RECALL Meryl Streep’s role as the monstrous fashion magazine editor in The Devil Wears Prada. Or the impatient workaholic lawyer played by Michelle Pfeiffer in I Am Sam.

Ambition in women is often depicted startlingly in films, with ruthless female bosses terrorising subordinates, or corporate overachievers seeking more success at all costs.

Step into the real world, however, and you'll find that behind most successful women is usually a healthy combination of the hunger to succeed, work-life balance and a host of helpful company policies.

For Annie Yap, the desire for success has been there from the beginning.

“I've always been competitive, always wanting to challenge myself,” said Annie, who started out as a recruitment consultant at The GMP Group in 1994 and is now its chief executive.

She was hungry to try new things, meet higher sales targets and take on greater job responsibilities.

But when she took over the running of GMP in 2001, her outlook shifted.

From a “more individualistic” employee, she became a leader who made decisions on behalf of the company, which now has offices in Singapore, Malaysia, China and Thailand.

“As you grow, you tend to be more considerate when making decisions. These days, I tend to draw more satisfaction from coaching my team members and seeing them grow in their careers,” said Annie, 35, and a mother of two boys aged five and three.

And scaling the corporate ladder doesn't have to come at the expense of having a social and personal life. The female bosses who spoke to are all firm believers in spending quality time with their family and friends, and encourage their employees to do likewise.

“I make it a point never to bring work home. I've not done so my entire career,” said Wee Hee Ling, managing director of travel agency CTC Holidays, which has 130 staff.

And when she or her colleagues are on leave, “we make it a point not to disturb or contact them, unless it's an emergency”. But what happens when personal and professional commitments collide?

When Hee Ling's mother had breast cancer a few years ago, she had to take time off to care for her and accompany her when she went for medical check-ups. When she could not be in the office, her colleagues stepped in to help out at work.

“It was a trying period ... my colleagues were instrumental in helping me get through it,” said Hee Ling, 43.

Besides informal policies and helpful colleagues, various human resource schemes at the workplace can motivate employees by meeting their needs for flexibility and a work-life balance.

Policies like generous leave schemes and permission to work from home are hallmarks of a pro-family workplace. At the Singapore Management University, which won the Family Friendly Employer Award in 2004 for having innovative pro-family practices, flexibility is key.

For example, employees can opt to come to work earlier or later than official hours, as long as they clock the required number of hours. They can also compress the usual five-day work week by putting in more hours per day.

Staff are motivat-ed through activities like department lunches to celebrate milestones, public commen-tation for individual or team achievements and long service awards for staff who have served more than five years.

“SMU recognises that the key to having motivated and happy employees is to help them achieve a good balance between work and healthy family life,” said Ong Tiong Eng, SMU's director of human resources.

Ultimately, success at work may boil down to the individual's definition of success. After all, personal goals change with time, and with the different roles taken on at the workplace.

“When I started out as an employee reporting to my bosses, it was more of meeting deadlines and producing the results required. Now I see the need to look further, on a macro level,” said CTC’s Hee Ling. “Success, to me, is being able to do the things I like, without compromising on ethics and moral values.”