CONSTRUCTING FAMILY-FRIENDLY CAREERS

A new study explores ways women can have more time for family while maintaining a passion for their career.

The dramatic increase of women entering the working field during the past 30 years has placed women in a position where they are often expected to choose between a full-time career and staying at home. However, a growing number of women are experiencing the best of both worlds as they explore the uncharted territory of family-friendly careers.

These women are the creative pioneers, challenging the idea that an individual must work 40 hours a week during regular business hours to make a legitimate contribution.

Unfortunately, while the number of such women may be growing, the number remains small. Researchers Aaron P. Jackson, Ph.D., assistant professor of counseling psychology at Brigham Young University, and Janet S. Scharman, Ph.D., vice president of student life BYU, recognized the on-going battle of the either/or option and set out to discover how women can successfully develop a family-friendly career.

“We’re both involved in counseling, and we began noticing how so many of our women students saw their choices as dichotomous. They felt they could either have a career, or they could have a home and family,” Scharman said. “But we think there are a lot more choices. We want them to be aware there’s a wide range of possibilities.”

According to the research, the possibilities are not limited to specific career tracks; but, rather, family-friendly careers are created in many fields as options are investigated and unusual vocational tracks are considered. Many women are finding high levels of satisfaction in all areas of their life by implementing flexible hours, flexible location, and often cutting back to less than 30 hours a week. They creatively construct their careers to maximize time with their families. Now, they plan their work around their family instead of their family life around their work.

“These women have found great satisfaction in the fact that they have achieved a level of success professionally while maintaining their priority of being a mom first,” Jackson said. “However, most of the women enjoying a successful balance between their work and their career had to take considerable risks as they paved the way. They were often the first in their company to identify and pursue the possibility of an alternative work schedule and other creative options. Many also had to trade some of the perks of their job, but, interestingly, did not consider it a sacrifice.”

While each woman who participated in the study had to make her own sacrifices and negotiate her own working arrangements, the following themes emerged for most of them: partner/family decision making, creative pioneering, work satisfaction, pleasant stress, ambiguous preparation, peaceful trade-offs, surprise feelings, and partner career flexibility.

Partner/Family Decision Making

Participants did not decide the “if, how, and when” of their flexible career alone. Most shared the decision making with their spouse as they reviewed goals and responsibilities. Compromises had to be made on both ends. Children also played an integral role in the decision-making. Inasmuch as children contribute to a successful transition, their opinions were often requested and considered. Results also showed a pattern of ongoing reevaluation of the situation.

“Most decision making was done with the spouse,” Jackson said. “Some of the women also expressed a reliance on the entire family. They would request feedback from their spouse and children on how the situation was working.”

Creative Pioneering

Often times without precedent or an existing structure to support a flexible career, research participants had to take considerable risks to develop, negotiate, and implement their plan. They were able to create or identify the possibility of an alternative work schedule. Some took a smaller work or client load, worked more from home to accommodate children’s schedules, contracted for 30 or less hours a week, worked weekends, or worked nontraditional hours of the day.

Each working arrangement was as different as the lives and family situations of each woman. No one formula or schedule works for all or it would once again cease to be considered a flexible career.

One woman shared the schedule that worked for her, “My situation is I’m home every day until 4 p.m. Then I go to work from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. I come home and have dinner and then get the homework and the practicing and all that kind of stuff done. I go back about 8:30 p.m.”

Work Satisfaction

Participants emphatically reported that they enjoyed their work. They reported feeling their work was meaningful and personally very satisfying.

“I love my life right now,” said one woman. “It’s a good amount of work. I feel that I’m stimulated and excited by my work, but then when I go back to being with my daughter, I feel fresh and excited to be with her again.”

Pleasant Stress

Although a contradiction of terms, pleasant stress was a common theme found throughout the research. Juggling a career and family can often wear a woman thin as she is pulled from each end. While women in flexible careers recognized the stresses, they did not feel
overwhelmed, but were rather satisfied with their current situation. The flexibility gave them the control they needed to keep the demands of work and family life in balance. “I’ve been happy with being able to juggle both work and my son and my husband,” one woman said. “Sometimes, I think I’d like to have more time, but I think I have a good balance.”

**Ambiguous Preparation**

While participants all had a general plan for their family and career, they also had to accept a level of uncertainty as their situations evolved. Not knowing how their current flexible career would accommodate family life from year to year demanded that the participants live with ambiguity.

“What makes me happy now, I might not be satisfied with next year. I don’t know. But I realize that, hey, maybe that’s true, and I’ll reassess at that point. I’ll just continue to do this for as long as it makes me and my family happy, as long as it works for us,” reported one woman.

**Peaceful Trade-Offs and Surprise Feelings**

Participants acknowledged that they had made some important trade-offs in the process. Some passed up promotions, turned down pay increases, or gave up personal outside interests and hobbies. However, they did not feel they had made sacrifices or paid a price. Jackson said this semantic difference seems to reflect the level of personal satisfaction and peace the participants reported.

“I feel like I’ve lost the prestige that I used to have. I feel like I’ve lost power. I think everything I’ve lost has been worth it,” said one woman.

A passion for both work and family drove the women who participated in the study to pursue a flexible career. However, many reported that they did not know just how strong their feelings were until their plan was implemented.

**Partner Career Flexibility**

Many of the women who participated in the research found that a successful flexible career required small vocational adjustments from their partner as well. While some women enjoyed their partner’s support and flexibility from the beginning, others reported that it was something that had to evolve.

One woman shared how her husband made adjustments to accommodate her evolving career, “We’ve had to make a couple of changes in our family. My husband has been very good about it. He changed his schedule around a little bit. He goes into work earlier. He’s at his desk ready to work before 7 a.m. but he’s home by 4 p.m. So that gives us a little bit of family time.”

Although the work experiences for the participants were quite different, these eight common themes emerged from the interviews. “Given the high levels of satisfaction reported by the participants, creating a family-friendly career may be a viable option for many parents,” Scharman said.

Jackson and Scharman hope career counselors will use these findings to help women construct their careers in a manner that will allow for the desired family time while maintaining their contributions to their profession. — Tonya Fischio

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**BYU’S SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE TO RECEIVE A NEW HOME**

Demolition is in full swing on Brigham Young University’s Smith Family Living Center, which will be replaced by a five-level Joseph F. Smith Building. With a design that will allow natural light to enter most of the facility, the building will become a campus centerpiece and will accommodate BYU’s School of Family Life, as well as other departments from the Colleges of Family, Home and Social Science and Humanities. Construction is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2004.

Paid for through private donations, the building will feature 27 classrooms, 401 faculty and administrative offices, a large auditorium, a theater and a three-level, 265-stall underground parking lot. (The building contains more than double the square footage of the existing building on a smaller footprint.)

The building is intended to function as a work of art that sends a visual message, says Van C. Gessel, dean of the College of Humanities. “The architectural concept emphasizes light as the source of any kind of knowledge and learning. Education at BYU is very much about the light that comes from the spirit.”

To bring natural light into as many offices and public areas as possible, the architectural firm of FFKR designed the building around a central courtyard. A massive glass portico will grace the main entrance on the east, and generous use of glass throughout will permit light to enter much of the facility, including some of the basement.

“Going into this new building will allow us to house together scholars researching the family,” says David B. Magleby, dean of the College of Family, Home and Social Sciences. “Another great advantage of having this new building in the center of campus is that it will be accessible to literally thousands of BYU undergraduates who are prospective parents. Here they will gain remarkable insights into the family as the world’s basic unit of society.”

— Tonya Fischio