

Family Footsteps

By

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Like it or hate it, your parents probably played a big role in your career choice, writes Anne Fawcett.

You could say Angela Vithoukas has the hospitality business in her blood.

The director of cafe and catering chain VIVO Group, Vithoukas's Greek parents were milk bar owners and she and her brother, Con, grew up in and around the business.

"My mother went into labour with me while serving a customer," she says.

"[Con and I] have a sense of [the industry] that only comes from growing up in that environment."

Despite urging from their parents to attend university and study law or medicine, the Vithoukas children dropped out of high school to work in hospitality before developing their own related business.

"We're really connected to our work," Vithoukas says. "There are aspects of it I don't like and aspects that Con would rather cut his heart out than do but we complement each other."

While we may like to think we forge our own career paths, the truth is many of us are

influenced by our families and, in particular, our parents.

If our parents are professionals, chances are we'll end up working in a professional field. If they are labourers we're extremely likely to follow suit. Many of us even work in the same job as our parents.

The figures are compelling. A landmark Swedish study in the 1990s looked at how likely people were to follow their fathers into a career. Across nine job categories the results were the same: people were up to three times more likely to enter a field if their father was in it. Agriculture, sales and professional work showed the clearest trends.

A senior researcher at the University of Sydney's Workplace Research Centre, Michael Rafferty, says occupations such as law, medicine, mining, farming, policing and firefighting are known for their family ties.

"The research suggests several reasons for intergenerational occupational following, including class background and increased exposure to the occupations of family members," says Rafferty. Biogenetic factors such as your parent's physical size and capability - and whether you inherit these - may also play a strong role.

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen says our parents are, by default, our earliest career role models. "There are critical stages of development when we grow up during which we are very impressionable," he says. "This is also the time that we develop our knowledge of what people do for employment - so the experiences of our parents and significant care-givers have a high impact. We generally wish to please and delight our parents, so we unconsciously take on the values, preferences, motivations and disinclinations of our parents."

Angela Vithoulkas says she and her brother love their catering careers. Their mother, who is now 70, continues to work in one of their stores.

"The good thing is that I can get together with my parents on the weekend and they know exactly what I am talking about," Vithoukias says. "The technology is different and we have to concentrate on PR and marketing, which they didn't have to do 20 years ago, but I'm never telling them something they have not experienced before. Their advice is always spot on."

Law lecturer Sophie York agrees family was a significant factor in her career choice. York, 41, is one of 12 children born to a commodore in the Royal Australian Navy and his artist wife. Six of her siblings joined the armed forces. York became a legal officer for the Navy Reserve. Her husband and childhood sweetheart is a naval doctor. "The dinner table conversation as we grew up undoubtedly had an impact," she says. "We discussed which warships were being repaired in the dry dock and which model fighter jets Australia was buying." York says that although her father never sought to recruit his offspring, he presented a compelling role model.

"He is a hard-working, deep-thinking, highly principled man," she says. "His actions undoubtedly would have made me think at some subliminal level that if dad thinks the security of the nation is a worthwhile cause, it must be."

York senior imparted a sense of excitement and job satisfaction.

"He never complained about life in the navy," says his daughter. "We got a sense that it was all very exciting."

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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