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Flexible Work That Works for Moms

by Erin Mantz

Part II in a series about moms and work.

Imagine a workweek where you are in the office for a few days tackling interesting work, producing results and building your career. Other days, you're spending a sunny fall day at the park, pushing your son on a swing instead of struggling through a grueling commute. If this scenario sounds appealing, it's no surprise. Recent surveys of moms show that part-time work is often ideal for those who can financially afford it. Millions of mothers across the country dream of balancing work and family but have trouble navigating the boundaries between staying at home and working full-time.

For moms who can and want to work part-time, jobs that are strategic, stimulating and career-building can be hard to come by. What options exist besides working full-time or leaving the workforce altogether to stay home with the kids? A lot, according to moms who are making flexible work arrangements work.

Part-time positions, job shares, compressed workweeks, telecommuting, direct selling and mom-owned businesses are on the rise. More moms are getting bolder and smarter about asking employers for what they want. And some area employers are responding. Here's a look at some flex-work options and inspiring tips from moms and experts who are paving the way.

Telecommuting Days and Flexibility

Tacy Paul Roby of Potomac is optimizing her flexibility at Bethesda-based Calvert Group, where she's worked as a wholesale marketing manager for four years. She telecommutes one day a week to spend more time with her 2 1/2-year-old daughter and always leaves to take her to the doctor when she's sick. "I came to Calvert Group because I wanted a family friendly environment," says Roby. "Calvert really demonstrated their flexibility the year my mother passed away and my daughter was born. I'd used up all my time off on maternity leave, but I was able to work extended hours for several weeks in order to get another week off to go to Texas to get my mom's affairs in order." Roby's story, along with hundreds of other employees taking advantage of flex-work options, shows why Calvert is awarded for being a great place to work from organizations such as *Working Mother Magazine* and the Alliance for Workplace Excellence. Learn more at www.calvertgroup.com.

Job Shares, The Best of Both Worlds

A job share is a unique work arrangement that just may be the best-kept secret to a mom's personal and professional success. And it's happening at more companies than you think. When Gretchen Hendricks of McLean celebrated her daughter's first birthday, she realized it was time to take some new steps herself. Once a director-level professional in higher education, but most recently a stay-at-home mom, she tried to figure out where she fit into the current job market. She couldn't go back to her old field part-time, and the part-time positions she did find were low-paying or unchallenging. Through online research, she discovered job shares - a scenario where two

people split the same full-time job - and it seemed perfect. She came across ShareGoals, a New York career planning and human resource consulting group for people interested in alternative employment like job shares (www.sharegoals.com). But before she knew it, a friend of a friend was looking to fill half an existing job share due to a partner's maternity leave, and Gretchen got the gig. The position, a senior-level communications role at a top consulting firm, offered everything she thought she'd have to give up when she decided to go back to work: strategic thinking, challenging projects, opportunities for skill-building and a feeling of being a real - and respected - part of an organization.

Today, she is optimistic about job shares becoming more prevalent and considers them a great option "for women who want to go back out and establish a career." She currently works part-time as an adjunct professor of psychology - once again proving that people can find flexibility when the field, timing and opportunities are right. "Why can't moms have the happy medium?" she insists. We deserve it.

Mompreneurs, Tapping Talents to Be Your Own Boss

Ann Madden of Capitol Hill holds a degree in art history and a master's in digital art, but she really put her creativity to work when she became a mom. Knowing she did not want someone else to raise her kids, she launched her own business painting furniture and murals with mom Jenn Mercado. Besides running Bebe and Bacups (www.bebeandbacups.com), she does web design services (www.dinwiddiedesignonline.com). And she just added baby girl #2 to the mix!

The Washington, D.C., Enterprising Moms group, a Yahoo-based online community where entrepreneurial, business owners and self-employed moms connect for support, inspiration and ideas, boasts more than 140 members in everything from consulting and photography to financial planning and interior design. That's where I met Stephanie Greenwald of Greenwald Design (www.greenwaldesign.com). This Arlington mom of one counts nonprofits and corporations as her top clientele but still has time with her 3-year-old son. The arrangement can be challenging at times; she's put her son in day care to focus as her business grows. It's easy to lose connections when working from home, and she doesn't quite fit in with moms who work full-time or stay at home, but Greenwald wouldn't have it any other way. She seeks out like-minded women in groups like Enterprising Moms, stays in touch with former colleagues and goes to school meetings and moms clubs. "The biggest challenge is coming to terms with not being the best mom or best worker I can be," she says. Even when working on their own terms, many moms I spoke with found devoting optimal time to everything is hard to do.

Part-Time Positions, Hard to Come By, But Hard Work Helps

Software consultant Angela Child of Bethesda works part-time as a contractor at a government agency. Six years ago, she got the job when a former colleague was looking for someone part-time. (Further proof that staying in touch with old coworkers can pay off.) She started working three days a week but reduced it to two once her third child was born. For Angela, working part-time is ideal. "It keeps me in the workforce. I like the people I work with; I earn a good income, and it gets me out of the house! Working part-time is hard. You don't get all the high-profile assignments you would if you worked full-time, but it's a good medium." It's still about balancing, but her employer's flexibility is key. She can even switch work days to go on a long weekend or attend a school event. Last summer, knowing she'd have no child care in August, she was able to work twice as much in July and take August off!

Last spring, attorney Kate Manning of Capitol Hill was working her dream job full-time, but got ready to quit. She wanted more time with her one-year-old daughter. A troublesome child care situation, a bad commute and her baby's sleep schedule of 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., left Kate wanting more mom time. Marching in to her boss's office to quit, she was shocked when he suggested she work part-time, split between office and home. "I never thought to ask for part-time," she says, "but I am making the mental transition now." Certain challenges arise, like the baby crying while she is on a conference call, but she's home to spend time with her and even make family dinners a reality.

Direct Selling, From Product Fan to Profitable Party Host

If you've ever heard of Pampered Chef kitchen gadgets, Mary Kay cosmetics or Arbonne beauty products, you've heard of direct selling, but those are just three popular brands in a line of hundreds being sold in home parties. Direct selling is the sale of a consumer product or service, person-to-person, away from a retail store. 2005 sales, the most recent data available from the Direct Selling Association, topped 30 billion dollars, and women make up more than 80 percent of direct sellers in this booming business. Many moms do this work part-time, whenever they choose, because direct selling offers ultimate flexibility.

Take Melissa Linsky of Waldorf, a direct seller (a.k.a. "consultant") for Usborne Books at Home (www.ubah.com). With two boys ages 2 and 6 and a husband who travels, Melissa wanted to work but knew she didn't want to have an office job or to put her kids in even part-time day care. Visiting a work-at-home mom website, she found Usborne Books and recalled she had a few in her playroom. She became a direct seller and found a great fit with her background, interests and life. "I'd been a preschool and kindergarten teacher, so I'd worked in education," Linsky explains. "And I don't go anywhere without something to read. Direct selling is about as flexible as you can get. This job is a perfect fit for me!" She coordinates with her husband so she can schedule her home parties or shows when he is in town, further saving on child care costs. In a given month, she can work as much or as little as she'd like. She also works two mornings a week teaching a Mom's Day Out program at a local church - with her 2-year-old son in the class next door.

Resources for Finding or Creating Flexible Work

None of these success stories surprises Lori Long, Ph.D., author of *The Parent's Guide To Family-Friendly Work* (Career Press 2007). She believes it is possible for parents to find the balance between employment and enjoyment, and her book details just how they can understand their options, conduct their searches and make family friendly jobs work. "If you're hoping to create a flexible arrangement at your current company, think about it from your company's perspective. Position it as a good business decision, whether it's the company getting two for one through a job share or extended customer service hours by you shifting your hours earlier," she advises. Her book notes resources and tips for finding and approaching flexible work.

Christine Fruehwirth, founder and president of FlexCareers Consulting in Potomac, helps moms realize their true passions in life and make adjustments at home so they can be successful in a flexible career (www.flexcareersconsulting.com). She does individual coaching for women who are transitioning back into the workforce or looking for more work/family balance in their existing careers. "Moms need to spend time reflecting on their lives, set goals for themselves and not solely focus on their children's lives," she says. Admittedly, this is hard to do when moms are overloaded with day-to-day demands. When stay-at-home moms want to return to the workforce, Fruehwirth helps them regain confidence in their skills, emphasize their abilities and deal with the gaps in their resumes (even developing a confident "story" to tell when networking and interviewing). She is optimistic when it comes to finding, or creating, these flex work opportunities, but says, "You've got to know where you're going to get there."

Saima Siddiqui of Bethesda came to Fruehwirth for career coaching and ended up in a dream job. Siddiqui had been home with her two kids for six years and once worked full-time in real estate finance. When her son started kindergarten, she was ready to work, but she wanted something flexible, challenging, senior-level, meaningful and innovative. Her husband travels, and she still has to show up at her kids' bus stop. "I asked myself if I was completely crazy with all these criteria, but Christine gave me hope," Siddiqui recalls. She became regional vice president of MomCorps, a professional staffing firm that enables moms to find jobs that are in their respective fields and also offer some flexibility around family priorities. MomCorps has placed an astounding 72 percent of their "talent" (moms) in jobs. For Saima, working from home for this virtual company makes it easier to spend time with her kids. Many moms come to her because they want to work from home, too, or find a job with "school day" hours of 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Other times, she fills half of a job share. She insists these opportunities are out there.

Sometimes, success can happen when women talk with their current employers. "In an effort to blaze the trail, moms also need to broach the topic of flexibility in their current work environment. Good managers who respect you and are open will listen," Siddiqui says. On the flip side, she is helping companies find and staff incredible talent, too. "All this education, all this experience, it's just sitting there," she says of moms waiting in the wings to work.

Erin Mantz is *Washington Parent's* editor at large. She lives in Potomac with her husband and two sons. See her blog at <http://blog.erinmantz.com>.

Five Tips for Finding Flexible Work

Life and career coach Christine Fruehwirth of Potomac offers these tips especially for moms:

- Ask yourself what you want to do. Return to an old company you loved? Enter a field you've always been interested in?

- Get organized. This can mean everything from setting goals to revising your resume.
- Bring your old networks to life - and find new ones. Contact former bosses and colleagues, revisit memberships in professional associations, talk with family, neighbors, friends and other moms. Join or visit online working moms communities, like DC Urban Moms, DC Urban Working Moms or Enterprising Moms, where you'll find support, ideas and inspiration.
- Consider working with a life or career coach to define priorities and create a roadmap, and/or a mom-friendly staffing firm to strengthen your job search.
- Make some life changes to ensure your flexible work arrangement works.

For more information about Fruehwirth's flex career services and workshops, visit www.flexcareersconsulting.com.

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