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THE WORK/LIFE Juggling Act

by Martha Nolan McKenzie photo illustration by Corki Bienenfeld

Erin Hand begins her days at 5:30 a.m. and ends them at 10 p.m. During those 16-1/2 hours, she cares for two children, manages a department of 24 people, works out, cooks meals, sits on boards of professional organizations and volunteers. And she remains sane.

Hand, 41, has found a way to achieve that seemingly unachievable goal — work/life balance. She is quick to credit her husband, Tim Flinn.

“The reason I can make it work is because I have a true partner,” says Hand. “We really split things 50/50.”

It also helps that her employer, Cox Communications, allows her the flexibility to do her work as vice president of talent and development from home when she needs to. “I’ve always been fortunate to work with bosses who are more interested in my results than in the amount of time I spend in the office,” says Hand. “I’ve got a Blackberry, a cell phone and a laptop, so I can do my work anywhere.”

Hand is one of the lucky ones. Many women are finding it increasingly difficult to juggle their jobs and the rest of their lives. For one thing, their jobs are more demanding, thanks to increased global competition and corporate downsizing, which has left more work spread across fewer workers. Indeed, more than half of all U.S. employees work more than 40 hours a week, according to Dr. Kathleen Hall, founder of the Stress Institute in Clarkesville, Ga., and author of *Alter Your Life: Overbooked? Overworked?*

Overwhelmed? And many workers don’t even feel like they can afford to take all their vacation, giving back on average three vacation days a year by not using them.

But for women, home often isn’t a haven from the pressure cooker of the office — it’s another set of tasks and responsibilities. “I start my second full-time job when I walk in the door after work,” says Christina Wheeler, 45, a pricing manager at AutoTrader.com and a widowed mother of two children, ages 5 and 6. “I make dinner, help Dominic and Emma with homework and piano practice, take them to soccer practice one night a week, do the bath and bedtime routine and then spend the rest of the night paying bills, doing laundry or cleaning up the house.”

The result, predictably, is a lot of tired, burned-out women. “In the human body, levels of the stress hormone cortisol naturally fall off dramatically by 4 p.m.,” says Hall. “However, some recent studies have shown that in women cortisol levels are increasing into the evening. Why? Women are working two full-time jobs, and it’s stressing their bodies to the point of exhaustion.”

It’s little wonder, then, that work/life benefits have become as important as health insurance and salary for many workers. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), three of today’s top five work/life benefits involve flexible work schedules — flextime, telecommuting and a compressed work week. Nearly 60 percent of U.S. companies offer flextime programs and one-third offer full-time workers such options as temporary part-time or telecommuting, according to SHRM. The other top work/life benefits are dependent care and family leave.

“There have been many surveys on what employees want, and flexibility invariably comes out on the top of the list,” said Bernadette Fusaro, director of Work/Life Services for Harris





Rothenberg International, a New York-based performance consulting company. "And it's not just for child-care, by any means. Some workers want a flexible schedule to go back to school, to train for a marathon or to pursue an interest on the side."

Flexibility became priority number one for Cindi Malloy when she divorced eight years ago. As a mother of two boys, then aged 9 and 10, Malloy was determined to leave her 8 to 5 office days behind her. "That schedule was fine when I had a partner to share the parenting," says Malloy, 50. "But it was much too stressful when I was parenting on my own."

She was able to find a sales position that allowed her to work from home. "I was able to better manage my role of parent and worker, and to do both of them well," she says. "If I had had to be in the office full-time, I think both of my roles would have suffered. When you're at your desk but worried about your kids, you are not really present and performing. And when you're at home but stressing about a deadline, you're not really there for your kids."

Now that her boys are in their senior and junior years at high school, Malloy goes into the office a couple days a week and works from home the rest. "I enjoy having the camaraderie of the office and the productiveness of my time at home — I can actually get more done there," says Malloy, who is currently a sales manager for WellPoint, Inc., the parent company of Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Georgia. "At this time in my life, this arrangement is great."

Right up there with flexibility, dependent care ranks high on employees' work/life wish lists. Offerings run the gamut, from on-site day care centers to referral services, and from reimbursement programs to the hottest current trend: back-up care.

Recognizing that child care snafus are a huge cause of absenteeism among workers, more and more companies are providing some sort of option for these parents. A few very large corporations have an on-site center where employees can leave their

When Lifestyle Choices Lead to Opportunities

Leaving a great job and a promising career path to become a stay-at-home mom was a tough transition for Cindi Filer. The former manager of compensation for WorldSpan, a subsidiary of Delta Air Lines, was committed to being at home with her son, but she missed the challenge and reward of her work. So when her old boss asked if she would do a project on a free-lance basis, she jumped at the chance.

Another project soon followed, and then another and another. At the same time, Filer started meeting a lot of other women who had left high-level jobs to stay at home with children, but who also wanted to work part-time. She made the connection and started Innovative Outsourcing.

That was 10 years ago. Today her Marietta-based firm employs 11 workers on staff and another 38 who do work for around 60 clients. The people Filer places typically have 10 to 15 years or more of corporate experience. They could be earning top dollar in their respective careers, but they have made a lifestyle choice to step off the corporate ladder, most often to provide care for their children. She places them in permanent (or at least long-term) part-time positions, usually with just one or two clients.

"Our clients get workers who are way overqualified for what they are doing, so they are getting way more than they are paying for," says Filer, 39. "Our workers get to use their skills and still achieve a work/life balance that fits their needs. It's truly a win-win."

It has certainly worked out that way for Filer. "I have a good seven hours to work on the business each day while my kids are in school," she says. "I feel productive and I get to use the skills I've honed over my career. But I also get to be a room mom, pick up my kids at carpool and be at all their sporting events. That's what it's all about."

children when they are sick or when their regular day care falls through. Others provide referrals to off-site centers or in-home care that employees can use when they need to.

"Invariably, your sitter calls in sick on the day you have to make a big presentation," says Fusaro. "It's very stressful to try to make alternative arrangements, so employees are very appreciative when their companies offer some type of back-up care."

And these days, back-up care and other dependent care benefits may just as likely be used for an elderly parent as for a child. Indeed, more than 44 million

Americans provide care for an older adult, according to a study funded by the MetLife Foundation. Of these caregivers, almost 60 percent work either full- or part-time and almost 40 percent have children under age 18.

"It used to be that 90 percent of the calls that came in were related to child care," says Mary Brown, senior vice president of BrownRichards & Associates, an Atlanta-based provider of work/life programs. "Now we are seeing about 60 percent related to child care and 40 percent related to elder care. It's become a huge issue with workers."

While large companies, with the advantage of greater resources and economies of scale, can offer expensive benefits, such as on-site day care, small companies often are able to tailor benefits to an employee's specific need. "Smaller companies are intuitively flexible — they are just set up that way," says Fusaro. "They can use that to their advantage to attract and keep good people."

David Felfoldi has taken that lesson to heart. The 25-year-old vice president and co-founder of Vascent Inc., an Atlanta-based interactive marketing and Web development firm, allows his 11 employees as much flexibility as he can. "We just require that team members put in 40 billable hours a week," says Felfoldi. "If they want to cram all of those hours into 3 or 4 days, that's fine. If they need to do their work at home, okay."

Felfoldi and his partner work with each individual employee to meet their specific needs. For example, one worker wanted to take every Friday off so he could get his pilot's license. One is starting a salsa dancing business on the side, so he uses the office resources to work on that in his free time. And one employee works entirely from his home, coming in only once a month for a meeting.

"It's a type of creative compensation," says Felfoldi. "We are able to attract good people to work for us a little more cheaply than they would work somewhere else because we are able to give them other things that they value. Everybody's happy." ♀