

FOCUS IS KEY TO EFFECTIVENESS, SAYS PUBLISHING EXECUTIVE

By Mary Ann Gratton

Working a 14-hour day is not the way to succeed in your career or in life, according to **Petra Cooper** (MBA '95).

You might not expect to hear that from the president of the Higher Education Division at **McGraw-Hill Ryerson Canada**, a high-achieving manager who leads a team of 75 and oversees a \$60-million operation.

Petra also serves on the boards of the **Ontario College of Art and Design**, the **Dorothy Ley Hospice**, **Bankworks Inc.**, **Access Copyright**, the new **Integrative Management Challenge** (IMC) course at the Rotman School, and other organizations – not to mention being the mother of a very active two-year-old daughter.

“People ask me how I do it – they think I must work 14-hour days, but I don’t,” she says. “I put in long days, but not on what is classically defined as work. I include time for family, creative interests, and contributing to the community. I’ve learned over the years about the importance of a ‘wide-angle perspective’, and that professional development can also happen *outside* of the work context.”

In her current role, Petra is responsible for meeting the bottom line and leading the senior management team that oversees all areas of the Higher Education Division – including editorial, business development, sales and marketing. McGraw-Hill Ryerson – a Canadian subsidiary of the U.S. based parent company – publishes educational textbooks, and is known for innovation in educational technology.

The best ways to make yourself effective are: to know what you want, be realistic about the required trade-offs, focus, develop excellent time management and planning skills, and be careful in identifying projects that relate to your personal and company goals, Petra advises.

“We go through a stage in our 20s and 30s when we are largely approval-driven. We feel we have to respond to every request within 24 hours and do everything perfectly – and work like crazy, putting in 70-hour weeks. We forget that self-development is vital to career development and leadership, and it’s easy to miss out on tremendous learning opportunities outside of work.”

She believes in balance, but “not the common interpretation of work-life balance, because there’s more to it than that.” Community work, continuing education, professional development, spiritual life, and creativity through

Self-development is vital to career development, and it’s easy to miss out on tremendous learning opportunities outside of work.



the arts are all part of balance, according to Petra. “People talk about work and home as the two sides of balance, but it’s important to stretch beyond that. Your career is a great avenue for personal development, because you learn how to deal with failure, and how to work with a diverse group. But work is only one part of your development as a human being.”

“Many people seem to think that the busier you are, the more you are accomplishing. When I see people talking on their cell phones in restaurants instead of concentrating on the person in front of them, I consider this an example of poor planning or prioritizing. Your daily reservoir of intellectual and physical energy is finite, and expending it unconsciously can reduce your energy for more important activities. I try to keep my list of priorities short, and do the things that really matter.”

Delegating is a key part of managing, she says, and saying “no” is something she would like to get better at. “One of the best lessons I’ve learned is that in business it’s not a sprint – it’s a long distance race.” Petra regularly reviews goals and “getting there” activities — not just daily but — annually, to help her focus on key objectives. “Every week I look at my annual list to help me stay on track and to make sure I am making progress in key areas.”

While Petra enjoyed the Rotman Executive MBA program, she would like to see MBA schools trying to foster and cultivate creativity more, and trying to instill a greater appreciation of the arts and their fundamental underlying processes. “I think the business world can learn a lot from the arts.”

When Petra is not working, she and her husband and daughter spend time at their hobby farm in Prince Edward County, Ontario. She also enjoys jogging, yoga, gardening, continuing piano studies, and scrapbooking.