rather than who you are. It is also important for us to adopt a collaborative and information sharing approach to building our networks of connections and potential alliance partners as it is a style that many women already feel comfortable with.

For me this has translated into choosing to work with people whenever possible who share my values

and interest in other cultures in addition to the specific work projects we pursue. China is a complicated place to try to do business and I have reached the point in my work where I am not willing to help someone who is merely interested in quick, cut-throat deals and who has no interest in understanding the challenges the people on the other side of the negotiating table face. Large profits are currently being made in China in part because labour there is still so undervalued relative to the competitive quality of the goods they offer. I believe it is important to let people in China know that our interest is not exploitation, but the desire to build a relationship both sides can benefit from. That has often meant adopting a style that, again, is more collaborative and sharing than one based upon contract demands and ultimatums. As in many countries, informal personal networks are essential to business success in China. If one wishes to develop such a network, she must build friendships based upon commitment, mutual respect, and personal favors.

I did not start my company with the goal of making a lot of money, but to learn more about China and continue to develop the close relationships with people there that I had begun during college. Making money has always been secondary to my goal of seeking challenging work that

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meshes with my interest in the Chinese language and culture. Recently when I pointed out to my nine-year-old son that I had reduced my business in order to stay home with him when he was young, he jokingly replied that he would rather have the money and had the babysitters!

In 1989 I started to seriously think about going to graduate school to

formally study some of the issues related to trade and economic development that I was encountering in my work with China. I met a professor at MIT, interested in having a student in his program who had many years of practical experience working in China, who offered me the chance to join a program in international management at the Sloan School. This was around the time of the Chinese government crackdown on Tiananmen, an event which affected me deeply, and made me realize that my approach to business in China was fundamentally different than that of most U.S. businesspeople involved there. Unlike most businessmen I was in favor of sanctions against the government and the loss of the "Most Favored Nation" trading status with China in 1990. I was not willing to sacrifice my personal values to promote or justify a cause which I stood to profit from personally. It is simply not true that by creating a strong economic presence in China we somehow facilitate the development of democracy. In fact, the workplace in China is becoming increasingly dangerous in part due to the presence of foreign firms who institute their own forms of internal organizational control free from enforced government laws protecting workers' safety. Today, as firms in China attempt to emulate western models of efficiency, Chinese women employed by exporting firms work longer hours, have fewer vacations, and thus spend less time with their families than before the current economic boom.

In recent months we have seen reported high numbers of industrial accidents in southern Guangdong province. Hong Kong and overseas Chinese-owned firms have been responsible for the majority of fires and factory explosions occurring in increasingly unsafe production sites. The victims in these fires have been mostly women workers. Hopefully, the implementation of a national union for workers in foreign-owned plants, scheduled to go into effect in 1995, will bring about an improvement in workplace conditions. I find it trou-

bling that women's working conditions in China, the safety of which were previously enforced by law, are now being steadily eroded in the pursuit of rapid economic growth.

Many of my closest suppliers in China in 1989 at the time of the crackdown were women department managers of government trading corporations. It was a very traumatic time for them as well as for people throughout Chinese society. I continue to feel a sense of kinship with my female counterparts there, and realized after the Tiananmen crackdown that I wanted to take my work to a more direct theoretical and influential level that is closely shaped by my values. I do not believe I can do this by simply continuing to help keep the doors open to increased China trade.

I believe it is possible to develop close relationships with trading partners in China that are mutually advantageous. It is possible, for example, to structure deals that ensure child labour is not involved but it can require extra work, and a level of expertise that most western businesspeople are not committed to developing. Until quite recently it was unlikely that Chinese firms doing business with Westerners would employ child labour in the production of their goods as all enterprises were state-owned. With the advent of capitalism and private ownership, however, child labour is being increasingly used in small workshops that work as subcontractors for the large exporting firms. If one wishes to ensure that child labour is not used today in an order from China, it is necessary to specify it in a clause on the sales contract, and inspect the goods at the factory while they are in production.

I am currently in a PhD program at MIT researching China's economy and the structure of its foreign trade sector. I also do consulting and business training to women in development organizations and to individuals trying to start businesses in this area. I am learning and developing new skills while I continue to enjoy a work

schedule that lets me be at home much of the time with my two-year-old daughter. Unlike most entrepreneurs, I have chosen a path of personal development and independence over revenue growth. Although I often do short-term month-long projects that may require travelling to China, I can still run my business from home. With three children, however, I am finding it increasingly difficult to work from home and have decided to move into an office when my daughter is a bit older.

One advantage of having many years' experience in a particular specialty is that it can give one tremendous leverage when trying to craft a routine that fits which family needs. My most enjoyable business trip was one in which I met three Chinese business colleagues (all men) and travelled for two weeks in California and New York with them and my four-month-old, nursing daughter. Their company paid me as a consultant to assist them to learn about the US MARKET and try to get orders for their products. They held Noelle when she cried, bounced her on their knees, kept her entertained in the backseat while we were driving to appointments, and generally treated her as their niece. They never once complained about the baby coming along and we continue to work together today. I think it says something favourable about the Chinese business culture and their attitudes toward children. I do not think I could have brought a baby along on a two week trip with American businessmen.

When I look at the structure of Pacific Trade Group as a woman-owned entrepreneurial business, I recognize that there are a few critical success factors.

*Low capital needs.* My role as a business intermediary required little start-up capital and no debt. Although in later years I did import products as a wholesaler I financed purchases internally without bank loans. Debt and rigid loan repayment schedules would have forced me to make different decisions about the evolution of the business. The bootstrap approach

to financing the business promoted slow, incremental growth without the large, differential steps that many growing businesses cannot successfully negotiate.

*Low overhead.* Even as the business grew, I did not accumulate the capacity, inventories, employees, and facilities which would have placed the business at greater risk. When possible I shared offices, used a warehouse that managed inventories on a project basis, and always sought alternative options that would give me increased flexibility over traditional strategies.

*Networking.* Calling the business Pacific Trade Group when it was a sole proprietorship implied that there were many entities working together toward a unified goal. Whenever possible I expanded my networks, and occasionally entered into alliances with other firms on projects that I otherwise would have been too busy to accept.

Having a home-based business has allowed me to continue to work while my children are young. I often work at night after they are asleep. China being twelve hours ahead of our time zone means that they are beginning their work day at 8:30 p.m., just when my household is getting quiet. Due to improvements in international communications over the last five years, today I conduct my business entirely by fax and telephone.

As the global village becomes increasingly accessible in terms of opportunities, I believe we will see more international businesses run in unconventional ways by women. My strategy of slowing down the growth of my business and expanding from a product focus to one of providing short-term consulting services gave me greater flexibility and independence while raising a family. This strategy also enabled me to continue my education and take the focus and

impact of my work to the next level. This is just one of the many options that having one's own business presents. Other women may choose to make different choices.

There are myriad ways to structure our lives to accommodate our values and goals. I feel I have benefitted greatly by having my own business which has given me the financial freedom to pursue my own personal vision of career and family.

*Heather Hiam-White has owned and run Pacific Trade Group since 1981. The company currently has offices in Leverett, Massachusetts and continues to represent U.S. manufacturers and distributors doing business in China. She is a PhD candidate in international management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Her research interests include China's development and industrial strategy, and regional patterns of East Asian investment.*

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## SUSAN McCASLIN

### Dad's Girl

Freud would have relished, Mom,  
your marking of my kitten curl  
in his lap, arms flung  
round his neck. And everyone  
says how much I take after him  
and his side of the family.  
I admit to playing house to him  
to supplant you, just to be  
your opposite — competent,  
adored. How can I help  
being apposite — slim  
to your bloat, tall  
to your slump, quiet  
to your heady scattering  
voice thrown everywhere?  
It is understood  
I am Dad's girl,  
and my brother  
his mother's son.

*Susan McCaslin teaches English and Creative Writing at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C. She is also poetry editor and reviewer for Event, a literary journal. Her poetry has been published in journals throughout Canada and the U.S.*

## BRIAN PASTOOR

### Decades

since my mother and I  
last swam together she  
motions  
sidestroke  
though more on her front  
than her side now  
toward the whirlpool  
and for some reason I grab  
three hotel flutterboards  
deftly  
balance on them  
in the deep end  
checking myself from saying  
Mom! watch me  
watch me

*Brian Pastoor is a Toronto high school English and Immersion French teacher. His poetry and fiction have appeared in Tidepool, Shard, and Cosmic Trend, as well as in several U.K. publications.*