

# Achieving Work-Life Balance: A Tan Sri Syed Zainal Experience

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## Prologue

One Saturday morning in 2005, Syed Zainal sat at his desk contemplating the career decision he would have to make over the weekend. At 38, Syed Zainal was Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at HICOM Holdings Berhad, a Malaysian automotive manufacturing company, for ten years. Perodua just offered Syed Zainal a promotion to CEO, a position that would make him responsible for the entire division.

Normally, Syed Zainal would have been blissful by such an opportunity, but he worried about its impact on his already fatigued personal life. Since his last promotion, he has struggled to balance an increasingly demanding workload with his responsibilities at home. Syed Zainal explained:

*“I have worked my whole career, and until now, I have never had any issues balancing work and home. However, things started spinning a bit out of control after my last promotion. At first, I thought I could handle the longer hours and more frequent travel, but it became a real drag on the family after a while. Then, two kids need my attention. That is when I realized it was time to change the situation. I have mixed feelings about accepting the promotion.”*

Over the past several years, Syed Zainal has taken steps to get his schedule under control. He and his wife, Jan agreed that things were better. Nevertheless, another promotion would invert their lives all over again.

As CEO, he could expect to be busier than before. It actually worried him. Syed Zainal found it hard to decide about accepting the promotion. He knew that the CEO of Perodua expected him to accept; in fact, he had emphasized that he had no second choice.

## Syed Zainal's Early Career

Immediately after graduating from Maryland University, United States (USA) in 1985 with a B. Sc in engineering, Syed Zainal worked for the pipeline in the US for a few months and was called to come

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### KEYWORDS

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### Disclaimer

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back to Malaysia in the same year. However, the recession at times makes him difficult to find a job. While waiting for a proper career, Syed Zainal worked at Italian Furniture for a few months. That company sells quality and expensive furniture; its target market is rich people. He reflected:

*"I gained much experience here focusing on communication and negotiating skills that go beyond our syllabus in university. It also taught me about selling and marketing techniques with high abilities to persuade people."*

A few months later, Syed Zainal got an offer from Petronas Gas Sdn Bhd to be a project engineer. Less than five years later, he was promoted to senior executive of the Corporate Planning & International Business Development unit. That position exposed him and made him responsible for expanding Petronas with Asian countries: Vietnam and Cambodia. As Syed Zainal recalled:

*"I was asked to open 11 petrol stations in Cambodia and Hanoi. I am facing many difficulties in dealing with strict regulations from other countries, such as safety issues. It shapes you into different characters and teaches me to avoid danger and mitigate risk."*

## **Into A Turbulence**

A promotion to global would require frequent travel to Vietnam and Cambodia, and some trips would last weeks. Over the proceeding few months, Syed Zainal had taken steps to get his schedule under control. He and Jan agreed that things were improving. As a Senior Executive, he could expect even more travel. The travel especially worried him. He did not want to break his commitment to his wife, especially now that she was pregnant with their first child, Adam. Syed Zainal recalled:

*"Adam's birth was the happiest moment of my life. I was so proud of the family we had created. However, Jan and I were distant. I was in Johor, and she was in Kuala Lumpur. I really struggle with work-life balance."*

A few years back, when Adam was growing up, he requested a bicycle. Because of his high commitment to work, Syed Zainal requested her son to write a proposal as he did. Jan discussed with him what was going on and asked the valid reasons why his son needed to write a proposal to buy a bicycle. Adam was ten years old at that time. Furthermore, Syed Zainal realized this was out of his control, and he had no intention of giving such instruction. It reflects a lot of pressure on him in this corporate world. He also realized the importance of being present for his family and making time for them.

Within eight years in Petronas, Syed Zainal considered taking more challenges from his current field and position. His engineering talent and hard-driving work ethic did not go unnoticed. As Syed Zainal recalled:

*“At one time, I think, it is not me. I am not satisfied with what I am doing now. I have ambition. What you are going to be. I wanted to do something different. Something is missing somewhere. However, I do not know what to do. I met my friend who is responsible for the International Business Development division at HICOM Berhad, and he asked me whether I should join the team. Without taking much time, I agreed with that offer and attended a formal selection and recruitment process.”*

After an interview session, Syed Zainal shakes the interviewer's hand. The interviewer told him his name was the only one on the list. Interviewer claimed:

*“Most people do not have what it takes to successfully lead a company (refer to previous company where Syed Zainal worked with, Petronas) like this, but you do. You have a rare gift, Syed Zainal. Well, we need a leader like you in this company. Syed Zainal, you are the only one with the experience and best track record to hold this position.”*

Syed Zainal's heart skipped a bit, then sank. A promotion to Project Manager in HICOM Berhad to implement a national project to produce a national truck in collaboration with Isuzu named HICOM Perkasa is not easy. He would be busier than ever before. Syed Zainal said:

*“As a Project Manager, I was in charge of not only developing an empty land start from scratch to a large factory in Pekan, Pahang but would also require frequent travel to Japan.”*

As a result, Syed Zainal became weekend husband and wife for the second time. Syed Zainal's workload and travel schedule had increased since his promotion, but Syed Zainal and his wife considered it manageable. Jan understands when Syed Zainal works hard and longer hours.

After an existing CEO had resigned, leaving a hole in senior management. Syed Zainal had been chosen to replace him. At 38, Syed Zainal was the youngest CEO at HICOM Berhad, who performed well in the company for over three years. As their incomes grew, their life together turned out just as they had hoped.

He would have to prove himself all over again. However, proving himself would not be easy. Syed Zainal's hectic schedule meant he was rarely home during the week, leaving Jan to care for his son. However, even with child care, Jan could not carry it alone without help from her husband.

Having become deeply involved in the details of the business, he initially found it hard to let go. Syed Zainal and Jan had discussed settling the issue raised. Jan was pregnant again. At first, Syed Zainal assured Jan that it was just a matter of a few tough months. However, it does not happen. As he continued to work hard, Syed Zainal became increasingly distant from Jan. He remembers feeling trapped. After two years, Syed Zainal's hard work paid off. Petronas Dagangan Berhad's CEO had just promoted Syed Zainal to vice president of downstream marketing at Petroleum Nasional Berhad. After one year later, he was appointed as Managing Director of Petronas Dagangan Berhad.



**Figure 1: Tan Sri Syed Zainal and wife**

### **Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia Berhad (HICOM)**

HICOM was incorporated on 11 March 1910 under The Companies Enactment 1897 as The New Serendah Rubber Company Limited. The company's name was changed to The New Serendah Rubber Company Berhad on 15 April 1966. Subsequently, on 16 December 1993, it changed its name to HICOM Holdings Berhad under a restructuring exercise. It was incorporated in 1980 as the Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia Berhad (HICOM).

Diversified Resources Berhad (DRB) was incorporated in 1990 as Peerless Assets Sdn Bhd. It was changed to DRB in September 1991 and listed on Malaysia's main bourse in September of the following year. In 1996, both companies merged to form the biggest conglomerate in Malaysia. DRB-HICOM was listed on the Main Board of the KLSE on 4 September 1992 and assumed its present name on 11 May 2000.

Within the manufacturing capabilities of DRB-HICOM is CTRM, a specialist composites products manufacturer, which counts Airbus, Boeing, and Learjet as their aviation customers. The plant in Melaka houses 12 autoclaves, the largest number of autoclave facilities in ASEAN.

### **Perodua**

Perusahaan Otomobil Kedua Sendirian Berhad. (Second Automobile Enterprise Private Limited), usually abbreviated as 'Perodua'. It was established in 1993 and launched its first 5-door hatchback, the Perodua Kancil, in August 1994. 'M2' refers to the codename used when the project to establish Perodua was still top secret. Initially, Perodua mainly produced minicars and superminis.

Perodua does not design or engineer its main components, such as engines and transmissions, in-house. The cars have historically used Daihatsu component designs. Daihatsu held a 20% stake in Perodua at the company's launch, increasing this to 25% in 2001 and then to 35%. In 2004, Perodua

started assembling the Toyota Avanza at its Rawang plant for sale in Malaysia. Perodua's shareholders currently include the UMW Corporation (38%), Daihatsu Motor Co. (20%), Daihatsu (Malaysia) (5%), MBM Resources (20%), PNB Equity Resource Corporation (10%), Mitsui & Co. (4.2%) and Mitsui & Co. (Asia Pacific) (2.8%).

### **An Offer You Cannot Refuse**

Syed Zainal is doing a great job in HICOM and many previous employments. Everyone has been impressed with his work, including Perodua.

Syed Zainal remembered:

*“Falling in love with my family was the best thing ever. However, it made the career decision more complex. I was assigned to Pekan, Pahang, while Jan and two of my sons were in Kuala Lumpur. I need to travel every week. We become weekend husband and wife for the second time. I am thinking about my second child, Hakim. This is not prolonged. Moreover, I believe the sustenance for my second son is determined. At that time, Perodua offered me the CEO position in Kuala Lumpur. I knew Perodua had the same culture resulting from collaboration with ISUZU, Daihatsu, and HICOM, so it is easier to adapt to a new environment.”*

Syed Zainal was determined to get his life back under control. Having become deeply involved in the details of the business, he initially found it hard to let go. Syed Zainal and Jan had discussed settling the issue raised.

### **Epilogue**

Syed Zainal cannot immediately say yes to a new job promotion or stay for an existing one. He believed he could accept the new job role based on an excellent track from a previous position in a different organisation. However, Syed Zainal also relied on the fact that the new job offer comes with significant responsibilities as CEO of Perodua. Furthermore, the decision is crucial to ensure no dire consequences for his family again. Syed Zainal reflects on his demanding career and how he struggled with work-life balance, particularly as he prioritized work over being a friend to his children. He realized the importance of being present for his family and making time for them.