

# 9work

BY CYNTHIA HANSON

Is your career destined to sputter if you don't have a mentor? Is a pink slip in your future if your desk is a mess? Most female executive freak-out is due to a slew of outdated rules that just won't die. We got career experts, plus some ultrasuccessful women, to tell us which conventions to break, so you can break out of the pack.

## myth 1

### You need a mentor

Sure, a career-guiding guardian angel doesn't hurt, but you can make it without one. "I've always asked advice from a variety of superiors, but I've never had any one mentor," says Milissa Tadeo, the first female senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. A web of multiple alliances guarantees greater exposure, points out Arlis McLean, vice president of Human Resources at Fel-Pro Inc., a Skokie, Illinois, manufacturer of automotive sealing products. "You're much more likely to be on the 'short list'—invited to important meetings, considered for promotions—if you know plenty of people who can put your name on it."

## myth 2

### Don't max out your expense account

Go ahead. Do it. Everyone else does. Especially men, who spend freely and without apology, says Adele Scheele, Ph.D., author of *Career Strategies for the Working Woman* (Simon & Schuster, 1994). "Most women figure they're 'good girls' if they don't spend 'Daddy's money,'" Scheele explains. But you need to schmooze clients. "Taking clients to the theater or getting them box seats for a ball game tells them you can take care of them." Penny-pinching can also backfire with the boss. "If you don't use your first-class perks, management wonders, 'Why don't you see yourself as an important person?'" notes Pat Heim, Ph.D., management consultant and author of *Hardball for Women* (Plume, 1992). "If you don't use your expense account, they'll think you're not worth it."

## myth 3

### You must be a team player

Of course, you shouldn't stab teammates in the back, but don't become a "yes woman" either. "Be polite, but if you don't have productive conflict, what's the point of getting the team together?" says Lynda McDermott, an organizational psychologist and author of the business management book *Caught in the Middle* (Prentice Hall, 1994). Speak your mind. Hold your ground. "Being a team player doesn't mean rolling over and playing dead," agrees Gail Evans, senior vice president at CNN. "I don't change my opinion to make the team happy," she says. And take credit for your ideas. In performance reviews, point out that you saved the company \$5 million or that you designed an award-winning employee-orientation program. Remember: Teams don't get promotions. Employees do.

## myth 4

### Never let them see you sweat

From the outside, you look cool and in control. Inside, however, you're panicked by that looming deadline. Better to drop the *machismo* facade and ask for help. "There's a point where the likelihood of making mistakes increases because you're so overworked," says Peggy Wilhide, who was press secretary for Sen. Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) during his 1994 reelection bid against the controversial, right-wing Oliver North. "It turned into such a big race that we needed more people to handle all the media interest." After Wilhide discussed her heavy workload with Robb's campaign manager, she was allowed to hire two more employees. Now press secretary to Vice President Al Gore, Wilhide concludes, "Sometimes, bosses don't realize all you have to do. Calling it to their attention shows good judgment."

# myths

# trashed!

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## ▶ myth 5

**Don't kiss up to the boss**

Your boss doles out the raises, promotions, and plum assignments. So you *should* suck up, but sincerely. Bosses like to be around people who make them feel good. "If your boss has a great idea, tell her so," says Phyllis Collins, senior designer buyer for Marshall Field's in Chicago. "If she helps you with something, thank her." You'll be seen as rooting for her, which every boss—with her own self-doubts and worries—needs. But don't just suck up to those above you. "You must offer recognition up and down the ladder to appear genuine," says management consultant Debra Benton, author of *Lions Don't Need to Roar* (Warner Books, 1992). "So compliment colleagues, support staff, and your boss."

## ▶ myth 8

**Always take the promotion**

In the old days, it was "up or out"—to decline a promotion was to harpoon your career. "That adage is garbage today," says Carole Hyatt, New York career specialist and author of *Lifetime Employability* (Master Media, 1993). "What if the new job is inconsistent with your long-term goals, or isn't a good fit? You'll be miserable." Years ago, Hyatt says, she found that being CEO of a market-research firm carried too many administrative duties. "I could manage people, but it wasn't my passion," she says. "I couldn't wait to sell the company, so I could go back to doing projects myself."

## ▶ myth 7

**Your desk should be spotless**

All messiness is not created equal. "Bad" messy is coffee cups, last month's newspapers, and old memos. "Good" messy is stacks of important papers, projects, and other pertinent materials. "If you can find things quickly and efficiently," says Cheryl Rich Heisler, a Chicago-based career counselor, "you're OK." One woman's clutter is another woman's system. "I've got five to ten projects going on simultaneously, and I need them visible and available," says Denise Fedewa, vice president and associate research director at Chicago's Leo Burnett Company, one of the nation's largest advertising agencies. Burnett's bigwigs don't mind. "My supervisor once wrote on a performance appraisal: 'I have no idea how Denise does it, given that office, but she is one of our most organized employees,'" Fedewa remembers.

## ▶ myth 9

**Burn the midnight oil**

Everything depends on the quality of your overtime. "If you put in a yeoman's effort to finish a project, you look like a hero," says Heisler. "However, if you stay late all the time to clean up paperwork, you'll be perceived as inefficient—and as someone who doesn't have a life outside work. It's better to take home secondary tasks, such as filling out your expense reports. Do them while you watch TV." That said, we don't advise shutting off the computer precisely at 5 P.M. Log enough face time so your boss knows you're committed to your job—especially if she keeps long hours herself. □

## ▶ myth 6

**Cast a wide job-search net**

If you're looking for work, don't do a mass mailing of your résumé. The most successful candidates target a select number of companies and tailor their cover letters and résumés accordingly. Most employers believe that a lackadaisical cover letter reeks of laziness. "It's so obvious when there's no evidence of research or genuine interest," says Patti Upton, chief executive officer and creator of Aromatique, Inc., the decorative home-fragrance company in Heber Springs, Arkansas. "They address the letters to 'To Whom It May Concern.'" Then they don't say why they'd be a good fit for us. I pitch that sort of letter—and the résumé—immediately."