

Combining work and family

Is working as a soloist a solution to returning-to-work mothers? Self-employment offers flexibility, work-life balance and a chance to excel in your chosen career. However when combining work and family you need to think through all the issues.



With an uncertain economic outlook, volatile stock markets and rising interest rates, more primary carers, particularly mothers, are feeling the pressure to return to work. Whether you have to work, or want to work, combining work and family is a juggling act that causes stress and frustration.

Returning to work is fraught with emotions. Many feel guilty leaving upset children at day care or school. Pressure is also heaped on from employers to provide a high quality work output. Children often get sick when they're introduced to a child care environment. The newly returned-to-work mother has to take time off to care for them, then often must succumb to yet more pressure from employers.

Back at home, women still do the majority of housework and cooking. Statistics show that even when two parents are working, 70% of housework is done by the woman.

Finally, the cost of child care eats such a large chunk of the mother's earnings that they question why they returned to work in the first place.

As a result, one opportunity for combining work and family that many mothers consider is the self-employed (solo) option.

There are many pluses for women in the solo world. As your own boss, you can work your hours around your life: school/day care hours or even naps, weekends and evenings. The hours are yours to choose. Therefore you can work your career around your lifestyle and find an economic and emotional equilibrium - the very definition of 'lifestyle balance'.

The 2004 work-life balance survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that an estimated 378,700 of all 'carers' were self employed. Ten per cent of these carers chose the solo route to make it easier for them to care for another person. Females were more likely than males to become self employed based on this reason (18% compared to 6%).

A recent study in Canada found that many women are choosing to work as soloists. According to Statistics Canada, self-employed women own almost half of all small and medium-sized enterprises, and start-up rates for women-owned businesses are twice those for men. The reason stated by the survey's respondents was primarily to allow them to work *and* care for their families.

But it's also worth considering the side effects of owning your own business. Your financial situation is less dependable than the reliable paycheck of an employer. There are no compulsory payments being made to your superannuation. Self-employed women tend to fall outside the social safety net. Their economic autonomy is risked by the lack of access to superannuation and any benefits such as paid maternity leave.

Another important concern is managing your working hours after your business takes off. In reality, working for yourself can increase the pressure to put in longer hours. Think about it: you are now answering to your own clients, rather than an employer. If you disappoint your client, you are taking a risk with your financial future.

In 2004, according to the ABS 34% of self employed people work between 50 and 60 hours a week and 28% work more than 60 hours per week.

These negative aspects aren't there to talk you out of a solo career. They're more there as a reminder that the grass might not always grow greener on the other side, but at least it's your own grass to grow!

With careful planning and consideration, combining work and family is possible. Women soloists of today can continue a rewarding career while enjoying the experience of motherhood at the same time.

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