**Question 1**

**The meaning of work-life balance**

Explain if you think there are similarities or differences between the concepts of work-life balance and work-life integration? Do you think they are the same or are they different?

I think balance is actually about the philosophy, the ethos of putting work and the rest of your life together. In fact work-life is a terrible misnomer because it suggests that life doesn’t include work, we just don’t have the vocabulary for the balance between work and the rest of our life. It does put work in a bit of a negative light - it is almost like when we get away from work we can have a life. But I think the balance is about the philosophy that the reasoned understanding of the need for the balance and the broad approach to achieving a balance. And integration is about the day to day implementation of that philosophy. I don’t like the word integration because it works on the assumption that they mesh, whereas some people would prefer to keep them completely separate; they are not actually looking for integration, they are looking for 8 to 4, 10 to 6 or 8 to 6 in the office and they don’t come together – and that is an important decision for some people.

**Question 2**

**Okay. What does work-life balance for women mean to you as a manager-coach?**

Well, the first point is that it doesn’t mean anything different for women than it does for men, in that everybody has to make their fundamental decisions on the balance between work and non-work, whatever it is. I think we need to make the distinction between women and men in order to acknowledge that the non-work activities, sometimes even the calling, of women is rather more complex and to be fair to women, sometimes much more difficult
than for men. And I think there are reasons for that, the obvious one is that for good reasons or bad, women tend to have more non-work responsibilities. And the second is that (and you hear this humorously expressed as a drawback) women integrate much better; so women are naturally better at integrating as opposed to separating. And for that reason, I think it can be difficult for women to make a clean separation between their work and the rest of their lives. And then, on the edge of controversy, where children are involved, motherhood is harder than fatherhood. I think mothers are created to be more emotionally involved and much more physically involved with their children.

So what does it mean? Well for the manager-coach it is firstly the acknowledgement that there is no difference to work-life balance for anybody else.

**It is the same for men and women.**

It is up to the employee to achieve that balance.

**Okay.**

Rather let’s say the ‘individual’, it is a more neutral term. And the second is that the woman concerned may need to work through a more complex set of trade-offs than men, and I have to underline the word ‘may’, than the male counterpart, but I can’t assume.

**Question 3**

**In what way is work-life balance important to women?**

It is fundamental because it is a key to achievement and satisfaction on both sides of the balance. Deciding what you are going to do and how you are going to do it is such an important part of being satisfied with the outcome.

**Anything else about why work-life balance is important, particularly to women?**

I would rather pause on that ‘fundamental’, it is just a key to success and a key to satisfaction, and really that achieving either success or satisfaction without giving attention to the balance, is really likely to be an accident. And then I think I should add that these comments apply to men and women whether they are working or not – and particularly to
women, whether they are working or not – in the context of this discussion, and I guess the reason for that is because it is actually all about priorities.

Tell me a little bit about that?

Well I think if we don’t understand our priorities, again satisfaction is likely to be an accident.

**Question 4**

**What are the challenges you think women experience in achieving work-life balance?**

Setting those priorities, making the very tough decisions that almost always involve trade-offs, overcoming the temptation to see this as a loss one way or the other, and the very strong possibility or perception that they need to put more time into one or the other, it is compromise or sacrifice, and to the detriment of that. I do think that is one of the biggest challenges for women. And I guess the only addition to that is that it is difficult for anybody to be completely rational in that situation, where it is hard to avoid the thought that sacrifice is necessary. And then I think the other thing that makes it incredibly hard is the presence of loved stakeholders, who may or may not have a part to play – and particularly those who don’t.

**Give me some examples of those stakeholders?**

Children are the obvious examples but I wouldn’t want to lay too much emphasis on children where it may be anything; it could be dependence in a hobby, it could be a sewing class you run, an ailing parent. So anything that interests the individual or woman in particular, where those stakeholders don’t really have a part to play. It is complicated in instances where the women disagree with stakeholders who do have a part to play, and those would be husband/partner and employer.

**Anything you want to add to that?**

No, it’s good.
The working woman’s reality in attempting to achieve work-life balance

Question 5

Looking at the women’s reality in the workplace in attempting to achieve work-life balance, what do you think those realities are?

Well starting perhaps with the more concrete ones, the time constraints, pressure to perform and pressure to be present. The pressure or perceived pressure to meet workplace norms in general, but also a way of delivering, a way of handling, where there are contradictions in terms of intrinsic values. The spoken or unspoken path to success, success is seen differently by different people. The challenges to respond to pressure, which may be giving more time or effort, and then the challenge of not to be distracted by interruptions.

Tell me a bit about the spoken or unspoken path to success and that success is defined differently by different people?

Ja, I think an organisation defines success but it does so in verbal, written or in unspoken ways. Personally, the definition of success is in your organisation may not align or correspond with your definition. Secondly, it is assumed, whatever that definition is, that every individual who wants that success, it is assumed that they will do what ‘it takes’ to achieve that success. And there will always be a non-verbal aspect to it. It is not easily described.

Question 6

How do you think these realities impact on the achievement of work-life balance?

For women in particular?

Yes, I focused the literature review specifically on the challenges that women face.

Well personally, I think stress undermines performance and it undermines confidence, and so quite a lot of the unspoken pressure has an almost unmitigated need to impact on the success of a woman. I would say delivery rather than success, depending on what their job spec required. So I think that background of pressure or stress is ... I can’t think of situations where it is positive for work-life balance, I just can’t. We suggest that it is always the employee’s responsibility to address any issues that can add to the stress. I think any
pressures to perform would put stress on the balance, particularly where the balance is not well thought through, or not well defined; because it invariably forces a compromise. And then I think the distinction between those that have a voice and those that don’t is important, because those who have a voice immediately win in a pressure situation.

**Tell me a little bit more about how having a voice or not, and whose voice is heard and louder has an impact?**

I think the loudest voice tends to win, but the voice again given unspoken pressure, the voice can come in many different ways and I think going back to the early questions I think that the more weakly the woman concerned has identified her priorities, the more likely she is to succumb to the loudest voice. For many women, the voice at home is inconsistent or doesn’t support that balance or doesn’t provide some corresponding weight against the corresponding voice of the employer.

What was the question?

**How do the realities impact on the achievement of work-life balance?**

I think the reality is that all of us are emotional beings; there is a reason to suggest that women are more in tune with their emotions and less able to screen out irrational noise, and more prone to calls for help, wherever they may come from.

**Anything else you want to add there?**

I don’t know if that is necessarily a bad thing because if they work through their balance properly and have their priorities then I am inclined to say they are better than their male counterparts at hearing the voices. And by way of example, they put their pen down and go home to their children, while the men of those children may not. So you have to be careful not to become too negative or pessimistic in terms of intrinsic ability of women to achieve this balance; in many ways she is much better equipped to do so than men are, and I think it is part of her integrating abilities.
**Question 7**

What do you think provides working women with a sense of meaning?

Firstly, it really is up to them to decide and it varies from one woman to another, and it is really, really important that she recognises what gives meaning and that she finds an appropriate channel. That’s a really, really good question but a very hard question for anyone to answer but particularly women because it goes back to question 1 and the priorities and there is a realistic chance that the honest answer to that question can change things. And so I really think it would be inappropriate to attempt to answer that question for womankind.

**Question 8**

Okay, the next one is quite similar - what do you think brings them fulfilment?

They must determine that for themselves. There are inclinations of difference between women and men, but those inclinations are completely drowned out by the inclination of the individual, men and women are two poles apart on any scale, individuals may vary by 5 set points quite easily.

**Question 9**

Okay. What support do you think could be provided to optimise the levels of work-life balance for working women?

I think the first is demonstrate an understanding of the challenge. And as part of that demonstration you need to show the following - and by the way, this applies to all managers of women and in some instances, it applies more firmly to female managers - so it is demonstrating the understanding, encourage a personal decision making process, encourage the freedom to decide for themselves (similar but subtly different) and encourage a corresponding action, provide a fair sense of expectation but demonstrate a willingness for flexibility around that. I think it is helpful to the woman concerned if her manager speaks with objectiveness about the requirements of the position; in other words, speaks for the employer unambiguously, without having to be harsh or lay down the law, but provides the perspective on more of what the position demands and why. And provides it with as much
context as possible and with as far a horizon as possible. In other words expresses the requirements of the job in terms of output, rather than in terms of daily delivery. I mean that is possible in any conditions and the reason for that are complex. The tone and language used expresses a support to the woman concerned to make her decide within the context of those requirements. It also helps her to understand with a little ambiguity as possible, we cannot pretend a misunderstanding, and it also helps her to understand the suitability of the position and its responsibilities to her context. Then I think I have said already that it helps her if you demonstrate the flexibility, the extent to which flexibility is possible. I mean that in the short terms, take care of a sick child and I won’t treat it as leave, but also in the longer term, and that comes back to the way in which the job and its responsibilities are described and its context and the need for output. So those parameters count because some positions require daily delivery and then somebody else has to look after her sick child or she has to deliver. And then I think also physical constraints, time and space constraints need to be taken into account. And all of that needs to be done with understanding for the position of the woman and the woman must be given freedom to express her constraints to the extent she wishes to. So, on the one hand you want to be describing the non-negotiables of the position as early as possible, preferably before an appointment is made, and on the other hand you want her to express the non-negotiables from her side, and then in the middle, you need to permit as much freedom as the business allows, and as I say those are time and space constraints too.

**Anything else related to support?**

I think there are a few basics which can be expressed in single words – listening, empathy, expressing understanding, regular non-work touch points, demonstrating sensitivity to context, and I think very importantly, allowing as much flexibility for daily crises as possible and these don’t apply exclusively to women.

**Question 10**

**Okay. What do you think the organisation’s role is in optimising work-life balance?**

I think organisationally it is slightly different, what the organisation does is firstly encourages and it requires its managers to meet certain standards. It really does, which means that managers should be spending some time understanding the people management of
subordinates. Then the organisation needs to provide the framework and the right structure, so it needs to demand that jobs are well described, it needs to guide and assist them in providing non-negotiables and I think we can be fairly mutual in this regard: the fact that I can’t stand set hours doesn’t mean that set hours are not hours that are not demanded by some organisations, frequently for good reason. Those things must be made clear. And then organisations must give to their managers the freedom again, within the constraints that the organisation has, the freedom to manage to the best of their abilities. Do I believe that organisations should necessarily provide the support structures to women that many organisations are providing? I don’t know, but organisations should certainly consider that. So I think that is non-negotiable. And then I think organisations should take care to watch the organisational culture, they should take care to listen to all of their staff and their views on the culture and their views on the freedom to express themselves. And then I think senior managers must lead by example.

Anything else related to the organisation’s role?

No.

The role and skills of the manager coach

Question 11

Alright, looking at the roles and skills of the manager-coach then, what do you do that helps working women?

Great, apart from not enough! (laughter) What do I do?

It goes from what you do, what you can do, and then it unpacks the role linked to work-life balance and what you do and what you could do.

I strongly encourage personal choices. I try very hard to respect those, but I do not hesitate to take decisions that might disrupt work-life balance in extreme situations, particularly where the woman concerned has demonstrated some willingness. (Woman manager) calls me after hours to resolve an issue - I am fairly confident that she is available to take my call on the same issue. Does that mean that I take advantage of her time on a different issue at the same time? Heck no, not if I can help it. But I think it is wrong to let a problem, it is just as
wrong to let a problem fester because you assume you understand, than to abuse her personal time. So it really does come down to communication and understanding. Do I do it well? Of course I don’t do it well enough but I do seek to spend time on understanding, to an appropriate extent, getting to know the woman, the whole woman, which means understanding her non-work context and showing a concern for her challenges, to the extent again that she meets those challenges. It is a delicate balance of course, but all relationships are a delicate balance. I also work hard on describing a degree of their responsibilities and I stretch towards the long term all the time, no matter what the position is, I am much more interested in long term objectives than short term. And then I don’t think I am good enough at encouraging explicit thought about balance, I think I give support, I think my tone, language and attitude encourages the balance, but it doesn’t challenge explicit consideration. So there is an area of improvement. And then I think I could do a little better at understanding that women without children, whether single or attached, have just as much of a right to work-life balance. I think I am reasonably good at calling attention to balance, where too much attention is on work and I am usually good at offering tangible support. And again, one of the tools that helps is a long term perspective. Is this burden at work temporary? If it is not temporary, we have a systemic issue we have to resolve, it is not sustainable. And then I think the other thing that I am reasonably good at is rewarding for delivery rather than for the appearance of delivery and allowing them to make their own decisions around how they do things.

**Question 12**

You have touched on some of the other questions, what do you do that helps working women, and you have also touched on the next question - what you can do?

Yes, what I am not doing appropriately. There were a couple there, what else?

I guess the key thing to do and this applies to everybody, is to help people understand that they have choices, that they live the consequences of their choices and the more they grab those the more likely they are to be in control. I think just understanding that people are unique, that is the first step, women as a group may be different to men – so to understand that – and b) the individual variations. So sensitively demonstrating that women certainly see things a little differently and have different priorities from men, but what is more important
is that you are an individual, you choose, you must choose, and in fact recognising that the best workers are those that hold their responsibilities in their grasp – it is absolutely key to it.

**Question 13**

What relevance do you think your manager-coaching conversations have to the women who report to you?

I think they are crucial. I think they are fundamental to helping these women to understand that within the constraints of a particular responsibility, they are free to choose. You can’t say that once, you have to live it out and you do that by demonstrating understanding, through recollection and our discussions. But you do it just as much in your daily chit chat, your daily interactions, your telephone calls. You lay the foundation in those formal discussions which you can so easily blow in your daily interaction. So I am inclined to describe those discussions as non-negotiable and very important, but the start of establishing the trust that is so important for the achievement of these ends.

**Question 14**

What role do you think manager-coaching or our coffee conversations could have in the working world of the 21st century – if any?

I think the fundamental purpose of those discussions is to enfranchise the individual to do their job in the way that works best for them and I am not particularly optimistic that workers and managers will achieve this but I think it is a mark of doing business in the 21st century, that we treat people as people – with all the richness they bring and all the richness they deserve - that we honour them and treat them with dignity as well. I think those conversations provide or break that non-negotiable to a sound relationship.

Anything else?

I wouldn’t forget the fact that other actions can break whatever you set out to achieve in those conversations. I think another reason that they play an important part in the future of working lives is because they will help to enable what technology makes possible.

**What specifically do you mean by that?**
I think the sense of understanding and dignity that a sound working relationship provides, allows a woman in particular to choose how to execute on her responsibilities and deliver. Technology allows her to do that remotely and a sound working relationship allows her to decide how best to do it, taking her objectives and her employer’s objectives into account.

**Question 15**

**What effect do you think your manager-coaching conversations have on the work-life balance of the women who report to you, if any?**

The best I can hope for at this stage is that they encourage her to be an individual and to make her own decisions and to feel free to determine that balance. Those opening words are not meant negatively, I think that is a good objective.

**Question 16, 17 and 18**

Quite a few of these next questions overlap, let me run through them and if there is anything you want to add then we can, otherwise if it is covered, then that is fine.

**What could you do more or less of in supporting women to achieve work-life balance - I think you have definitely touched on that.**

**And what support do you think you as a manager-coach could provide in achievement and optimisation of work-life balance – and what could you do in the future. A lot of those you have touched on.**

I think at the risk of repetition I think a lot of it is specifying the ends and allowing the woman to determine the means, but essentially not over-stating the interim importance, not thinking or saying unless requested, how ends should be met. I think that is probably the key, all the rest is understanding and everything, the little bits and pieces though tie into the long term objectives.
**Question 19**

Alright, I am going to pick up on skills again, but one question first: describe if you think there is any connection between manager-coaching conversations and the retention of women in the work place?

Yes and no. There is undoubtedly a link between the way we treat our people and the likelihood that they stay with us, no doubt about that. And the no part is that people are free to make their decisions and particularly when it comes to work-life balance, they can decide against the employer, and so there are certainly instances of that. And while I think we should observe retention as part of our success criteria, I think we should do so with a soft ruler. And then the reality is that doing this properly can lose you people, who hear your focus on work-life balance and choose against you.

**Anything else related to retention?**

No, just a happy worker is more likely to stay; satisfaction is key, and the role it plays is very important. The link between satisfaction and retention is important. And the whole process seeks to improve that.

**Question 20, 21 and 22**

Alright, looking at the skills, you have given me a list of skills but there are four questions: what skills do you utilise well, what skills do you need to display to optimise this role, so it might not be ‘you’ specifically, but generally what skills are needed to optimise the role, what skills do you believe you need to develop further and what would help you become a better manager-coach, and that could be anything.

**So skills you utilise well.**

Ja, so I have given you a list of skills I think I utilise well and the next list would be the skills that are required that I don’t utilise well. That will give you a fairly full list. I am reasonably good at displaying empathy, at listening, at encouraging personal decisions, at encouraging flexibility and understanding personal circumstances. I am reasonably good at working towards describing a job specification. I could be better at expressing the end, in other words
I can describe a job, but the expression at the end is actually more about vision, it is more about value. Gosh it worked beautifully with (direct report/woman) recently.

It resonated?

Ja, it really did. An ambitious approach. I definitely could be better at acquiring prioritisation; acquiring is too strong a word because it is not non-negotiable, but it really would help if they could give casual thought to what they are trying to achieve in the longer term and what they need to do in the shorter term. I am reasonably good at backing up my words with actions. I am reasonably thoughtful but I could do better. Thoughtfulness, I am particularly bad at remembering the small things, like the names of children. My wife says I remember things I want to remember. I feel I have pretty much exhausted those lists, but I am sure I could do better if I gave it some more thought.

If I put these together would it give me what roles you need to optimise?

I would really appreciate it if you just popped those lists together and asked me to explain them.

Sure.

You can put them separately and give them aggregate and give the full lists.

Okay, and see if there is anything you can add to them. Excellent.

If I change my mind, we will just delete the whole thing!

That’s fine, addendum! (laughter)

Question 23

One last question: what would help you to become a better coach or better manager-coach?

Thoughtfulness definitely, because it builds empathy, it builds an understanding; and then preparation. So I would be better at what I do and this is something that you could add to 22, is preparation for discussions - nothing demonstrates being caring like a well prepared discussion. And I could demonstrate thoughtfulness in little ways. I could allow more space
for individuality. I think on a list of positive attributes is a dangerously negatively expressed attribute and that is ‘take care with humour’ and I strongly encourage and I am happy with thick skins, skins are getting thicker, but if every time I went out I kept my mouth shut – well then not.

**So not always knowing how the humour is going to land for that person.**

Ja.

**In terms of things that could help you to be a better coach, is there anything practical, any support mechanisms, anything the organisation can do?**

The organisation can encourage us or command us to do a better job. The organisation could demonstrate its awareness and willingness to do that; the organisation could demonstrate its own thoughtfulness to the needs of women under its roof. And I think it could take deep care to measure perceptions.

**Okay. Tell me what you mean by that?**

They could do better at understanding how the people feel about the organisation and the messages it sends out. And then it could build on that by demonstrating an understanding of the differences between people and encouragement for people to feel free to be themselves. I think an organisation could work much harder to address poor management practices because almost invariably this is not about the culture but about the individuals who carry the culture.

**Anything else?**

Those are my thoughts for now.

**You can let me have them if more materialise.**

*The interviewer thanks the respondent and closes the interview.*