

A FINE BALANCE

Finding the right balance between work and life is getting easier thanks to supportive programs that help women develop rewarding careers on their terms By Marcia Kaye



(Clockwise from top left): Heather Burkett in Washington DC; Kelly Morrison with her daughter, Rachel, at daycare; Janet Matsushita outside Imperial's Nanticoke refinery; Susan Stark at her daughters' ballet studio.

Not long ago, most working women were forced to choose between a professional life and a personal life. Those who wanted a rewarding career often had to sacrifice family time, while those who wanted a fulfilling personal life had to forgo career opportunities. That's still the case in some workplaces, especially for women in non-traditional occupations. But Imperial has been a leader in recognizing the importance of a healthy work-life balance.

"Many employees will need flexibility at some point during their career to deal with family or personal interests," says Roland Schustereder, manager of workplace policies. "The company is committed to being the workplace of choice for the most capable and high-performing people in our industry, and workplace guidelines and programs that provide flexibility and assist employees in achieving balance are a key part of that commitment." He adds that the company encourages managers to be creative in considering how to apply the guidelines, since every employee's situation may be unique.

The programs have evolved over time, in response to employees' needs. So in addition to long-standing programs like flex-time, parental leave and job-sharing, recently added options include extended leave for personal reasons, such as to train for a marathon, do some extensive travel or home-school a child for a year. Such programs, combined with a variety of job opportunities, support a culture at Imperial that encourages women—and indeed, all employees—to grow both personally and professionally.

Here are four accomplished women in non-traditional occupations at Imperial who have achieved their ideal work-life balance, successfully integrating deeply satisfying personal lives with careers they love.



JANET MATSUSHITA

REFINERY MANAGER
NANTICOKE, ONT.

Janet Matsushita is one of only a handful of women refinery managers in the world. One of her predecessors as manager of Nanticoke refinery, near Hamilton, Ont., was also a woman. But Matsushita says, "It's not about gender, it's about what you bring to the role. And refinery managers tend to have broad ranges of experience." (She's held 14 different positions in her 24 years with the company.) Having said that, she adds, "It's important for young women to know that there are opportunities here and the only thing that limits them is themselves."

Matsushita, raised in Oakville, Ont., and Montreal, is a chemical engineer and mother of two who began her career as a design engineer at the Sarnia refinery. "It was pretty challenging, but they put some experienced people around me so I could learn about the company, not just about my role," she says. She then went on to work at two of the company's refineries—Dartmouth and Nanticoke—as well as head office. "What I like is the variety," she says. She's had very technical roles in specialty fields like environmental engineering and process engineering, and commercial jobs like foreign crude oil buyer, as well as a number of management positions. Before moving to Nanticoke, Matsushita spent 18 months as manager of the Dartmouth refinery, which followed a decade of working in various other positions at the refinery. "Safety at Dartmouth has been a high point for me," she says. The refinery sustained 16 consecutive months without a recordable injury among both employees and contract workers. "We're going to bring the same focus on safety to Nanticoke, and that means no injuries—not a scratch, not a bandage." While safety is number one, her other priorities for the refinery include reliability, efficiency and profitability. And, of course, people. Matsushita says her biggest challenges are to ensure that the workforce of about 450 employees and contractors knows how much the company values them, and to channel their energy to deliver what the business needs.

Matsushita's most influential mentors were her father, a former oil company executive, and Ted Stoner, Dartmouth's former manager. "I admired [Stoner's] level of caring for people," she says, "and he really encouraged every individual to excel and go beyond boundaries in their thinking."

As for balancing work life and home life, Matsushita says, "Your needs for work-life balance change over time and you need to reset that. Nothing is static, and career opportunities may change for you. We sometimes forget that."

With two adolescent children aged 14 and 11, Matsushita says her spouse "anchors our family." He gave up his excavation and snowplowing business when the family moved from Nova Scotia to Ontario. She admits her husband and kids had to warm to the idea of the move, but she says keeping the family together is important right now. "For us, finding the right balance between our family and work opportunities is a priority."

Rob Warner



KELLY MORRISON

TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR, ASSET ENHANCEMENT
CALGARY, ALTA.

On Thursdays, when Kelly Morrison leaves her job, she looks forward to a four-day weekend with her family. That happens every week. Morrison works on a part-time basis in the position of technical supervisor in asset enhancement for Imperial Oil Resources. Heading a small team that looks for advantageous opportunities to acquire or divest assets, Morrison could have been overwhelmed with trying to fit what had once been a full-time job into three days a week. But she says, "The company did a really good job of pulling away some responsibilities and setting the job to be successful for me."

Morrison, who has been with Imperial since 1996, started the part-time schedule after taking an 18-month leave when daughter Rachel, now four, was born, and she has continued it since having her son Kyle, now two. "With Rachel in preschool, on Mondays and Fridays I can be that mom who's there, who volunteers," says Morrison, who is married to her high school sweetheart.

Growing up in the Manitoba farming community of Lockport, north of Winnipeg, Morrison always loved math and science. When her high school guidance counsellor recommended she study engineering, she said, "What's that?" Even when he tried to define this enormous and varied field, she couldn't quite grasp it. But when he mentioned there might be more scholarship money for engineering students, she decided to give it a try. She majored in geological engineering.

When Morrison was hired right out of university to work in Cold Lake, Alta., she remembers thinking that she didn't want to be one of those new hires who say, "I have an engineering degree and I know all I need to know." Instead, she says, "I took the approach, 'I don't know anything and I'm here to learn from you guys.'" She tagged along with Bob Claude, hopping in his truck and going out to the wells. "Bob is six foot three, tattoos up and down his arms, a voice as low as it gets. I should have feared him, but I told him I wanted to learn from him and he took me under his wing." As she learned the business from the ground up, she earned the respect of people on both the operations and the technical sides, and gained the confidence to pilot new ideas. One of her on-the-job highlights was doing onshore safety training to prepare for a two-day visit by helicopter to the Thebaud platform, part of the the Sable offshore gas-production project east of Nova Scotia.

From time to time Morrison's supervisors let her know about full-time career opportunities, but she tells them, "Not yet. Let's talk again in two years." As she says, "I have many years yet to work full-time and to advance my career."

Kate Kinz



HEATHER BURKETT

U.S. DISTRIBUTOR BUSINESS ADVISER — EASTERN REGION, EXXONMOBIL
FAIRFAX, VA.

If not for Imperial, Heather Burkett probably wouldn't be looking forward to a scuba vacation in the British Virgin Islands next May. But scuba diving is a popular activity in Fairfax, Va., which is also the home of ExxonMobil's downstream global headquarters. And when Burkett took an assignment there, she decided to take up the sport. She's since done dives off Mexico and the Caribbean island of Bonaire.

Originally from the Toronto area, Burkett didn't expect that her career would ever take her beyond that city. After graduating with a combined five-year degree in mechanical engineering and business, Burkett had several job offers, but Imperial was her top choice. "Imperial hadn't even been on my radar screen, because I saw them more as a chemical engineering company," she says. "But their presentation on career night really impressed me." What particularly attracted her was Imperial's commitment to being an "employer of choices," offering several different careers within the company, and its commitment to assigning challenging projects from the get-go. "And that's not just talk," she says. She started in the technical services group in lubricants and specialties at the Toronto office and began receiving challenging assignments almost immediately, such as providing technical consultations to large industrial customers.

But when the company relocated its corporate headquarters to Calgary in 2005, Burkett was thrown for a loop. "That wasn't exactly what I'd signed up for," she admits. "But moving to Calgary was a real turning point for me." Not only did her new marketing job open up doors and help her understand the business much better, but she had the opportunity to work on her snowboarding, a sport she hadn't gotten the hang of in Toronto.

Two years later Burkett was offered a marketing assignment in the eastern United States and, with some qualms, took it. "I moved to the U.S. without knowing anyone," says Burkett. "I felt a little brave, to be honest. But I thought, this is a great job opportunity and I'm just going to go for it." To her delight she found Fairfax, which is just outside of Washington DC, to be a vibrant, diverse city hosting people from around the world. She liked its pleasant climate as well as its proximity to New York City and Philadelphia for weekend trips. She built up a social network by joining leagues in volleyball, bowling and soccer-baseball (called kickball in the U.S.), as well as through scuba diving. Burkett now manages strategic issues facing the distributor network east of the Mississippi, which involves moderate travel.

"I've had a tremendous number of different experiences with the company in a relatively short period of time," Burkett says. "But my managers have always provided me with an appropriate workload and predictable hours. That allows me to achieve the work-life balance I want."

STEPHEN VASS



SUSAN STARK

CONVENTIONAL RESERVOIR ENGINEERING MANAGER
CALGARY, ALTA.

When Susan Stark first told her dad that she planned to follow in his footsteps and study engineering, he wasn't thrilled. He was worried. "What if you want to get married and have children?" he asked her.

But now, 25 years later, Stark credits Imperial with having allowed her to develop her career at her own rate, easing for several years after her two children were born, then ramping up as soon as she was ready for greater challenge. "I've always been very honest and open about what I thought I could handle, and my supervisors have always respected that," says Stark.

While studying chemical engineering at the University of Calgary, Scottish-born Stark got summer jobs at Imperial's Cold Lake oil sands project in northeastern Alberta, first as a plant operator at Cold Lake, then with the Cold Lake reservoir engineering group in Calgary. She loved the work. After graduation she happily accepted a full-time position as a reservoir engineer in Imperial's conventional oil and gas area. But when her husband-to-be, Shane, also a reservoir engineer with the company, told her that there were two reservoir engineer jobs opening up in Cold Lake and he wanted to apply, Stark felt a pull to go back there, too. "At first I felt I couldn't even ask, because I'd just been hired," Stark recalls. "But then I thought that getting two reservoir engineers in one fell swoop in Cold Lake might be good for the company." The company thought so too, and transferred them both.

Although the town of Cold Lake had little more than a grocery store, a hardware store, a fast-food outlet and a video rental, Stark loved the relaxed pace of the community, a perfect contrast to the huge, busy, exciting workplace environment. The couple stayed seven years.

With the birth of each of her two daughters—Kelly, now 15, and Jamie, 12—Stark and her husband took sequential six-month leaves. Back in Calgary, Stark took her work-life balance cues from her manager, Bruce Carey. "He worked 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., to be home for his family," she recalls. "As a manager he lived that commitment, and I learned that from him." Stark and her husband have alternated that work schedule for years so that someone is always home for the children after school and to chauffeur them to lessons. Both girls are now serious students of ballet.

While her daughters were young, Stark didn't seek to advance her career. But as they got older, she felt she had the time and energy for a greater challenge. She told her boss she would love to go into planning, even though she was more experienced than the typical candidate for such a career move. "I was concerned that I'd waited too long," she says, "but I found that there was no downside to having waited."

Within two weeks she was made the conventional and Syncrude planning adviser and in June she became the conventional reservoir engineering manager, leading a team of about 16. "I'm really lucky because I've got a great job, and at the same time my kids have never felt that they come second." ■

Kate Kinz