

Podcast transcript

International Women's Day 2020.

Podcast with Manal Corwin, Principal-in-Charge of Washington National Tax and Head of International Tax Policy at KPMG in the US, Komal Dhall, Head of Global Transfer Pricing Services at KPMG International and Sharon Katz-Pearlman, Global Head of Dispute Resolution & Controversy, KPMG International.

Musical intro

Announcer:

Hello and welcome to another episode of the KPMG podcast series for tax leaders. For today's special International Women's Day episode we have brought together a panel of distinguished female tax leaders who will share their inspiring stories and perspectives on their careers in Tax so far, including the challenges and opportunities they have experienced, the advances in the industry and the role women play in tax today.

Joining me in this conversation are Manal Corwin, Principal-in-Charge of Washington National Tax and Head of International Tax Policy at KPMG in the US, with Komal Dhall, Head of Global Transfer Pricing Services at KPMG International and finally Sharon Katz-Pearlman, Global Head of Dispute Resolution & Controversy also at KPMG International.

Manal, Komal and Sharon, thanks for joining me on this conference call today. Perhaps we can start at the beginning. Thinking back to your childhoods, do you remember what your dream job was and why? Sharon, can I start with you?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

I trained to become a ballet dancer. From my very young childhood all the way through college and I never made it to actually National Ballet of Canada was the company that I desperately wanted to join. For many reasons my father did not approve, so he wouldn't sign the release for me to audition. I was a minor. It was the only fight I ever had with my parents really. So I taught for many, many, many years. I taught all through law school. And I danced for a small company in the city, here in Manhattan. But that was my dream job for well past my childhood. I don't know there was just something magical about ballet and I fell in love with it. So sort of a strange beginning for a tax lawyer I guess.

Announcer:

Thanks Sharon. And, Manal?

Manal Corwin:

So as a child, I wanted to be a high school math teacher, I loved teaching. I used to put all my dolls up and my younger siblings and force them to hear me pretend to be a teacher. And I liked math and so for me that felt like the dream job.

Announcer:

And Komal did you have a dream job when you were young?

Komal Dhall:

I've always known since I've been young. I've been really fascinated with all things international. So, I don't know if had a specific job in mind, but whether it was from watching the Olympics and seeing all the citizens from around the world or whether it was just reading and meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures, I've always found that I've been interested in the international domain. So growing up and being able to do something that allows me to experience different perspectives, different ways of trying to solve problems has been able to allow me to take what I've always loved as a child to where I am today.

Announcer:

Thanks Komal. Can you each tell us about your career journey so far – where your career began and the moves you've made to reach where you are today? Again Sharon can I start with you?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

My first real position was with the U.S. government. The litigation arm of the Internal Revenue Service. The Office of Chief Counsel. From there after eight years I came to KPMG as the experiment. When I came here there really were no attorneys from the government that had made the move to a non-law firm.

You know it's interesting when I – when I think back I really never intended to leave the government. The only reason I did leave is because I had my first child and realized that I needed flexibility and despite the fact that it was the government and everybody assumes the government is super flexible, back then they really were not. And I actually had to step down from my special litigation attorney role, which was a competitive role. There were very few of those spots. So I did. Took me a while to kind of come to the realization that it was just very important to me to be able to be home and do all the mommy things that I didn't feel that I had enough time to do. I stepped down from that position, and so looked at several things and then was contacted by somebody in KPMG's national tax office and said the firm would like to do an experiment. Would you like to be the guinea pig? And that's how it started. And the group has grown and I've taken on different roles over the years. And now here I am as – I lead the U.S. practice but in a global context I helped establish the global disputes group and oversee that now. And I love it.

Announcer:

Thanks Sharon. And Komal?

Komal Dhall:

Before I arrived at KPMG, I was with the Federal Reserve Bank. So, as a background, I'm an economist by training, and after my degree, worked at the Federal Reserve Bank. I spent a little bit of time in public accounting at another firm, but then when I joined KPMG I was here in New York and really appreciated the experience that I had working and really what is our U.S. firm headquartered office. But very quickly, I think I was interested in learning more about the firm, understanding how our own firm strategy works. So, I've done a rotation in our Vice Chairman's Office with tax and accelerated in my career pretty quickly. And then I started to get a little restless, again, and I thought about making a move internationally. So, I then moved on to a secondment in the U.K. which is relatively rare to do with the partner particularly in tax. I ended up staying there almost 5-1/2 years. So, by the time I returned to New York 5 1/2 years later, it was – it was with a much broader network globally. And then from there, moved into the current role that I'm in now, which is in – which is leading our Global Services for Transfer Pricing.

Announcer:

Manal what has career journey been?

Manal Corwin:

It hasn't been a straight line to where I am today. I started out in school thinking I wanted to be a doctor. I was an engineering major but trying to take all the classes necessary to become a doctor. I eventually realized that that was a lot to take on and I switched to psychology and graduated as a psychology major but then decided I wanted to go to graduate school and ended up going to law school. And spent three years in law school which I loved and that was a really good fit.

Had the opportunity to clerk for a judge and then went to a Washington law firm, where I was immediately attracted to the tax group and was doing international tax from the very – the very beginning of my career. I was on a path to making partner in that law firm and content to – with the success I had when I received a completely unexpected phone call from someone at the U.S. Treasury Department and asked if I would be interested in coming in to the office of the International Tax Counsel at the U.S. Treasury Department. I had not, at that point, thought about doing something like that and I thought maybe I would try it but I was also about to make partners as I said and I had a wonderful mentor at the law firm that I spoke with and he advised that going in as an attorney at the Treasury is something that may come up again so that I should wait and make partner and then go over a few months and that's what I – what I said to the Treasury folks and they said, "Well, we may call you again at some point." And a few months later, they did call me again and said, "Well, would you consider coming in as the deputy international tax counsel?" So I went back to my mentor and said, "Well, they called me back," and he said, "Take it. It's a no-brainer. You'll – it's a great – it's public service and it's something you learn a lot and it's a great position." So that's what I did and I went in to the Treasury Department and worked on very interesting issues, had my first experience being the delegate for the U.S. at the OECD. And after two years, I decided it was a good transition point and ultimately started thinking about what's next. And I had opportunities at other law firms but it was the first time that accounting firms were beginning to – in the U.S. to really look at attracting lawyers into their national offices and I talked with KPMG, thought that given the policy work I had been doing and many other reasons the way that KPMG operated as national office that I would take the leap from being a practicing lawyer and to come to – to come to KPMG.

So had a great experience at KPMG for eight or nine years and then the Treasury called me again and asked me to come in – if I would be willing to come back and serve as international tax counsel first and then deputy assistant secretary for international tax. And I did that and that was just an incredible experience again. I did that for three plus years and then returned to KPMG to head up their international tax practice and now, to head their national office.

Announcer:

Based on your career journey and experience what are some strategies you think can help women grow within their organization?

Manal Corwin:

I would say one is don't assume that people know what you're doing. I think women in particular who are tend to keep their heads down and do what they can and work very hard at it and assume that everybody knows what they're doing, how they're contributing and how hard they're working and I think that assumption, particularly in large institutions, is not – is not always accurate.

So finding ways even if it's not necessarily in your nature to make sure that folks know how you're contributing. I would say the other strategy is to find someone that you trust within the organization to serve as a mentor and ideally as a sponsor for you to help guide you on various aspects of how to be successful in the organization but also as being someone who's going to champion what you're doing and be able to amplify those contributions. The final thought I had was to not count yourself out from opportunities. I think often women as leadership opportunities or other things come up make assumptions about their either qualifications to serve or their ability and capacity to do so and may not even have the conversation with either a mentor or with the leadership who's making those decisions to think about how they might be able to contribute. And so they count themselves out before even considering and I think that can – that can often lead to a lot of missed opportunities.

Announcer:

Komal, would you add anything?

Komal Dhall:

You really have to trust your instincts and you have to trust your judgment. I continue to speak with the people today about career move and career trajectory, and there's one thing I do know your personal situation does matter and so you've got to be comfortable in your personal circumstances to be able to take these leaps of faith from professional level. I do think those two things go hand-in-hand, but I have to believe that taking risks and doing things out of the ordinary continue to set you apart from your peers.

Announcer:

Sharon who has inspired you the most throughout your career?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

You know, my father. Which it's interesting because I said at the beginning he was completely horrified when he realized that I was planning to audition for a ballet company. He really inspired me. Because my father really exemplified somebody who had gone through a lot of difficult things and just worked hard and kept going and had his priorities right. And achieved things. And really taught me that working hard is a good thing. And that has always really stuck with me.

Announcer:

Thanks Sharon. Manal who in your life has inspired you and why?

Manal Corwin:

I'll have to say my parents, both my mother and father. They are immigrants came over to the U.S. right after they got married, and their experience here I think similar to a lot of immigrants was really an attitude of lots – anything is possible if you – if you set your mind to it.

My father, and just his attitude, his optimism, his ability to bring people together and his kind of communication skills have all been through drivers and inspirational to me and part and parcel of who I am.

Announcer:

Over the course of your careers what is some of the best advice you've received? Manal?

Manal Corwin:

Well, I've received a lot of great advice throughout my career but one that stands out was when I was actually in fifth grade and it was a fifth grade teacher. When I would raise my hand to contribute to class at one point, he called me and after the class was over and said to me, "Do you realize that every time you say something, answer a question, you giggle afterwards?" And he said, "What you say is actually really, really interesting and insightful and you don't – I think you might be giggling afterwards because you're not confident in what you're saying but you should be really, really confident in what you're saying." And I completely understood what he said and he was right and it gave me two things was sort of just a self-awareness but also the fact that how you present yourself and the confidence with which you express yourself matters and that is something that is your control.

Announcer:

Komal?

Komal Dhall:

What I've learned is that you have to continue to build relationships not just with your peers but also with your leaders because they are making decisions every day, and if they don't know you, they don't know how to include you in their plans.

Announcer:

Sharon can I ask you what you're most proud of professionally and personally?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

So professionally I am – I'm very proud of kind of how far I've come in this area of tax disputes in a – in a major firm like this to hold the role that I do is something I really am incredibly proud of and it's led to so many other things. Because of this – the work I do here. I sit on a UN sub-committee on tax dispute resolution which most people don't even realize that the UN has a tax-related committee. It does. And a number of sub-committees. So I'm incredibly proud of that.

On a personal level, I am most proud of my family. I have an extraordinary husband and four amazing kids – and two dogs. I shouldn't leave them out. (Clark and Lana). And my kids and my husband are my greatest support.

When I need cheering up they are there to make me laugh or to – or to tell me to stop being a drama queen.

Announcer:

Manal can I ask you the same questions?

Manal Corwin:

Professionally, I have to say it is the – it's the opportunity that I've had to do government service. The two stints at the Treasury Department were just phenomenal experiences for me. I was really thankful for the opportunity to do government, to do public service. I think it's really important. I learned a tremendous amount in those periods of time that I've been able to apply to my private sector experience.

Personally, hands down, I'm most proud of my family. I have four children. And being a mother has always been something that was – even as a child, I knew I wanted to be and it was very important to me. My children are just really incredible. Not perfect, none of us are and I think they are incredible because they are – they are not perfect but I'm just so proud of what they've achieved.

Announcer:

Komal how do you feel the tax profession is doing in terms of gender parity and embracing the power of Diversity?

Komal Dhall:

So, I do travel a fair amount, and when I go to certain locations, you can see number of women in the tax profession and women leaders in the tax profession. My view is that the reason women tend to make such strong leaders in taxes because they're very powerful in terms of their communication ability. So, as I think ahead and I consider how the tax profession is evolving, I continue to see bright lights in terms of females getting involved. They're not only bright technically but they're also able to take those difficult concepts and explain them in a way that's relevant to their stakeholders whether they'd be senior stakeholders, whether they'd be tax professional or non-tax professionals. So, I continue to see a strong world for women though I think there's plenty of work to do around the world in terms of gender parity probably so, but I'm inspired by the fact that there are spots of – spots of progress.

Announcer:

Sharon what do you see as some of the biggest barriers to female leadership?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

I do think that despite the fact that there's been a ton of progress made there is still sometimes a perception issue around the viability of women's leadership style. And I think women have a different leadership style and there's still some, lack of familiarity, hesitancy around a woman's approach to leading a group or a team or a company.

I think that that – the fact that there haven't been a lot of women leaders or enough women leaders to get people comfortable is still a barrier.

Announcer:

Manal what barriers have you encountered?

Manal Corwin:

I think some of the biggest barriers are connectivity to decision-makers in an organization you know, maybe because they're balancing other things or kind of keeping their head down and not being part of those connection groups, those networks. I think sometimes women themselves don't raise their hands for opportunities, don't put themselves in a position to be considered because they count themselves out. They make an assumption about what their – that either maybe they don't have the skills or they don't – they don't have the capacity and assume that it won't work rather than maybe taking a little bit of a leap of faith and that can – that can count you out.

Announcer:

Komal if you had the chance to start your career over, knowing what you know now, is there anything you would do differently?

Komal Dhall:

I do believe that I would probably invest differently in relationships. There's that old adage about how CEOs make very tough decisions in a very short period of time. Some say that most decisions are made in about nine seconds and difficult decisions are made in maybe 90 seconds. It's very important at senior levels to have a level of trust, and I think that trust is built through relationships and familiarity. So, not only through one body of work but also through just the ability to understand someone's perspective, someone's attitude towards change, someone's attitude towards progress and growth. That I think those relationships not only from a sales perspective, but also from an internal organization perspective make a tremendous difference in one's future.

Announcer:

Manal how do you balance being both a mother and professional?

Manal Corwin:

I think it's less about balance because there is no perfect balance in my mind. It goes – it's more about control and being able to have control when you need it and I think that's what I've strived for by staying as connected as possible, constantly checking in with those that I care about and making sure that I'm somewhat both forgiving of myself at times when it's not perfect and appreciative of the input that I'm getting and constantly listening.

Announcer:

And Sharon. anything you'd add?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

I think balance is an interesting word. I think it shifts. I don't think there is a recipe. I think it's just a question of kind of where you are in your life and how to find that place that you're essentially happy and feel OK.

So for me having the flexibility and being able to arrange things in a way that let me do the mommy stuff and also do my job, it was a great trade off. And worked and I was – I was happy with it.

Announcer:

And final Komal what are your thoughts?

Komal Dhall:

I've been very blessed to have an infrastructure that allows me to take time away from the family and know that my children are being well looked after. I found over the years that being away from them is very difficult, but we are in a demanding profession, and so over time, what I've really tried to do is manage my schedule so that I know where I will be, when I'll be there. And for those times that I'm going to be at home, I make every effort to spend that opportunity with my children or with the community or with my family at large to ensure that I give them some undivided attention when I can.

Announcer:

Thanks Komal. To wrap up our conversation today, and based on your experiences can I ask you each to pass on some advice to the next generation of female leaders within Tax? Komal can we start with your thoughts?

Komal Dhall:

I think this is a great opportunity for female leaders in tax. I think one of the things we have to do is find our voice and take up space, and as I think about some of the key issues in tax such as the transparency agenda, trust in tax, communicating with key stakeholders. I generally believe that these are areas where women have strength.

Announcer:

Manal what advice would you highlight?

Manal Corwin:

Be part of thinking creatively about how to strike balances at moments in your life that you need to strike the balance but that gives you the greatest flexibility and options for the future as you grow your career.

And I would say, pay it forward. I think leaders, both women and men frankly who tell their stories help those that are – that are coming up understand the art of the possible.

I think the more people tell their stories that the more that younger professionals and younger women see the art of the possible and are less likely to count themselves out for the future.

And then I guess finally I would say is to be forgiving and that perfection is not attainable and that there's a lot in between perfection and failure and that – and you should just make sure that you're not so you're harshest judge.

Announcer:

And Sharon any final thoughts or advice that you would like to add?

Sharon Katz-Pearlman:

So I've got two pieces of advice. One is give yourself a break. We're all striving for the next thing. The next role. The next big case. The next whatever. But you have to give yourself a break and nobody can be 100 percent on every minute. And it's OK to not be perfect. This kind of constant driving and feeling that you have to be just a perfect 110 percent of the time is ridiculous.

The second thing is a piece of advice from my ballet teacher who is 92 now. And when I was struggling through the my father won't let me audition and what am I going to do and she said life is strange. Things are not black or white. There are many shades in-between and don't think in terms of one or the other.

Announcer:

Sharon, Manal and Komal, on behalf of our listeners I would like to thank you for your time today and your candour in sharing your professional and personal experiences throughout your career. It has been an eye opening conversation that i think will really resonate with our listeners. For more on International Women's Day please visit kpmg.com/IWD.

Join us again next time and please email us with any questions you have about today's episode at tax@kpmg.com and we'd also love to hear from you with any suggestions you have for future episodes. Thanks for listening

Musical exit