

AN INTERVIEW WITH

# KIM POWELL

COO & CONSULTANT  
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*Observations from a well-practised COO*



Kim Powell runs “The Business Change Specialists Limited” providing change consultancy services and has had a career spanning 14 years, as a solutions architect, COO, business manager, project manager and business analyst.

Kim previously worked at Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse, and as an independent contractor at Thomson Reuters, Credit Suisse and Barclaycard.

Kim holds an MA in computer science from the University of Cambridge, The Prince II Practitioner qualification, the ISEB BCS diploma in business analysis, the investment management certificate and the CFA’s ESG investing qualification.

## Have a life plan!

I’ve always had a plan in mind - outlining what I have wanted to achieve in my career, breaking down the steps that would get me there. As project professionals like saying, plans are ‘living, breathing documents’ and of course you cannot predict everything (as Covid-19 has shown us all too clearly) so you need to be adaptable... you can still reach your goals but the path will almost certainly have twists along the way. To date I have been fortunate to forge a path which has led me to some significant career achievements, whilst also striking a healthy balance with life outside of work.

## The beauty of planning

It can be eye-opening to create a life plan – a spreadsheet, with a timeline view setting out the years, with your corresponding age and that of any children next to it. I find this gives me perspective – a chance to reflect on the fact that these early-years, filled with childhood illnesses and sleepless nights, will pass. And the realisation that one day my children will be choosing

their own careers, considering what they experienced in their childhood and learning from my mistakes.

As a COO I had to plan for crises, including pandemics – and whilst I can’t claim to have foreseen the level of impact this would have on family life, I have always been aware of the risk a loss of earnings could have on my family and our tolerance to this. By also listing my financials, it has allowed me to assess working pattern options to facilitate working reduced hours during the crisis. Beyond this, it was intended to provide a running view of my working life through to retirement – which permits me to plan what I would like to achieve by the time my children are flying the nest, and I can finally tend to the garden. This planning has meant I have avoided finance-induced sleepless nights - even though my billable time has reduced.

## Getting the balance right

I’ve had experience of “working remotely”, to varying degrees over the course of my career. From the more typical arrangement of working part of my week from home, to operating in

a nearshore hub location away from the main financial centre, which I was instrumental in establishing. Working remotely has helped me to get the “right balance” - enough time with my children, and time to develop my career.

Some sage advice I was given as a new mum, was to know that I could still have it all, “but maybe not all at the same time”. I’ve found that separating both gives me the best of both worlds. Whilst consulting, I separate, as far as possible, my children and work-life - I’ve set myself up with a proper office chair, large screens, a separate full sized keyboard and mouse, and I turn on the video call option for face-time. I also set myself ground rules – when I’m working, I’m not looking after my children and vice versa. I have been fortunate that my husband or nursery looks after the children whilst I work, and then when I’m not - the children benefit from my full attention.

I do hope that one of the lasting benefits of these difficult times is that employers continue to be more flexible and receptive to making workplaces that work for people from all walks of life – those with caring responsibilities in particular can benefit from the technology that

has been fast-tracked to enable more remote working. The environmental impact of reduced travel will not only benefit our children's lungs, but result in more productive time for employers and quality time for their families. This enforced experiment should also help remove any preconceptions or stigma attached to working from home, which may have previously been held.

I applaud employers and clients who do this already - my current client, being a case in point. They have been exceptional, being receptive to time spent working from home, and with video technology being widely available and utilised already.

## Have role models: both in career and in life.

It is well noted that mentors are helpful for women in their careers, but I have also found it helpful to consider role-models for life too. I have the most inspiring retired neighbours, who I am helping during the pandemic. They have led rich lives - living abroad in Zimbabwe, raising five children and having two careers. He rows, she plays in an orchestra and they live the good life with their chickens. When I'm ready to retire, I hope that I have the wealth of life experience that they have. My three year old daughter says she wants to be just like them too! I have to accept that won't happen accidentally - I need to keep in mind the need to invest in my own interests and hobbies, so that one day, when things are quieter, I can find peace in my own company.

## When life gives you lemons.

If you have a period of downtime, like a global pandemic, or redundancy, take it as an opportunity to consider what you would have done, had you had more time. I took this advice recently - having not taken any professional exams since having children. I recently passed the ESG Investing, CFA level 4 qualifications (which has 120 hours recommended of

study) whilst looking after two children, between finishing my prior employment and starting my consultancy.

As a new mum it is easy to be swept up in expectations for yourself, and to question whether you still have the same ability. Well-meaning individuals may make assumptions about your limitations, or to not know your full capability - especially if they have only known you in the period of life with young children. But know-thyself, know you can still achieve in your career too - and use any suggestions to the contrary as fire in your belly!

## Take lessons learned from home to work, and from work to home.

At home I try to apply process improvement where I can - I batch cook meals to save time, set out the childrens' clothes for a full week on Sunday to save having to think about it at other times. I'd like to say I have a key operating procedure for the cleaning... erm, but that's in the book of work for another time. I take notes on my phone on "lessons learned" from such things as Christmas and holidays, to make it easier for the future. Sometimes I give up and order from Deliveroo and life goes on. The family is fine.

At work - having a family taught me how to be a better manager. I hadn't realised how different pregnancies can be, until I had a challenging one, and it made me more empathetic towards life-events outside of one's control. It has also taught me that I can get up before 5am, and that actually by getting up and going to work, I can be back in time for bathtime.

## In summary

I know I won't get this time of life again, all the more significant when it's also the lives of my children. I may not make every parent teacher evening, but I'm also clear on the compromises I'm not prepared to make. I've learnt to be kind to myself - knowing that no two families, pregnancies, children or careers are the same.

# At the end of the day, life is short, and there are no guarantees.

It is worth considering quality of life and the things you hold dear along-side your career plan to ensure you give yourself the best chance of a good overall quality of life.

Consider this for the present, but also don't forget that the present is temporary - and plan for future phases of life too.

