

Chapter 3

Is There An Ideal Work Status?

Unfortunately, there is no Holy Grail work status for all mothers. Given that each mother identifies situations relevant to her work status and then applies her personal values, it is no wonder there is no “agreement” about any one work status being “the answer” for all mothers. Each mother has her own circumstances and values, so no work status would or could be right for all. However, there is good news. Mothers, who at any time experienced full-time, part-time employment, or being at-home full time, enumerated very satisfying aspects in each of the work status options. Of course, they also identified frustrating parts of each work status option.

Full-time employment

Taking the responses of all the mothers in the study, 57 percent of those who were, at any time, employed full time wrote that there just was not enough time to respond to the demands of the job, their children, household, and their own needs. All these demands created a lot of stress, which they found very frustrating:

Not enough time to balance work and family. I feel like I am not totally organized—always trying to catch up on things.

The stress of having to make it home through terrible traffic in time to relieve the daycare/afterschool care provider.

Trying to fulfill my boss’s expectations and my own desires to get ahead, with the demands for my time and attention from my children and husband.

The responses above clearly describe the challenges of being pulled in one direction to be the best employee and in another direction to be the best mother and wife you can be.

Just dealing with the objective factors of time, place, and the accompanying responsibilities can be very taxing.

Trying to be excellent in two roles can and does lead to more subjective issues that were also identified as frustrating, but this time by 35 percent of the mothers. These factors include exhaustion, stress, and no time to think about, never mind care for, yourself.

A mother who was employed full time and traveled frequently, who retired to be an at-home mother when her children were in high school stated:

I always felt rushed, stressed and exhausted because there were many demands from work and at the home front. Had a hard time relaxing and sleeping through the night. Also, wished I didn't have to miss some of my children's special activities.

Long hours, stress, inability to give my family all that was needed, no down time for myself, constant demands on my time and energy, feeling burned out.

An interesting observation from a full-time employed mother suggests the self-imposed "mommy track" she chose to reduce her stress. This evidently came with the small price of guilt:

The main reward for working hard in the government is that you receive more work and responsibility, which ultimately creates more role strain for a mother. The alternative, not working very hard, actually worked better for mothers, it seemed to me, but I always felt guilty not working hard since I was working for the taxpayers (federal employee).

Given these quotes of frustration and stress, it is no wonder that there are books written to help mothers handle the logistics of two roles/two jobs.

Juggling: The Unexpected Advantage of Balancing Career and Home for Women and Their Families, (Crosby, 1991) was one of the first books published advising employed mothers how to handle both roles with a sense of humor. "The unexpected advantage" part

espouses that the children and husbands of employed mothers were happier. I am not going to discuss that in detail. But, let me just say it is the kind of comment that is more self-serving than fact.

Another book, *Mothers on the Fast Track: How a Generation Can Balance Family and Careers*, (Mason and Mason Ekman, 2007), although focused on how to climb the corporate ladder and not remain in lower levels of management because of the demands of motherhood, does provide suggestions for creating an optimum balance between work and home.

Advice is out there to help full-time employed mothers find a balance between the demands of employment and motherhood. And note that within the advice is critical information that will confirm you are not alone. The information will validate your daily efforts often filled with stress. We all feel better about ourselves when we realize there are others out there who are like us with similar struggles, successes and failures; they understand.

I was on a panel recently at a conference sponsored by Congressman Jim Moran on “Living My Ideal Life: Balancing Career, Family and Personal Needs.” During the Q and A a young mother who had brought her very energetic three year old with her because she had no one or could not afford to pay someone to watch her child, asked for help on how to manage as a single mother. She was going to school to better her job options and make more money to support herself and her son. She did not have enough time in the day, enough money to manage everything, or enough help; she was exhausted and felt alone.

All mothers in the session—no dads, except my husband who came to support me—started to offer suggestions. What really seemed to make a difference to her were the

comments that included: “I know, I’ve been there,” and “You’re doing a wonderful job managing everything” and “Yes, it is very hard but you seem to be handling it!” We all like confirmation that we are doing a good job and respected for our efforts; our struggles, though unique to us, are typical. We need the support of knowing that we can and we actually are meeting the challenges.

If full-time employment is filled with stress and frustration, what is so satisfying that counters these uncomfortable feelings? We are not masochists; we do not choose to remain in situations that we find unpleasant, so what is the pull to keep so many employed full time? The answer is: the tangible rewards we receive from employment—promotions, power, money—plus the personal growth and achievements we experience. In fact, a total of 89 percent of the mothers in the study who experienced full-time employment at any time cited either the tangible “rewards of the job” (51%) or the “personal growth and accomplishments” (38%) as very satisfying.

The quotes below exemplify the satisfaction the mothers gained from full-time employment. You can almost hear their pride:

Respect, appreciation, socializing with co-workers, prestige, independence, money for extras.

A sense of accomplishment at work—especially when I was able to get a big project finished that really made a difference. Getting to the point where I had extensive knowledge of the organization and how to make things happen.

To be perfectly honest, it isn’t the work that is particularly satisfying—it is the fact that I have excellent benefits with the federal government—health benefits, pension plan, thrift savings, etc.

The reward of being able to do things for my family that I could not have done without the income I earned... If I had not worked I do not know that we could have had as many great travel experiences. Also—I am the “toy” buyer: iPods, computer stuff...all from mom’s salary!

These quotes from different mothers in my study are filled with a sense of pride and solid self-esteem. The mothers clearly gained a strong sense of competence about themselves and their abilities, which they value very much. Whether you gain a sense of competence from money, promotions, achievements, or all three, they certainly do boost your self-esteem. Full-time employment provides the opportunities to obtain these feelings.

Further confirmation that full-time employment has very satisfying rewards is that a total of 91 percent of the full-time employed mothers found “rewards—promotions, raises, and salary— of the job (49%)” or “personal growth and accomplishments (42%)” very satisfying. Given that 80 percent of the mothers who were employed full time in 1994 remained in full-time employment in 2008, it is safe to surmise that these tangible rewards and the personal rewards obtained in full-time employment outweigh the frustration and stress experienced by most of these mothers. (*See Appendix, Graph 2.*)

Another interesting finding is that in 2008 more part-time employed mothers than any other work status group—71 percent—wrote that "rewards of the job" was very satisfying. What makes this interesting is that 37 percent of these mothers were at home in 1994 compared to the 15 percent who were employed full time in 1994—more than double.

Why is that? Why did the mothers who were at home for any length of time really value and appreciate the rewards of employment (part-time employment 71%) more than those who were employed full time (49%)? If we think about the kind of satisfaction a mother at home receives compared to a full-time employed mother, we'll get an answer.

The compensations a mother at home receives are personal and emotional—often self-observed; they are not clear, tangible, objective rewards. At-home mothers do not have

performance reviews. They do not receive a salary. They do not get promoted; a promotion isn't even possible! And, in truth, not very often do mothers at home hear: "You're doing a great job;" "You handled the kids' argument well;" or even, "Thank you for making a delicious dinner." Or, "The way you managed getting a baby sitter for the kids and planned our vacation was superb—so organized, fun, and easy." I could go on and on...but need I say more?

You get the picture. Full-time employment offers ongoing assessments and if you are a good employee, you receive lots of kudos in different ways that tell you are good, smart, and competent. As one mother commented in 1994:

One of the biggest challenges I faced when I stopped [working] seven years ago was being able to derive satisfaction from staying home. I missed the pay raises, promotions, and praise from superiors. Now that our children are seven and three, I am able to derive a lot of satisfaction from my "role" in raising my children. Their happiness, independence, self-confidence, good manners, and compassion towards others are my feedback.

Understandably, it is hard to give up the rewards of successful employment. This is probably a good thing, otherwise the stresses and frustrations would prevail and no one would choose full-time employment.