

Work & Money

AMERICAN VOICES



PAMELA ABALU

▪ Chief architect and global head of design and construction at MetLife
▪ Based in New York City

girls boarding school in Nigeria where, if you got good grades, you were put in the science classes. If you had average grades, they put you in the business or art classes. I had really good grades, but I liked art, so when I was 11 and they wanted me in the science classes, I said, "No, I want to take art." I started going to both. Then I took a technical-drawing class, and I fell in love with it.

How did your determination develop as you got older?

My first summer as a freshman at Iowa State, I said, "I'm going to intern in New York." Everyone said, "No one hires a freshman as an intern in New York." So I went to the alumni office and got a list of all the architects who had graduated from my school, then bought nice paper and sent each one a letter and résumé. One of them hired me, and I went to New York to work at the firm Perkins Eastman as an intern the summer after my freshman year.

You went all over the world as a kid, right?

My dad worked with the United Nations on agricultural economics. We lived in Ethiopia, London, Geneva, and most of the West African countries, like Ghana and Sierra Leone. I was immersed in these different people and cultures.

Did that help shape your career?

Since I was 11, I knew I was going to build things. I went to an all-

Some of us take a winding path to a career we love, and some meet that spark early. *Pamela Abalu*, chief architect and global head of design and construction at MetLife, knew as a kid she'd grow up and build things. Now, at 39, she's breaking down walls, implementing the design of more than 15 million square feet of office space all over the world. Her secret? Taking responsibility, asking for what she wants—and occasionally wearing a ball gown to work.

Written by Jane Porter

RELATING

You got your architecture license in 2005.

Yes, it was very important to me. There are fewer than 400 African American women who are licensed architects in the U.S.

You seem very directed. Any early missteps you learned from?

I was doing a project in my early 20s, and I went to my manager and said, "This person didn't do this, and that person didn't do that, so I couldn't get my part done." He looked at me and said, "Pamela, you didn't try hard enough." That resonated. It reminded me I don't have to wait for someone else to do what needs to be done. I can facilitate. I can always do better.

What were your jobs like before MetLife?

I wanted to experience different forms of architecture. I did historical restoration. I worked on rebuilding efforts at the World Trade Center after 9/11. I did retail work, designing stores like Coach and Williams Sonoma. I started at MetLife when I was 33, and for a while, I was traveling 70 percent of the time.

"The thing that has leapfrogged my career has really been knowing myself and being myself."

That's a lot. How do you find balance?

I don't travel as much as I used to. And over the past two years, I've started meditating every morning. It really allows me to experience the day.

What advice do you give about moving forward in a career?

It's very important at the end of the day to be very clear about your purpose. The thing that has leapfrogged my career has really been knowing myself and being myself.

Give us an example.

I'm professional, but I'm also fun. For example, I love whimsical fashion. I have this thing at work with my team called the Sunday's Best Award. You know how you might buy an outfit you love, but there's nowhere to wear it, so you just

leave it in your closet? My team and I will sometimes get decked out in those clothes. You might come to MetLife one day and see us all in ball gowns.

How have you changed as a leader?

One thing I learned was to stop being a perfectionist. Instead, I had to learn to identify what people were good at. It's about saying, "I don't know what I don't know. What's your thing?"

What's a lesson you learned the hard way?

After I lost my dad, over a year ago, I learned that you have to make time for what's important. It's too easy to get focused on one thing and forget the rest.

What's life at home like?

Back in 2008, I found a dilapidated brownstone that was superficially horrible but that I love. I spent two years making it into my dream house. It's a place I'm excited to go home to every night.

Parting words?

Fear is imagination used for the wrong purpose. There are infinite possibilities from just taking one little step.



ASK BUCKY

TIME INC.'S* ALL-KNOWING, STRAIGHT-SHOOTING VICE PRESIDENT OF STAFFING, BUCKY KEADY, TACKLES YOUR WORKPLACE CONUNDRUMS.

Should I apply for a job even if I don't have the requisite years of experience?

That depends. Read the job description carefully and reflect on your depth of experience. It might help to draft a cover letter. Be sure it directly addresses the skill set in the job description: "I have in-depth experience in x, y, and z." Mention clients you worked with or projects in which you were a senior participant. Then step back, read the letter, and see if your experience is hefty enough and on point. Some research has shown that women tend to be much more hesitant than men to aim high for a job. So err on the side of going for it. I personally don't like it when a job description has a number of years' experience attached, but I don't think it should hold you back from applying. Take advantage of it as a guideline so you don't waste your time or anyone else's.

GOT A QUESTION FOR BUCKY? SEND IT TO ASKBUCKY@REALSIMPLE.COM.
*TIME INC. IS THE PARENT COMPANY OF REAL SIMPLE.