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Ten Years Later:

Memoirs of Life and Work a Decade after an MBA

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This case series was written by Jennifer Petriglieri, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, both at INSEAD. It is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of personal and professional circumstances. This case was inspired by Leslie Perlow's and Tom DeLong's H.B.S. Case Study "Profiles of the class of 1976."

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Attending an MBA programme is often an opportunity to reflect upon, reorient or reimagine one's career and life trajectory as a whole. Students may be aiming to speed up their career progress, attempt a transition or to find out where their true passion lies. During the course, time often feels both suspended and accelerated. But despite an MBA's intensity, the future is ever present as everyone wonders, privately or out loud, what will happen next.

The following narratives provide a glimpse of "what happened next" in the lives of a group of members of the INSEAD class of 2002.

The whole class was contacted to participate in the project shortly after the 10-year reunion. We invited alumni to share their honest reflections on what had happened in their lives since graduation – covering work, family and personal events – in the tone they would use writing to a fellow MBA. What follows is a sample of the many who kindly shared their stories with us, and generously gave us permission to share them with you.

Unlike most cases, we didn't write these up from interviews. Each individual wrote his or her own story, and other than disguising the protagonists' name (and in a few cases, nationality) we minimised editorial intervention to preserve the authors' original voice. As you read each story, you may want to imagine the author sitting in your class a few years back – and yourself 10 years from now. What might you write then?

Alejandro Carpi, Peru

I went to INSEAD seeking a career change. I told myself I wanted to move away from banking, get a job in a real company and produce tangible goods that people really wanted and needed. Alas, while at INSEAD it was the Finance courses that I enjoyed the most, and furthermore, upon graduation, I only received job offers from financial institutions. The job market in 2002 was not exactly hot, and at 32 I was a little long in the tooth to start anew as an associate in an untested field, so companies were understandably wary to take a chance on me.

In the end I accepted an offer from my previous employer, doing the same job I had done for them well before INSEAD. The only differences were the location and the region of responsibility; I traded New York for Singapore and coverage of Latin America for coverage of Asia. I was apprehensive and somehow deflated by the thought that I was going back to an industry and a job I had tried to leave behind. I could have been an idealist and stayed the course in search of a career change, but I chose to be pragmatic. I had a wife and a six-month-old (our son Mateo was born during P3 in Fontainebleau), so a well-paid job as a Vice President in an exotic region was not the worst possible outcome.

Asia was exciting. We arrived during SARS and lived through the paranoia and the recession it caused to then witness an incredible economic bonanza driven by China's seemingly unstoppable investment boom. I enjoyed my job more than I ever had, helped governments and companies raise billions of dollars in the capital markets, got promoted to Director, we had our second son (Lionel was born in Singapore in 2004) and then we moved to Hong Kong – the Manhattan of the Far East. However, after only 1.5 years we were back in Singapore, partly out of concern for our boys' health because of Hong Kong's air pollution, but primarily because a new job opportunity presented itself.

In the summer of 2007, while I was on gardening leave between two jobs, the global financial markets started to unravel. We were staring at the abyss. The prospect of a 1930s-style depression and soup lines did not seem too far-fetched. I lost sleep for an entire weekend over the money I had in my money market account at RBS – it really seemed like a widespread run on banks could be triggered at any minute. While people in the financial industry were freaking out, it seemed like the rest of the world was living in ignorant bliss. I kept telling my wife to be prepared, it could all end at a moment's notice and we would have to go into subsistence farming. Little did we know that we would enjoy our best year ever in 2009 and then again in 2010. Being at the helm of the desk of the dominant firm in Asian Capital Markets I was at the top of my game. I was promoted to MD and life was great.

I now run Fixed Income Capital Markets in Asia at a leading investment bank. I adore my wife and we have been blessed with four beautiful, smart, happy, healthy kids (three boys and a girl, who is the apple of my eye). I manage a team of exceptionally talented people that generally want to serve their clients, beat the competition and make money for themselves and their employer (in that order).

In spite of – or maybe because of – all that excitement, I am getting tired of the constant travel (more than 150 days a year). The opportunity cost of being away from my family is weighing on me and I ask myself with increasing frequency whether it is all worth it. One of these days I may throw in the towel, hang up my gloves and head off to a new adventure with fewer demands and more time to enjoy my family.

Chloe Gardener, France

When I left INSEAD in 2002, I had a clear goal in mind: I wanted to be a regional FP&A manager for a multinational, preferably located in Switzerland. I had no specific reason for the location or the multinational but ended up fulfilling my exact requirement. I even had the luxury of being able to choose between two jobs.

Two years later, I became impatient again – what’s next? So I jumped on an opportunity to head an SAP implementation in Australia. This could only have been exciting and challenging, a combination I love. Going down under to do something I had no clue about, although my company was sure I was the best person for that!

It took me a week to overcome the nagging thought – why the hell do I always have brilliant ideas that put me in challenging situations? But after that, I just loved my job and my time in Australia. It is a fantastic country, full of life and great people. However, within a year I went back to Switzerland for a four-hour interview, and took a VP position in a Swiss private equity owned company.

So here I was, with a new and exciting challenge after 10 years in my previous company and faced with having to learn everything from scratch. The first few months were tough but it went well and I was adding responsibility on responsibility. I was offered coaching sessions and through them discovered that I was doing so many things that nobody knew what my role was anymore. I have to say, I was somehow lost myself. The coaching sessions helped me realize that I might want to do something with my personal life and not just learn to drive a motorbike, ski and organise dinners. This is when I met my husband, and within a year of knowing each other, we got married, moved houses, changed both of our jobs and had a child. Still pretty fast speed...

During my maternity leave I did not want to sit at home, although I wanted to spend as much time as I could with my baby. So I created a company with a friend. We started a small wellness centre and I organized all the communication and marketing. This enhanced my finance perspective and taught me first-hand the importance of cash flow. It took us two years but we eventually created a nice customer portfolio and started making money.

Between 2008 and 2010, my husband and I spent two years commuting between Lausanne and Zurich. But as I became pregnant with my second child we decided it was time to live together. So I returned to Zurich as the EMEA Head of Finance for a Swiss company that hired me during my pregnancy. Within two years I was promoted to my dream job, as global CFO, which I will start in April 2013.

Looking back, I am truly happy about my career development but I am also careful about my work/life balance. I am very lucky that my husband and my current company are very supportive, but it is also easy to get absorbed by the job and forget that your kids need you to grow and develop.

My next 10 years challenge will be to make sure that I can continue to drive my career and at the same time raise my kids and spend as much time as I can with them. These are my priority and I strongly believe that making this clear is what is helping me to be successful in the job.

Eddy Hartono, Indonesia

I jumped at this opportunity to crystallize my thoughts on my evolution over the last 10 years, because I'm at one of life's natural junctures – the Big 40 this year. I arrived at INSEAD with my wife a week after my wedding bash. Since then, we added two lovely daughters, now 6 and 8 years old.

Ten years out, I have clearly met all the objectives I had set for doing an INSEAD MBA – to broaden into general management and internationalise my career. Prior to INSEAD, I trained as a civil engineer and worked in operations in the construction/building material industry in Asian markets. Post-INSEAD, I have worked for two different multi-national companies and moved four times: Singapore, France corporate HQ (with 50% international travel), China in two different second-tier cities and in a variety of projects and functions. I have found my calling in building materials with a noble contentment that I contribute to build a better world in this way.

My early life philosophy of seeking life experiences, 'go where the opportunity is' (do whatever is interesting) and 'work hard and money will take care of itself' (don't worry about money) has served me well as I have tackled challenge after challenge. With this basic tenet, I have grown and progressed in my career.

I remember clearly the overall environment of 2001-2002 and the stress of job search at that point. I interviewed for my current company and was rejected. I entered three years later in the same position I interviewed for, via a headhunter – how ironic. I was determined to work for this industry and company.

Overall, I am content with my steady paced corporate career development, the work/life balance I have reached, the industry and environment I have chosen. My business outlook has grown with international exposure and a stint in multi-functional consulting-like internal audit projects. At this point, I have direct P&L responsibility for a small start-up within a large MNC. I changed from directly delivering results to managing high-performing teams that deliver results.

After seven years, another financial crisis has dimmed the attractiveness of my company, highlighting its inherent flaws and struggle to transform. Against this backdrop, I am in the midst of making a career move, this time very much tempered by my personal needs as a family man and filial responsibilities. I remain heavy-hearted to leave the familiar but am confident that I will find greener pastures and balance my personal and family needs.

Our finances and comforts are in order and I currently enjoy a balanced lifestyle. My earlier overbearing emphasis on career has given way to more equal weight given to career and family needs. Without this anchor, I am floating. Many questions are brewing in the mid-term. Location may determine the answer but many factors pull in different directions:

1. The need to maintain location flexibility for career progression and still possibly in developing markets if for this current company.
2. Immediate need for a better/developed environment for the family.
3. A place to stay put for the kids to grow in the next 5-10 years.

4. A sense of filial responsibility with aging parents (may return to my home country but less optimistic that career-wise it will be interesting). Nevertheless, this issue will become critical.
5. No clear choice of base as home country is mired in a downward spiral, and Singapore, our earlier adopted base, is getting more stressful in terms of living costs.
6. Option of emigration based on children's education needs and respective cost (esp. university). Australia has emerged recently as a possibility with its favourable environment.
7. Preparation of a retirement base, again no clear choice of location

To top it all, there is the slow and steady decline of my country in every aspect and its racial privileges. Feeling a second-class citizen as an Indonesian Chinese has dampened my patriotic fervour and is making it feel less of an option for retirement. With this realization dawning, a spectrum of emotions emerges – from frustration, bitterness, anxiety and perhaps misplaced expectations for real change. My sense of identity, although still deeply rooted, is at a pivotal point as I journey forward in life.

Jan Kowalski, Poland

The ten years since my INSEAD MBA July'02 class graduation passed like a day. A certain melancholy surfaces as I start writing this story. But... this melancholy is tempered with the happy realization that after all this time all that I have lived through remains an extremely valuable and rewarding experience.

At the age of 31, with an MSc a 7-year marketing career in a fast moving consumer goods company in Eastern Europe, I was one of the oldest MBA candidates admitted at that time. My career goal at the time of graduation was employment at LVMH in Paris. Luckily, I got what I was striving for, unlike many of my INSEAD colleagues who were unsuccessful in finding jobs in the post-dotcom-bubble and 9/11 era at the beginning of the millennium.

However, Paris proved not to be my destiny due to family issues (my father had a serious stroke). I returned home to Poland and became the Marketing Director and board member of the country's market leader in home furnishing products. The company was undergoing serious restructuring and preparing for an IPO – it seemed to be a perfect place for a fresh MBA to prove his value to the world. Business results under my influence were quite successful, yet power and politics led to a difficult atmosphere and I decided to leave before the IPO. On the bright side, in the middle of this project I met Maria, who would soon become my wife.

From there I jumped to being Marketing Director for the Eastern European division of a large FMCG group. It seemed a close fit with my pre-INSEAD experience, but although my performance and business results were very good they came at a high price of difficult work/life balance and extreme stress. This led to sleepless nights and serious health problems, culminating in a heart malfunction. A week after a mutual decision for me to leave the company, my father passed away. The following day our first son Szymon was born.

Six months later, I was back to life, full of energy and optimistic about the future. Given lessons learnt about how critical company culture and relations with your principal are, I spent some time researching my current employer, a Fortune 100 insurance company, before agreeing to take on my current position as Marketing Director (which I got through my INSEAD network).

So far, so good. I have significant influence over company culture and can shape it together with my boss according to a vision we both share. Not to mention a healthy work-life balance. My performance has been rewarded with a promotion to Sales & Marketing Director after two years. In the meantime our daughter Maria, and our second son Henryk were born.

In conjunction with all of this I have discovered my entrepreneurial spirit and set up a company selling aircraft. Between 2007-2012, I not only managed to sell over 20 aircraft, but have also opened a certified aircraft maintenance station and a parallel management organization. We still live in Warsaw, enjoying seeing with kids how it develops and flourishes over time. It is good to be here, with them, at home. First marathon to come soon.

Maud Thomas, Australia

Things started well post-INSEAD, when achieving the triple – changing continent, job function and industry – took me to a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland. I'd thought this would be the perfect fit with my pre-MBA science background but I rapidly became disillusioned with the industry's focus on patients chronically ill with first-world diseases.

It didn't help that I also experienced the medical system first hand as a cancer patient, albeit with the least dangerous type. When I was diagnosed, my doctor said, "This won't be what you die of" – but it still required three operations and two rounds of radiotherapy.

So when, after two years in Switzerland, my pre-INSEAD boss rang saying "We've got a job for you in Paris," I said, "Where do I sign?" without thinking about what the position entailed. It was a newly-minted global account management role, responsible for the company's relationship with a major French food business.

But I'm not a sales person. And, I discovered, I couldn't make myself into a sales person. So, after two years of global misery, I recommended my role be disestablished and got myself moved back to the company's Australian headquarters for my first experience of people management. There I discovered that I'm not a manager, and couldn't make myself into a manager.

Just when I was at my lowest, a friend put me in touch with a therapist who, after talking to me for an hour, said "You're burnt out" – and the sun came out from behind a cloud. Having a label to attach to what I was feeling – so at odds with what I was 'supposed' to be feeling as a high-flying INSEAD MBA – made all the difference.

But now I had a new problem. I didn't want to tell my colleagues I was burnt out, but I needed a reason for chucking in my career. The standard female 'time for babies' didn't apply since I'm resolutely single and have zero maternal instinct. Luckily I'd made no secret of my love for baking, so I told everyone I was quitting to start my own business and would do my research by working in local cafés. Which was half true; I spent the next eight months baking cakes for cafés but never took it any further.

I was just starting to feel that I'd had my fill of cakes, when a fortuitous meeting led to a part-time job lecturing to MBA students at the local university. I took a group of them on a course trip to Madrid and found myself walking early one morning through a park with flowering chestnut trees and suddenly terribly missed France. As soon as I got back to New Zealand, I signed up for French courses at the university and spent the next three years combining lecturing with studying. This led me into a PhD programme and a move back to Paris to research while teaching English.

Which is where you find me – financially poorer but intellectually and emotionally richer, and hoping to find a permanent lecturing job in France.

Max Norm, Spain

So much has happened in the last 10 years. I graduated from INSEAD having broken off my relationship with my girlfriend at the time, left a career in industry for one in management consulting, and took the decision to return to my home country after several years abroad. It was the beginning of a new life.

I rented a large flat with three INSEAD classmates working in competing firms. We worked hard and continued to party hard for a couple of years, thanks to four post-INSEAD incomes and our flat which created a hub for INSEAD friends passing by.

By 2004, however, I found that consulting was becoming less fun, I was becoming too old for parties, and I was missing the international business environment. I therefore accepted a global HQ job in a Fortune 100 industrial company with a view to travel the world and aim for an international general management career. I somehow got what I asked for, as in the following few years I visited 27 countries for business and climbed the corporate ladder. In 2006, I met my wife. We married in 2008 and the next year had our first baby, two weeks before I sold a €100 million business for a substantial profit on behalf of my company.

This success opened the door for me to work on a complex joint venture deal, which took me away from home so often that by the time my son started to talk, he would point his finger to airplanes and say “Dad”.

At Christmas 2010, as we were announcing to our parents that a second baby was on his way, I got a phone call asking me to be the CEO of the new joint venture and relocate to another continent for a few years. The offer got me less excited than I thought it would. I was tired of corporate politics, of planes and hotels, and of pushing for change in reluctant organizations. Even more so, the prospect of being away from home 200 nights a year while my family was alone in a foreign country in a nice villa with a swimming-pool, made me think that I was at risk of being a more successful executive than a father and husband.

For the first time since INSEAD, I started looking for alternatives and found one where I was least expecting it. I met some great people working in one of the top executive search and leadership consulting firms and, after some soul searching about what really made me happy at work – in the month when my second son was born – I accepted an offer to join them.

So I'm now a professional consultant again, still working 60 hours a week or more, but my time is now spent meeting interesting leaders rather than leading steering committees or reviewing PowerPoint presentations. I manage to take one of my sons to school on most days, and wish them goodnight on most evenings, and on weekends have enough appetite to travel for fun. Right now, I could not ask for more.

Meera Sharma, India

On graduating from INSEAD, I joined a large American financial services company. I have been with them now for 10 years, moving roles within various business units, mostly located in London. The past 10 years have also seen me become a mother to two children (now aged 5 and 7), a transition that brought its own challenges. While I would never have it any other way, it has been stressful to juggle being a full-time career professional with being an involved mum (in a family where my husband has his own demanding role and travels extensively).

Though this balancing act is increasingly common in many dual-career families, it surprises me to see how few true role models I have in my company (which is a leading advocate of female talent and ranks highly on many diversity awards). Many senior women in the company are either single or have husbands who have given up work to mind the family. I still feel that every time I leave work early to attend a parent-teacher meeting or because the nanny has a medical appointment, I lose a few 'brownie points' at work.

My solution to this has been to firstly pay over-the-top for extra childcare, so that I can go to work with an easy mind. And secondly, I have learnt to take the rough with the smooth at work. While I have at times lost out on a role due to my inability to spend 50% of the time on the road, or taken a few 'non-jobs' so I didn't need to relocate outside London, I have realised that in the long run you can get to the top, albeit a little slower than somebody with fewer constraints. Lastly, it helps immensely that my husband is a true partner who pulls his weight.

I now work in a senior role in the marketing department of my business unit and am considered promising talent for the next level. I do at times wonder what my marketability outside the company would be (I have never really looked outside for a job in the last 10 years) and whether I could have gained more out of my INSEAD MBA by making a few timely career jumps outside, as some of my classmates have made. My rise has been steady and at times slow, rather than meteoric.

At the same time, I realise that I probably have my longstanding relationships and my credibility in my company to thank for many blessings. I have survived many restructurings in the recessionary years (who knows if the next one will get me!) and been awarded resources like executive coaching even in a downturn. Changing company more may have bagged me a better title and/or more money, but no doubt it would have been more stressful to manage my work/life balance.

On a personal level, I do wish I had more time to myself... to do the things I thought I would do when I was still a young MBA graduate (travel, network at career events, socialise more). Between my full-time and demanding job and my family, I don't seem to have much spare time. However, this is the only way I know to be true to myself... I need my career to feel fulfilled, and I cannot be any kind of mother other than one who is 100% involved (even if I cram all that mothering into the few hours I get with my kids in a normal week). On balance, it all seems to be working so far...just about!

Valeria Miranda, Italy**THROUGH THE ROLLER COASTER OF FINANCIAL CRISES – YOU GOTTA FOLLOW YOUR HEART!**

Ten years after graduation – gosh that sounds daunting – time has flown so quickly. To sum it up in one sentence: during this time span, I kept exploring different options and lives, made some crazy choices, and I am quite happy and satisfied with where I landed.

I graduated in July 2002 – that was the summer after 9/11. The world changed in a day and the job market plummeted. Although I was not too keen on going back to my previous employer, BCG, mainly because of the too-long hours and consequent lack of work/life balance, I eventually decided to do so. I declined an offer to relocate to London and work for a financial institution that would have only paid off half of my MBA debt.

So I spent the following two and half years working hard – too hard – spending more nights in hotels than in the cosy apartment which I had managed to buy in my home town, Milan. I had a rather unfulfilling relationship with a guy with whom I shared too little. When I attended the INSEAD 5-year reunion, I felt that I was one of the few women who had not managed to build a family and find the right job...yet!

So I got the job hunt started thanks to a connection that I had built during my original recruiting at INSEAD with the financial institution. The result was that I got a great job reporting to the Italy Country Manager. I spent three years there, between Milan and London, loving my job, colleagues and the intellectual challenge.

In July 2008, I travelled to Greenland, where I met a Viking working as a chef in a minuscule village among the ice. We clicked and started a long-distance relationship that sent me to heaven. It wasn't easy, he has three kids in Australia from a previous marriage, and Italy is a tough country for a Viking to find a job. But hey, you gotta follow your heart!

In 2008, the crisis of subprime mortgages was spreading and Lehman Brothers went bust. In November of that year, when my Viking and I were trekking in Nepal, I got a text informing me of a major reorganization: my team had been wiped out from the organizational chart of the company. This led to five intense months of looking for a new job – the first chance in my life to ponder what I really wanted to do and become.

Although I had a promising offer in business, Médecins Sans Frontières Italy was looking for a Fundraising Director – I had always admired them and could not miss this chance. The pay is less than half of that in business, there are virtually no benefits (forget the fancy car, the paid-for mobile, expensive hotels and restaurants – all the money raised is to save lives), but hey, you gotta follow your heart! So I started a new career in the not-for-profit sector.

So here I am, happily married to my Viking, pregnant with twins, and loving my job. If I look back, I reckon that through the roller-coaster of those global financial crises, following my heart helped me make some crazy, yet right, turns. And needless to say, I am very grateful to INSEAD for helping me to find the courage to make unobvious choices.