

Talent Management

Case Study: When Your Star Player Asks to Go Part-Time

by Thomas J. DeLong

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Bianca Bagnarelli

“Melissa, hi!” Su Yee Goh was surprised to see her deputy’s name pop up on her phone, but she answered immediately. She’d been meaning to check in with Melissa for a few days.

Both worked in business development for the Singapore office of international energy-foods firm Shapiro Global (SG), Su Yee as director and Melissa as her number two. Their team had been working tirelessly since the Covid-19 outbreak to ensure that SG’s

expansion plans in Southeast Asia were not derailed. Melissa had been leading the charge, but in recent video calls the normally focused American had seemed distracted. Su Yee knew her work-from-home situation during the pandemic was not ideal. While many offices in Singapore had remained open, SG was one of several multinationals that had sent its entire staff home. Melissa and her husband, who also had a busy job, lived in a two-bedroom condo with their six-year-old son, whose school had gone remote three months before.

“I’m glad you called! I was just about to book some time on your calendar,” Su Yee said. “Maybe we could both pop out for some fresh air and do a walk and talk?”

Su Yee was happiest when on the move—not just exercising but also working hard to advance her career. In 1997, she’d been among the first seven employees in SG’s Singapore office. As an assistant to the office manager, she had run errands, answered the telephone, and kept the office operating smoothly. When it expanded, she was promoted to business analyst, and over the next 14 years she had grown with the company, acquiring skills and experience and winning promotions. Now she oversaw business development for all of Southeast Asia, with 28 employees reporting to her. The only female SG executive in the region and the only vice president who’d worked her way up from the ground floor, she made a point of mentoring the young employees, and particularly the women, on her team.

“Sure, that would be great,” Melissa replied.

“Anything special you wanted to talk about?” Su Yee asked.

There was a pause. “I have some news. Scott and I are expecting,” Melissa finally said.

Su Yee didn’t process this right away. “Expecting?”

“I’m pregnant,” Melissa said. “About six months along.”

Only just walking out the door, Su Yee stopped in her tracks. The weather was balmy, but she felt as if she'd walked into an ice-cold wind. Quickly, though, she snapped back into manager mode.

“Congratulations,” she said. “That’s terrific news! I guess we’ll need to talk about maternity leave. In Singapore, it’s 12 weeks of paid leave, much better than in the U.S.!”¹

“Well, that’s the thing,” Melissa said. “I may be asking for a bit more than that.” Su Yee’s jaw clenched. Melissa was a rising star at SG, one Su Yee had planned to lean on—and continue to groom—in the coming months and years. Even a three-month absence would be a struggle.

“What were you thinking?” Su Yee said, still trying to hide her surprise.

“Honestly, I’m not sure I want to come back full-time.”

A Rising Star

Su Yee struggled to process her emotions. First came shock. Since Melissa had arrived in Singapore as a three-year transfer from the San Francisco office a year earlier,² she had always come across as a go-getter with leadership capabilities, if not C-suite-level ambitions. More important, she was an extremely hard worker—easily keeping pace with long workdays and always willing to put in weekend hours if required. A quantitatively minded analyst, she pushed data-driven decisions that had reenergized the group’s outreach and boosted revenues. While Su Yee had initially been frustrated because Melissa’s rotation into her office was forced through without her consultation or buy-in, she eventually came to see in Melissa many of the qualities that had fueled her own rise. She quickly promoted her to deputy, gave her three direct reports, and nominated her for key committees to give her exposure to senior SG leaders. The pair had developed a very close working relationship.³

Su Yee thought back to one of their late nights in the office before the Covid-19 outbreak. Melissa had confessed that, even though she knew the move to Singapore would accelerate her rise at SG, doing so with a small child had been a difficult decision. She'd said yes only when Scott, her husband, also managed to get a three-year transfer, and they'd found a terrific nanny and school for their son. Doing the math in her head, Su Yee realized that Melissa was probably pregnant when they'd talked then but hadn't mentioned it! She couldn't help feeling a little betrayed.

But then Su Yee felt a wave of empathy. She knew how difficult the past few months had been for Melissa as she'd tried to juggle her work and family obligations during office and school closures.⁴ To be pregnant in a pandemic, far from friends and family, would only have added to her stress. And Su Yee had the power to help. She had the final say in what allowances were made for Melissa beyond SG's official maternity leave. Recent efforts by headquarters to set global HR standards had fallen apart when regional managers (Su Yee included) had complained that they needed to be able to handle requests on a case-by-case basis.⁵

Su Yee listened quietly as Melissa laid out her proposal: After her 12-week leave, she wanted to work a three-day week at 60% of her full-time pay. Su Yee cringed inwardly. She was surprised that Melissa was asking for a part-time schedule. When she suggested an extension to her leave instead, Melissa replied that both she and Scott worried about continuing to manage virtual school for their son and bringing their live-out nanny back into the house given the uncertainties surrounding Covid-19.

Su Yee knew better than to push back any further. She congratulated Melissa again and promised to give her an answer on her proposal without delay. She then walked back to her desk and sent an email to the HR staff to fill them in on the situation—really just a formality, since she knew the decision rested with her.

Other Options?

That night, after a string of meetings with corporate lasting late into the Singapore evening, Su Yee finally had time to think about Melissa's request. The most obvious solution was to accept Melissa's proposal and restructure her job as a three-day position. Su Yee's own managerial duties would not be affected much, and Melissa would be able to accomplish a lot in the compressed workweek—conducting business via videoconference, which was now the norm anyway, even if she wouldn't travel. But Su Yee worried the arrangement would have an adverse effect on her other subordinates: The cutback in hours would most likely mean additional work for them.

And it might set a precedent that she—and SG as an organization—would regret. Melissa would be leaving in two years, once her transfer period was complete. That meant her manager in her next assignment would have to continue the accommodation or deny it, which could cause problems in the new role. And Su Yee wouldn't ever see the payback on being a flexible boss.

Another alternative was to create a new, part-time special-projects position for Melissa after her leave and hire a replacement for her current role. But that would be a tough sell in an economic downturn.

The simplest approach would be to persuade Melissa that a part-time arrangement was neither advisable nor feasible. Su Yee had invested a great deal of time, energy, and social capital in developing and promoting her, and Melissa had an amazing future at SG ahead of her. The research was clear that switching to part-time work hurts employees—often women; they end up toiling away for more hours than they should for much lower pay and less credit. Meanwhile, many male professionals simply take the time they need without formally reducing their hours and pay.⁶

Would Melissa leave SG if she didn't get her way? Pre-pandemic, she had seemed totally enamored with her career at SG. Her salary would easily cover the cost of a larger apartment and a live-in nanny.

Perhaps an offer to shorten her workday to eight hours would suffice, giving her time to experiment with work-family balance and renewing her enthusiasm for her job.

Glancing at the clock, Su Yee closed her laptop and decided to sleep on it.

Role Models

“Auntie, what is the matter with you today? You seem so distracted.”

Su Yee put down her kaya toast and looked at her niece, Jing Yi, sitting across from her. Breakfast on Saturday mornings at the Raffles Hotel was their tradition and Su Yee’s favorite part of the week. Jing Yi, a bright 22-year-old, loved hearing her aunt’s office gossip and usually found a way to make Su Yee laugh—but not today.

Su Yee leaned forward and laid out the situation with Melissa for Jing Yi. She explained to her niece that she had misjudged her protégé’s ambitions. No doubt Melissa could continue to contribute to SG as a part-time worker, but she wanted to get off the fast track. She would essentially be sidelining herself, moving from superstar to solid employee.⁷ Su Yee couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a mistake. She wanted to tell Melissa to snap out of it. Why, after years of being a successful working mom, did she now want to derail her career and squander her talent? Yes, the pandemic had made life much more difficult, but eventually life would return to normal. Su Yee knew, however, that giving that kind of advice from a position of power was ethically—not to mention legally—questionable.

“I don’t know,” Jing Yi said. “My mom took a different path than you so that she could be at home with me. She’s not well-off or powerful, but I appreciate what she did and know she feels she made the right decision. She’s just as happy as we are.”

Su Yee was surprised. Her niece had gotten top marks at university, worked at a prestigious consulting firm, and would begin her MBA the following year. Su Yee had always felt slightly sorry for her sister,

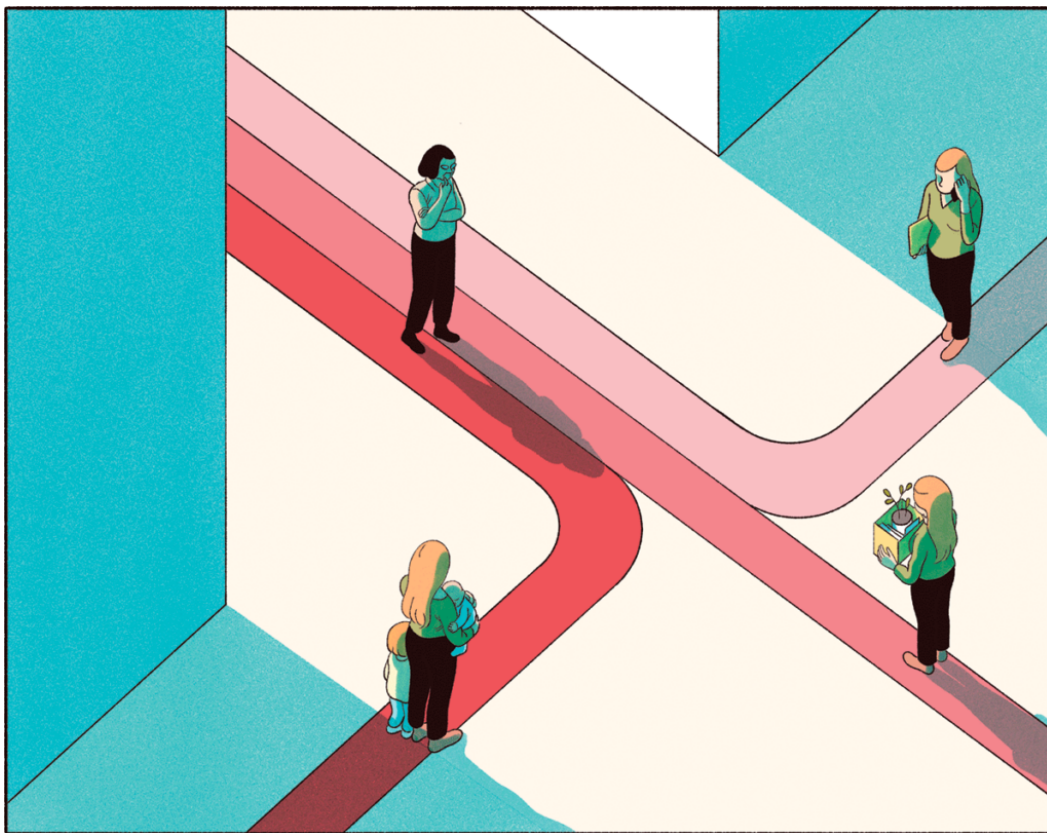
who had led such a conventional life, and thought Jing Yi felt similarly. “At the same time,” her niece continued, “I had the best of both worlds because I had you as a different sort of role model.”

Su Yee nodded, slightly reassured. “I suspect that Melissa doesn’t yet know what will make her happy, but I need to think of how this affects my team.”

Jing Yi took a sip from her cup of hot kopi and tilted her head. “Auntie, you’ve always supported women at work—but for promotions, not for the right to step to the side,” she said. “This must be a difficult decision for you.”

“Yes,” Su Yee reflected, “it certainly is.”

The Experts Respond: Should Su Yee grant Melissa’s request to part-time?



Bianca Bagnarelli

Elizabeth McKinnon is a co-CEO of Environmental Justice Australia.

The best thing Su Yee can do is become a trailblazer for flexible and part-time work schedules. Going part-time doesn't have to be an off-ramp for a career. Su Yee is worried that her protégé is making a mistake and feels slightly betrayed. But Melissa is obviously bright, ambitious, and hardworking. She could very well be back up and running on a full-time, five-day-a-week schedule within a year or two and go on to do great things at SG. Su Yee should not make assumptions about Melissa's intentions or her future.

Communication is key. Su Yee needs to put aside her dismay and have a frank conversation with Melissa about what she wants and how to make it work in a way that benefits both Melissa and SG. Su Yee should ensure that Melissa retains her client contacts, direct reports, and all the other parts of her job that will keep her career on track.

The worst thing Su Yee could do is move Melissa over to a special-projects role and hire someone else for her position (unless that's what she prefers). Once you get off the fast track, it's very hard to get back on.

Because neither woman has experience with flexible schedules, the two should agree to a trial period so that they and the team can adjust and learn as they go. The danger, as Su Yee knows, is that Melissa would end up squeezing a full-time job into a part-time schedule, which is a recipe for burnout.

Granting this flexibility to Melissa—and other team members should they request it—will most likely lead to short-term inconveniences and costs for Su Yee. For instance, she might need to hire a contractor to pick up some of the workload. But it's also possible that junior employees will want to take on more as Melissa cuts back. This is an opportunity for Su Yee's team members to transform how they collaborate and allocate resources. At my organization, for example, I share the CEO role with another female executive, and we both work three days a week.

The good news is that flexible work policies get easier over time. Fast-forward 10 years and Su Yee might have a much more dynamic and diverse team of employees who are not only hardworking but also extremely engaged and loyal to the organization because they feel that their professional and personal needs are being met. The benefits for SG—increased productivity, better recruitment and retention, and improved culture—could be significant.

Su Yee sees herself as an advocate for women, but that's not authentic if she provides support and encouragement only to certain categories of women—those who have made the same life choices that she has. Rather than feeling that Melissa is betraying her, Su Yee should consider the bigger picture and see this as her own moment to shine as a leader.

Rachel Thomas is the CEO of Lean In.

Su Yee should reconceive the role so that Melissa doesn't have to step back unless she wants to. Su Yee first needs to understand what's really going on in her protégé's life. Is Melissa asking to reduce her hours because she wants to spend more time at home with her family? If so, Su Yee should respect that and find a way to make it work. You don't retain talented employees by refusing to adjust as their lives and goals change. Or does Melissa feel as if she doesn't have a choice—that there's no way to balance her job and two kids during the Covid-19 crisis?

If Melissa would prefer to come back full-time but can't envision a way forward, the two should start thinking about creative options. There's no such thing as business as usual right now, so companies need to move beyond business-as-usual solutions. For example, Su Yee could temporarily eliminate some of her department's less-essential work to take the burden off Melissa (and others) during the pandemic. She could reframe Melissa's goals and performance criteria so that they're more attainable. She could commit to keeping meetings off Melissa's calendar during designated periods each day to

make it easier for Melissa to accommodate her kids' needs during the crisis. Su Yee should also consider extending more flexibility not just to parents but to everyone.

These suggestions might sound over-the-top, particularly during an economic downturn, but leaders everywhere need to recognize that we are on the verge of losing millions of Melissas. Lean In and McKinsey recently released the 2020 Women in the Workplace report, which shows that as many as 2 million women in the U.S. are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce as a result of the crisis. That means far fewer women on track to become leaders, erasing all the progress we've seen in recent years. If Lean In had a panic button, we'd be hitting it.

So while Su Yee is understandably focused on her young protégé, she shouldn't miss the bigger picture. I guarantee that there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of talented women at SG in the same boat. Before the pandemic, mothers employed outside the home were already working a "double shift"—a full day at the office, followed by hours of domestic duties. With schools and day care centers closed, that double shift has doubled again. Studies show that mothers spend 20 hours a week more than fathers, on average, on housework and childcare due to the pandemic.

Melissa's case provides Su Yee with an opportunity to sound the alarm within her firm. If she truly wants to be a champion of women, now is her chance. She should engage SG's executives, encouraging them to focus on the struggles of working parents—especially mothers—during Covid-19. She should suggest that SG work creatively with all employees so that no one has to step back—unless that's really the preference. Reimagining Melissa's role so that she can continue full-time is a big ask, but the long-term payoff is real. It's good for SG because having more women in leadership roles means a stronger culture and better financial performance. It's good for managers because they don't have to replace talented employees. And it's good for employees. Balancing work and family is still far too difficult in too many workplaces. We can and must do better.

Case Study Classroom Notes

- ¹ On average, OECD countries pay 16 weeks of parental leave at a rate of 55% to 100% of wages. The U.S. is the only OECD country that lacks government-mandated paid parental leave.
- ² Job rotations have long been a popular way to build the skills and experience of promising employees. Should the fact that Melissa's time in Singapore is relatively short influence Su Yee's thinking?
- ³ Resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances, has been a hallmark of Su Yee's success. But has it led to her having unrealistic expectations of her workers?
- ⁴ In a recent poll by Ginger, an on-demand mental health company, nearly seven in 10 U.S. workers reported that navigating the Covid-19 pandemic has been the most stressful experience of their careers.
- ⁵ Should HR departments of global companies standardize benefits or leave decisions to regional and local managers?
- ⁶ A study by Erin Reid of Boston University found that even though few male employees ask for reduced hours, many are able to limit their workweeks to attend to personal issues without calling attention to their absences.
- ⁷ Many firms invest significant resources in attracting and retaining star performers. Do they underestimate the importance of supporting players?

HBR's fictionalized case studies present problems faced by leaders in real companies and offer solutions from experts. This one is based on the HBS Case Study "Shapiro Global" (case no. 407003-PDF-ENG), by Thomas J. DeLong, Michael Brookshire, Monica Haugen, Michelle Kravetz, and Sarah Sommer.

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Thomas J. DeLong is a Baker Foundation
Professor of Management Practice at Harvard
Business School and the author of *Flying Without
a Net*.