

Employment Digest

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Can Stay-at-Home Moms Return to Work?

News

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Can Stay-at-Home Moms Return to Work?

There's been a lot of mommy blog chatter lately about two high-profile books that belittle the 5.6 million stay-at-home moms in America for not working. Linda Hirshman's *Get to Work* compared women who stay home with children to reckless drivers who ride motorcycles without protective helmets. Leslie Bennetts' *The Feminine Mistake* offered a gentler critique, filled with stories of stay-at-home moms who inadvertently found themselves on the wrong end of divorce, financial bad luck or unfulfilling domestic lives.

After talking to hundreds of women following publication of my anthology *Mommy Wars*, I started to wonder about the conventional wisdom that moms, especially college educated professional women, have trouble returning to work after staying home to care for children. How could a few years off nullify decades of education and professional accomplishments for so many bright, hard-working, driven women?

I talked with dozens of college-degreed mothers ages 30 to 55 who left professional work for 3 to 10 years to care for their children. I went to conferences for "on rampers" hosted by top business schools, and spoke to large groups of professional moms in New Hampshire, Minnesota, Illinois, California, Florida, Wisconsin, New York and Washington, DC. Hiring managers, headhunters, and placement specialists across the country offered their insights as well.

I was not able to find a single college-educated stay-at-home mother who couldn't find fulltime work within twelve months. A survey by the Center for Work Life Policy in New York shows that 74% of stay-at-home moms who want to go back are able to. Most who don't get jobs are looking for part-time or flexible jobs, which are notoriously difficult to find.

Certainly, obstacles exist. It takes time and determination to craft a marketable resume without glossing over significant gaps, to find the right childcare, to refresh critical skills, and to come to peace with reinventing oneself – yet again. Some on-rampers face an initial salary penalty. Staying in the same field and geographic area makes returning easier; as does coming back within 10 years. Critically, the majority of success stories involve a return to fulltime work. Although some companies, such as Minneapolis-based Best Buy Corporation, allow employees to work flexible schedules, there are still far more fulltime jobs.

Wharton, Harvard and Dartmouth and other business schools have started programs for high-powered stay-at-home moms. New companies like Moms Corps, Career Partners, Business Talent Group, McKinley Marketing and Flexperience Staffing are springing up to connect professionals with rewarding part-time positions and temporary projects, many of which provide excellent bridges back to fulltime work. Fortune 500 employers such as Lehman Brothers, Citigroup, UBS, Johnson & Johnson and Discovery Communications are targeting talented stay-at-home moms whose skills and educational credentials outweigh any perceived negative of time off. "Well-educated stay-at-home moms have experience, judgment and maturity that our companies need," explains Anne Erni, managing director and chief diversity officer at 29,000-employee Lehman Brothers.

Good news abounds for today's at-home mothers. So why the pervasive myths about moms' inability to restart their careers?

One answer is that five or ten years ago, it was tougher for well-educated women to take time off without significant penalty. A second explanation may be America's collective devaluation of stay-at-home moms who perform years of unpaid labor. We tend to applaud paid labor in this country.

However, part of the answer – and not a pretty part – may lie in the fact that working moms (and dads) hold the pens and the microphones, and therefore we control the messages. Stay-at-home moms are, by definition, not writing books, producing tv shows, or writing many newspaper articles; they're home serving chicken fingers instead of anchoring the nightly news. With the exception of the pervasive, vocal, increasingly powerful mommy blogs, stay-at-home moms' public voices are inadvertently, and unfairly, silenced by their decisions to stay home.

"Full-time homemakers [have] a highly combative sense of indignation about views that challenge their own," wrote Leslie Bennetts, the author of *The Feminine Mistake*, in a recent HuffingtonPost.com article. I wonder whether the same is true of working mothers: maybe we want stay-at-home moms to suffer a penalty for taking time off. Moms at home are the devil on every working mother's shoulders: the women who chose their children over their jobs. Their decisions make us feel guilty about our own. Psychologically, maybe working moms seek to justify the superiority of our own, often guilt-ridden, anxiety-driven choices to continue our careers uninterrupted by disparaging stay-at-home moms for their foolish "feminine mistakes."

There are approximately 81 million moms in America today. Each of us juggles modern motherhood amidst social paradox and flux. Fifty years ago women struggled to force many law schools, business schools, and medical schools to admit women. The number of women with college degrees has doubled in 20 years, and women now make up 51% of the white-collar workforce. In the last 50 years, the percent of American women staying home dropped from 76% to 28%. In the middle of this societal chaos, none of us has the today's work/kids paradigm figured out.

Beneath the surface of the "mommy war" between working and at-home mothers lies each woman's inner mommy war, an endless mental debate over whether we've made the right choices about how we juggle work and family. Now that women's advances at work and at home have increased our options, the challenge for each woman with a bona fide choice is to feel good about her decision - without condemning, or silencing, other women who make different ones.

At-home mothers across the country are proving that choosing stay-at-home motherhood does not spell the end of your career, especially if you got skills, a good education, are determined to return, and are willing to work fulltime. Not a fairytale ending - we won't have that until there's a cornucopia of flexible, well-paid, part-time work for men and women in all segments of the labor force - but far better news than moms have gotten in a long time.

1. **Melissa in MN** Says:
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Interesting point for all of us to remember: "working moms (and dads) hold the pens and the microphones, and therefore we control the messages." Why would we want to perpetuate the myth that there is a right answer for any parent choosing to work or stay at home with children? We can control the message, and the message should be that each person or family should make the decision that best meets the needs and priorities of their situation. As a professional woman who works full-time, I celebrate the fact that we are getting closer to the point where people (regardless of sex) can make that choice. 50 years ago the only right choice was to stay home; in the 80's the only right choice was to get right back to work. I hope in the 00's, that I can choose, and I can keep choosing every day to do things that help pave the way in case I need to make a different choice later. For example, if I were a stay at home mom, I would choose to keep current in local professional groups, keep up on industry trends, and try to keep those networks going. It is hard work. Since I am at work, I do those same things, but I also save money for a rainy day in case I later stay home, keep connected with school and other community groups so that I have adult connections: if I leave the work force, and I keep my eyes and ears open to learn of part-time opportunities and work from home opportunities that are a good fit for my skills or those of people I know.

We can choose, and we need to make the choice continually. In addition, we all need to stop judging others' choices to make ourselves feel better. We would be way ahead if we would support each other!