

Information technologies help women

The role of chance

I have been asked by “Polish Market” editors for remarks about careers of Polish women and potential for their professional development, including the perspective of my own experience. I am not sure whether my remarks will be reliable because chance has played an enormous role in my life. I am not a good example of someone carefully planning their own career. Neither have I been particularly sensitive to obstacles and difficult moments in my life. This spared me many disappointments, although there were many of them. I was never under pressure from my parents or teachers to make any special effort aimed at my future career. My parents simply believed that one should – as they used to say – “live decently and work decently.” I did not feel pressure from my environment either. There was no atmosphere of a “rat race.” I think I was greatly infected by this “no-pressure” approach because – as I see it now – my behaviour towards my son is similar. I believe that life in harmony with oneself is more important than a professional career understood as moving up the ladder. Nothing is probably more devastating for one’s satisfaction with life than losing face. This is why I think the “mirror criterion” is so important – the ability to look into one’s face, to look deeply into one’s eyes, without feeling ashamed. I think this is the most important thing in life.

But when I think about what had a major influence on decisions and developments in my life, including my professional life, it seems to me that it were my teachers – and definitely some of them at least – who played the leading role. It so happened that at primary school I had a maths teacher who was able to instil in most students a love of mathematics or at least inclination for it. The teacher encouraged us, children – to the surprise of our parents – to study works which were actually suitable for university students. He encouraged us, for instance, to read works of outstanding Polish mathematician Hugon Steinhaus. What is more, he recommended that we should make presentations on this topic. It is beyond doubt that we did that ineptly but the maths bug spread by the teacher had a strong impact on me, if not on others. This is why I decided to study mathematics at the University of Warsaw. On the day when I was to file my application with this faculty, I met a friend who said she was just going to file her documents with the economics faculty. She encouraged me to do the same. However, I stuck to mathematics. But as we thought it would be good to have a talk over coffee after submitting our applications, I decided to accompany her to the economics faculty and then file my documents with the mathematics faculty. When she was in the process of submitting the documents, I had an opportunity to read information on a notice board about the programmes of study available at the faculty. I found that the faculty offered a course in econometrics and came to the conclusion, not without my friend’s influence, that the use of mathematics in economics may be no less interesting than pure mathematics. I changed my application, which was quite risky because the faculty of economics was virtually besieged, with many candidates per place. But I managed to pass the entrance exam and after five years of study became an economist – econometrician.

The knowledge of economics and econometrics, combined with the knowledge of accounting I had acquired at secondary school gave me, during my university studies and after graduation, an opportunity to get many interesting assignments. Most

of them were associated with making multiple cross-sectional economic analyses. Thanks to this work, I had contact with practice. After graduation I worked as a university teacher, but also as a consultant and analyst at the Polish-Swedish firm Swea-System. This inspired me to develop various research studies that I conducted and still conduct at the Warsaw School of Economic and the Polish Academy of Sciences. As part of this research, I developed quantitative models for bankruptcy prediction and models of early warning against bankruptcy. I still deal with research into corporate bankruptcies.

The knowledge of economics and econometrics helped me a lot in gaining job offers. It was important for me, especially during my time as university student. My ambition was not to be a financial burden for my parents. I alternated between economic analyses and translations from German, which helped me improve my knowledge of this language. After graduation I passed the foreign ministry's German exam. My good command of German enabled me to use internships and scholarships in Germany, like those offered by DAAD. I value this very highly. The knowledge of German is very useful for me. For example, every year I conduct together with my German colleagues a two-week seminar in Germany on models of the socio-economic system. This is why I think that in one's professional career it is not only English that is important but also less popular languages. In my case, the knowledge of Russian also turned out very useful as it enabled me to take part in Polish-Russian seminars organized by the Polish and Russian Academies of Sciences.

I am often asked whether, being a woman, I have sometimes felt discriminated against in promotions. Such questions are not surprising. It is impossible not to notice that women encounter many barriers to their professional development. This problem requires careful, well-thought-out and comprehensive measures to be taken in social and economic policy. Statistical data prove that we still have to do with the "glass ceiling," the barrier in the career ladder that women rarely cross. The same is the case with wages. However, it seems I was lucky because I never personally experienced that. I never felt being treated worse at work than my male colleagues. Perhaps the reason is that I spent most of my professional life at the university. If my male colleagues moved ahead of me it was mainly the result of my own choices and life preferences.

There is much truth in the saying that for a woman to achieve a similar success as a man she has to be at least two times better than him in professional terms and has to work much harder, but there are many signs indicating that the future looks favourably for women. Women are increasingly well educated. There are more women with degrees than men and the number of female university students is also higher. This creates the basis and opportunities for women to start an attractive professional activity, even in areas which until recently were dominated by men. If women are university graduates their chances of professional advancement and career in business grow. Women run one third of small and medium businesses in the United States. In Poland, there are also more and more women starting up their businesses. Most of them are small but some grow into bigger firms. One example is the Irena Eris cosmetics company. All this bodes well for the Polish economy and society.

Although the Polish proverb "Where the devil cannot come he will send a woman" can be interpreted in different ways, it illustrates the big potential of women's creativity, rationality and resourcefulness in every sphere of social and economic life. It

cannot be overestimated. The development of digital information technologies is conducive to exploiting this potential.

Information technologies, including the Internet, and the ongoing digital revolution are now the main factors contributing to women's careers and professional life. The use of the potential offered by these technologies results in favourable conditions for Alvin Toffler's "social futurism," first of all by creating at all levels of social and economic life "imagination centres" aimed at "interdisciplinary "brain activation." This can be a source of ideas technocrats have not even dreamt of. What may seem naïve in an industrial era is not naïve now at the age of Internet and information revolution.

The Internet and information technologies help removing barriers to women's careers. They are conducive to better organization and work-life balance. They enable work from home, remote work and flexible work time, and make communication easier. This is important, the more so as many research studies show that the presence of women on company management and supervisory boards leads to better management, improved efficiency and reasonable decisions.

All this helps women and these opportunities are exploited to a growing extent, benefitting both the economy and society and promoting a harmonious, empathetic and lasting development. □



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