

A mother's job is never done



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If the idea of working from home brings to mind visions of reclining on the sofa in your pj's and slippers with a laptop propped against your knees, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the TV remote in the other, allow me to present a stark, but personal insight into the realities of a work-from-home juggling act. It's not as easy as it sounds.

As a career-driven, but dedicated mother of two, the option of working from home meant that I could have my cake and eat it too - as opposed to the sad alternative of simply storing my cake, which seemed a strange condition to contemplate. Why would anyone want to hoard a collection of uneaten baked goods?

So I negotiated a part-time contract with my employer which includes two full days in the office each week, with a day and a half worked from home. This allows me to keep my footing on the corporate ladder without missing my toddler's first step and all those sweet little kisses before every nap.

My day begins around 6.00am with the delighted chortling of a hungry baby and an action-packed nappy. From that point on my time is divided into a series of 10 to 15 minute units with one big stretch in the middle when the girls sleep.

As any parent can attest, unless you plan on leaving your bub to starve in a soiled nappy with only a forlorn overhead mobile as entertainment, it's just not possible to work your hours from home in long, consecutive chunks. So I spend my time flitting between the girls' activities and the constant influx

Balancing work and family takes on a different spin when you combine the two from a home office.

There are calls to make, **deadlines to meet** and **children to feed**. Resident working mum, Claire Jones, describes an average day in the "office" and provides some insight into what **multi-tasking** really means.

of e-mails, phone calls and looming deadlines that comprise my working day.

This pattern continues for most of the morning until around 1.00pm when both girls go down for their afternoon nap, and I finally get an hour or so to concentrate on my paying job. One minute I'm preparing a budget report and the next I'm crafting a family of aardvarks from neon pink play dough or rescuing the cat from being body slammed by my eight-month old baby. I'll leave for 10 minutes to make a phone call and return to find the cat looking decidedly unimpressed and the unsuspecting aardvarks dismembered and stuffed into a sneaker.

Like any work environment, the home office presents its own set of challenges, including constant interruptions. At work it's likely to be a mix of meetings, phone calls and talkative colleagues, while at home it could be an unexpected bout of projectile vomiting, a nappy explosion or an inspired decision by an artistic three year old to paint the kitchen cabinets with honey - which, although horrendous to clean up - did buy me more than half an hour of uninterrupted work time while both girls busied themselves licking the cupboards like a pair of ecstatic geckos.

The key to a successful balance is being able to prioritise, along with superlative organisational skills and a willingness to go the extra mile, even if it means logging on at 9.30pm to finish an urgent report, just as hubby saunters past with a bottle of Shiraz, some Belgian chocolate and the Foxtel movie guide.

Routine is key, but so too is flexibility. The best laid plans are out the window the minute your toddler feeds the baby half a can of shaving cream or your boss calls as you're leaving for play aroup with an urgent budget revision. On other occasions, I have to combine my work and parenting obligations, which could see me typing a business proposal while my toddler wreaks havoc with her face-painting kit. It doesn't matter that I look like a deranged Mohican warrior by the time she's finished; at least it gets done.

As much as I love my daughters, I look forward to my two days in the office with relish. It's a luxury for me to focus on the job at hand without routine intermissions to feed, dress or entertain anyone. It's nice not having to check that anyone needs the toilet before we leave for a meeting or having to referee a tug-of-war over a *Dora-the-Explorer* action doll, but that aside, I can never totally detach from my parenting obligations, and so twice a day I take a 10 minute break to express milk. It took some getting used to. Some people smoke on their breaks; I fill baby bottles.

The first time I broke out the breast pump in the sterile surrounds of my fluorescent-lit office I had to resist the urge to moo. I emerged a few minutes later with a full bottle, a red face and a desperate desire to avoid eye contact with anyone as I scurried towards the office kitchen. But as with anything, the more you do it, the easier it gets, and no-one even bats an eyelid now when I pop a freshly-squeezed bottle in the office fridge.

I suppose the bottom line is this: regardless of where you work, the responsibilities and tasks that define your role don't change. The environment I work in is different, but the work itself remains the same. And in return for the flexibility my employer affords, I am committed to the organisation and happy to put in the extra effort when necessary.

It's not always easy and things can get stressful. There are days when I wish for a simpler, more gentle pace, but I'm managing so far and my daughters get the benefit of having me around, while I get to keep the career I've worked so hard for. It's a delicate balancing act and not something to attempt half-heartedly. You can kiss your spare time good-bye and say hello to routine and schedules, but with support from your employer, you can make it work and come out on top - with a cake in the tin and a piece on your plate!

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