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Elisa J. Grant-Vallone and Ellen A. Ensher²

Child care and housekeeping have satisfying moments but are not occupations likely to produce a flourishing life. Gender ideology places these tasks on women's backs; women must demand redistribution.

—Linda Hirshman, author of Get to Work...A Manifesto for Women of the World

I only eat lunch at home with my mommy.

—Nicholas, age 3, day care hunger-striker son of coauthor of this article

Abstract

Professional women with children are inundated with conflicting messages about how to manage their careers and personal lives and whether they should "opt in" or "opt out" of the workforce. Using in-depth interviews with 23 professional women, this study focused on the career choices that women make after having children. The authors found that many mothers neither opt in or opt out but successfully function in between

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these two choices, or opt "in between," by working flexible hours, by working part-time, and/or by being involved with home-based entrepreneurial endeavors. Using the boundaryless career typology of knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom, the authors summarize the key strategies that mothers use to opt in between. The interviewees were clear about why they were working, managed their careers by finding the right organizational fit, did not focus on guilt or perfectionism, and maintained excellent networks of friends, bosses, colleagues, and day care providers.

Keywords

Women's careers, boundaryless careers, work-family balance, opting in

Professional women with children trying to balance their careers and personal lives are bombarded with conflicting messages, as epitomized in the above quotes. Some women may have a choice to stay home and care for their families that most professional men, lower income women, or single women, rarely have for reasons of economics or societal expectations (Stone & Lovejoy, 2006; Williams, 2000). Although this group of women may be a minority, their choices and approaches are important to understand, as these women often are a crucial source of organizational human capital (Stone & Lovejoy, 2006). Not only do organizations invest significant resources in their recruitment, retention, and development (Davidson & Burke, 2004; Mattis, 2002) but their strategies in balancing work and family can be useful to individuals in a variety of occupations.

The purpose of this study is to understand the strategies that professional women with children use to effectively manage the push and pull inherent in balancing both work and family roles. First, we integrate past research from the career and work family balance literatures to provide a contrast between the two divergent approaches of opting in or opting out of work. Next, we suggest that newer literature on women and careers along with the literature on the boundaryless careers can provide a useful perspective to frame the strategies used by professional women with children.

Career theory has evolved to provide a better understanding of how individuals approach the integration of the multiplicity of their work and personal roles (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Super (1953) posited his highly influential theory of vocational development, which suggested in part that a confluence of internal individual characteristics (e.g., interests, abilities, and personality) as well as external variables (e.g., parental socioeconomic class) affects career patterns and life stages and ultimately career satisfaction. Using Super's original work as a foundation, scholars have added to the original theory to formulate the life span, life space approach to careers (Super et al., 1996). Savickas (2005) explicated the importance of understanding an individual's own self-constructed perception of their career as manifested in their individual stories and life themes. Other concepts such as social cognition, traditions, and sex-role stereotyping (Lent, Brown, & Hacket, 1994) paved the way for career researchers to further examine women's unique approaches

and challenges in managing their careers (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 2006; Williams, 2006).

Recent studies carefully examine the role of perceptions on careers and suggest that not only may there be gender differences but also generational differences (Dries, Pepermans, & DeKerpel, 2008). In fact, these authors challenge traditional definitions of success and suggest that individual's own perceptions of satisfaction are integral to defining a career as successful. Both the scholarly research and the popular press suggest that professional women with children, who successfully balance their work and their personal lives reap many rewards, including greater financial stability and success, happier marriages, and in general greater life satisfaction (Bennetts, 2007; Hirshman, 2006). In fact, in a recent review of the literature, Barnett (2008) finds that participation in multiple roles is related to lower levels of stress and higher levels of mental well-being. Moreover, working women are often touted as an inspiration by serving as role models to their children and mentors to the next generation at work (Shambora, 2008). For authors like Bennetts and Hirshman, the answer is simple: women should work, be as successful as they can, and not feel guilty. Women who heed these messages are "opting in."

In contrast, other authors point to the negative consequences of trying to combine work and family in terms of stress, health, and negative repercussions for family members (see Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000 for a review of work–family conflict literature). Working long hours, time spent commuting, working at night and on weekends, and extensive travel are all contributors to stress and overload. The effects of conflict and job stress on burnout, depression, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are well documented (Allen et al., 2000; Dorio, Bryant, & Allen, 2008; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). Professional women with children who experience high levels of conflict may be perennially exhausted and not performing at maximum capacity in any of their work-related or personal roles. Belkin (2003), a *New York Times* reporter, wrote about a small sample of highly educated women who chose to leave the workforce because, in the words of one, "I could not be perfect as a worker and as a mother so I am choosing to do one very well."

In fact, it is virtually impossible for a working mother to not feel guilty when her son refuses to eat all day because he only wants to eat lunch at home. It is hard to be excellent at work and at home at the same time. It is no surprise that some women choose to quit their jobs and stay home to take care of their children, to care for aging parents, or simply to attend to a deeper need for authenticity (Hewlett, 2007; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006). These women are "opting out."

Belkin's article (2003) about the opt-out revolution sparked a great deal of controversy and galvanized scholars to look more closely at the issues affecting women's careers (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett, 2007; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Stone, 2007). Leading management scholars such as Mainiero and Sullivan concur that the reasons women leave the workforce are complex and argue that opting out is a revolt against traditional, male-oriented ways of managing one's career. Mainiero and Sullivan demonstrate that women's career patterns are often different from men's

and suggest a new theory of careers called the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). These authors explain that women's careers are not necessarily linear but are dynamic and that women may focus on authenticity, balance, or challenge at different points in their career.

Several studies examine the KCM. In an online survey of 497 women, Cabrera (2007) found that just under half (47%) of the respondents had stopped working at some point in their career. However, for the majority of these women (70%), their time out of the workforce was temporary and relatively short. Of those who stopped working, only about 35% did so solely to stay home and care for their children. Other reasons included eldercare responsibilities, dissatisfaction with their jobs, or layoffs. Consistent with the KCM model, Cabrera found that for women at all stages, the shift in career focus was related to balance, and this was highest for women in mid-career. In her study of approximately 3,000 college-educated U.S. professionals, Hewlett (2007) found similar patterns for why women leave work and the temporary nature of their time out of the workforce. The reasons for opting out are complex.

The boundaryless career literature offers suggestions to address how women can keep their career options open. A boundaryless career is characterized by an independence from traditional career arrangements, either physically or psychologically (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). In a boundaryless career approach, there may be movement across employers through project or consulting work (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008). Validation is often drawn from professional identity rather than from a specific employer (Ensher, Murphy, & Sullivan, 2002). Women typically have strong networks, which can contribute to success in a boundaryless career (Ibarra, 2003). Moreover, a key component of the boundaryless career approach relevant to professional women is that one may reject specific career opportunities for personal reasons (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) outline three competencies of boundaryless careers: knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom. Knowing why is the competency that addresses the question of why we work. The knowing-why competency relates to one's motivation to work, identification with work, educational aspirations, profession sought, as well as other interests and goals. The second competency, knowing how, addresses the question of how we work. The knowing-how competency reflects one's skills, specific expertise, and the way daily work is performed. The third competency answers the question of whom we work with. The knowing-whom competency relates to the relationships that we develop as well as our social capital derived from these relationships. Recent research has empirically tested these core competencies within a variety of contexts and found them to be related to perceived career success and perceived internal and external marketability (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003).

To summarize, earlier research has made significant progress toward better understanding the phenomenon of opting in or out. Past research has addressed the big

questions of why women leave the workforce, their likelihood of returning to it later, and the myriad reasons behind the choices they make (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett, 2007; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006). Research demonstrates that opting out is usually temporary and is fraught with complexity. This study is unique as it integrates past research on careers and work and family. Moreover, it provides an understanding of how women actually use micro strategies that enable them to successfully balance their work and personal lives as they transition between opting in, out, or in between. The findings of this study can be used as tools for employees as well as career counselors and human resource practitioners to enable a better balance between work and family.

Method

Participants

We interviewed 23 women from the Southern California area with a wide range of career backgrounds. To participate, women had to meet certain criteria: (a) women had to have at least a bachelor's degree; (b) at least one child under age 5 and be married or in a committed relationship; and (c) consider their line of work a career. Based on previous career research (e.g., Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), we asked several questions to determine whether their positions were a career: "(a) is it something you are doing for more than the money? (b) something you feel invested in? and (c) something with future career potential?" Although this helped us differentiate between a job and a career, we did not differentiate between a career and a calling. Because of their high levels of education and the types of positions they occupied, all the women were considered professionals.

The women in the study were highly educated and worked in a variety of industries. Fourteen of the 23 women had advanced degrees, including master's degrees and doctorates in psychology, education, sociology and veterinary medicine, master's degrees in business, law degrees. All of the women had one to four children (17 women had 2 children) with at least one child under the age of 5. Seven women worked full-time. Three had recently stopped working completely and were not included in the final sample. The others worked part-time, ranging from 5 to 30 hr per week. The vast majority of the women were Caucasian (82%); three women were Latina, and one was Filipina. All were between their early 30s and mid-40s.

All women were in heterosexual relationships and had a spouse or partner who worked full-time. Partners of the women we interviewed held a variety of positions in management (n = 5), sales or marketing (n = 4), and technical areas such as engineering and film editing (n = 5). Four partners held professional positions (e.g., pilot, professor, and attorney). Five held nonprofessional positions that included a lab technician, federal express courier, and a contractor. More than half of the participants described their partners jobs as demanding with very little flexibility (n = 13); nine described their partners as having flexibility in their work schedules

or work arrangements and two interviewees described their partners positions as variable and shifting.

After the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's home institution, the participants were recruited in several ways. First, we worked with a local pediatric office and day care center and distributed flyers to mothers who met the criteria. In addition, we used several personal contacts to recruit other interviewees. Finally, we asked women who participated in the study whether they would be willing to recommend any other professional women that met the criteria for our study. We found this type of snowball technique (e.g., Babbie, 1986) to be a useful method for connecting with other mothers. At the start of each interview, women were informed that the purpose of the study was to explore the work and family lives of women with young children. It was explained that interviews would last for approximately 1 hr and that participants could discontinue at any time. Participants were asked to sign two consent forms: one to participate and one to be tape-recorded. All participants were informed that being tape-recorded was optional; however, all gave consent. Participants were informed that all data would be kept confidential and that in any publications, participants would be referred to by their professions and never by name. We asked approximately 15 open-ended questions (see Table 1 for complete list of questions).

Qualitative Analysis

We used a data analysis technique suggested by Taylor and Bogdan (1998). Their approach places less emphasis on theory building or hypothesis testing and more focus on a deeper understanding of people. The advantage of this technique is that it provides an approach to identify themes and insights while fitting data within existing theories. Rather than determining broad generalizations about a population, the primary purpose of this type of qualitative approach is to represent a particular group of people and one point in time. Marshall and Rossman (1995) describe a critical part of qualitative research in general, and interviewing in particular, as one of acceptance; they elaborate that the phenomenon of interest should evolve from the participant's views not from the researchers. Throughout the interviewing and analysis process, we maintained an attitude of acceptance, listened to the stories from the participants, and let the findings evolve from the data. To enhance our understanding of the data, we used the following process: (a) transcribed all taped interviews, (b) read all interviews and summarized emerging themes, (c) re-read all interviews and refined categories and themes in cases where the data did not fit or there were inconsistencies in interpretation, (d) examined how the themes fit within existing theories, (e) we read the interviews again and conclusively sorted all data into organizing categories and themes, and (f) used quotes to highlight key themes that emerged (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In the following paragraphs, we expand on each of these steps in the process in more detail.

Table I. Interview Questions

Background

Number and age of children and day care situation.

Educational background

Current position and hours worked

Spouse/partner position and work hours

Career/Organization

Describe career path since college.

Describe three things you like most about your position and organization. What is most difficult about your position?

Describe workplace environment (and any family supportive benefits)

Family/home life

Describe transition back to work after having children (for each child).

What are key factors that helped you decide to keep working? (was there a defining moment)? Examples of what is most difficult about working outside the home?

How does your spouse feel about working mothers in general? About you working specifically?

How many of your friends work outside the home? What is their perception of working mothers?

Describe support network (friends, family and spouse). Who do you rely on most for help? How do you define balance? Looking at your different roles how are you doing in each role? What strategies do you use to find balance?

What do you imagine your life to be like 5 years from now? Ideally what would your life be like five years from now?

Following the strategy of Taylor and Bogdan (1998) of "ongoing discovery," we kept track of emerging themes early in the process and refined ideas as they emerged from the data. We started with the overarching question, of "what key factors keep women in the workforce?" We asked women about their current or past work arrangements, relationships, and family environments. One theme that began to emerge was that of options—the women who chose to stay in the workforce discussed their ability to change their careers, work at home or part-time, or start their own business. In fact, the three women who stopped working completely felt they had few options; they had demanding jobs with long hours or travel and did not see any options to modify their jobs. Because the qualitative approach encourages refinement of ideas, we decided to focus on women who kept working rather those who dropped out completely. This focus provided richer data regarding the different options women had and the strategies they used to stay in the workforce. Subsequent interviews were conducted with women who worked at least 5 hr per week.

The second step in the process was to read our interview notes in their entirety and refine concepts and propositions. The two authors reviewed every interview and identified major themes and concepts that emerged. For example, key themes that emerged were flexibility, supportive bosses and colleagues, a shifting in career plans, and a sense that women were better moms because they worked. We identified

key themes, discussed them, and then went back through the data and coded every interview for examples of key themes we identified. We found that some themes overlapped and we collapsed the categories into one theme. For example, stories of feeling guilty and needed perfection were often intertwined. Initially, we had this as two themes, but we merged into one. There were few disagreements, but when there was one, we discussed it and refined the concept until we came to a consensus. Other themes were refined when cases did not fit the original theme identified or when there were inconsistencies in our impressions of the data. For example, we started with the general idea that women either opt in or opt out of the workforce, and our focus was on the factors that influence this decision. But after in-depth analysis of our interviews, it was clear that the binary question of "did you opt in or out" did not adequately capture the experience of these women. We recognized that these women's experiences could be more fully captured by the idea of "opting in between." Some women opted out of a full-time career to start their own business whereas others opted in between by changing their hours or structure of their jobs. We then went back and coded the data for examples of women "opting in between." What allowed women to opt in to the workforce was really this concept of "opting in between." We recognize that there are women who opt out completely and women without flexibility, but in this sample of highly educated women, we found that opting in between was a key strategy that they used to stay in the workforce.

Following the strategy of Taylor and Bogdan (1998), we went back to see how our themes fit within the literature. We recognized that participants discussed approaches that related to the boundaryless career literature. We then re-read our themes to see how each fit within each competency of the boundaryless career framework (knowing how, knowing why, and knowing whom). We did not ask women about their boundaryless careers, but rather this idea emerged from the strategies they discussed with us. After themes were established, the two authors and an independent coder (an advanced undergraduate student who was trained in interviewing techniques) read interviews again and sorted the data into the boundaryless career categories that had emerged from the data. Based on our themes and previous literature, we coded women's stories and examples within the structure of knowing who, knowing why, and knowing whom. Congruent with the recommendations of Taylor and Bogdan, we provide quotes to illustrate key themes and to create a deeper understanding of the experiences of these women.

Results

Women Are Opting In Between

The decision to opt out of the workforce was not a black-and-white one. The women we interviewed made shifts in their careers; they became part-time consultants or entrepreneurs, or changed organizations to work a reduced schedule or flexible hours. Twelve women reported that they worked part-time and eight worked

full-time. Of the 8 women who worked full-time, all had flexible schedules, were entrepreneurs, or worked at home part-time.

Interestingly, the shift in career choices came at three major points in these women's lives. Five women shifted focus or chose a career that would have flexibility while still in the process of receiving their education. For example, a dentist who had originally planned on going to medical school explained: "I thought that with dentistry I could have a good career, make a fairly decent amount of money, not work full-time, and pursue other interests, like having a family." Four women changed careers before having a family. One woman who was a personal assistant to a movie star realized that the career was not conducive to the lifestyle she wanted: "I knew I wanted to be married and to be a mom. So I stopped and took a job at a PR agency." Shortly afterward, this woman started her own company and has been running it successfully for 10 years and has 2 children. For the majority of women (n = 14), the experience of having a child led them to change their career path. As a high-level hotel marketing executive who traveled frequently and worked long hours explained, "I lasted 4 months after having my first child because leaving her every day was too extreme." A comment by a veterinarian illustrated this point well: "I never understood how people could be in love with their baby. I thought I'll just take 2 months off and I'll go back to work. But having my daughter totally changed me." Consistent with the KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), the women in this sample were very comfortable shifting their focus away from achievement to more balance between work and family when the timing became rightalthough the timing was different for each woman.

The women in our sample placed a high value on their careers, but they also placed a high value on family and children. Participants made choices along their career path that were consistent with creating a boundaryless career by maximizing their flexibility. In the following sections, we have categorized the strategies derived from our data analysis into the three boundaryless career competencies of knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom.

Knowing Why

Why work? The easy answer to this question often starts with money. Fourteen women discussed money and the financial rewards of working. They talked about the extra financial freedom their income brought to the family and about using the extra money to pay for education, family vacations, and other perks. Although these kinds of financial details came up frequently, it became clear through our discussions that many worked for more fundamental reasons—a sense of self-identity and the challenge that came with their positions (n = 15). For example, a PR business owner explained, "I didn't think I wanted to lose the part of me that is the conduit with people and relationships, which is what publicity is all about. I didn't know who I would be if I gave all that up." A small-business owner said it very effectively: "It is fulfilling, it fulfills my self, my heart, my soul. It's my own business, and I'm passionate about it." Others explained, "Work is a lot fun. It keeps me active, puts my

brain to work" and "I'm a very driven person, so I don't think I'd be challenged enough if I were home all day long."

Four women explained that working was good for their "mental health" and made them a better mom ("happy moms make better moms"); as one interviewee put it, "I think you're a better mom when you get away from your kids even if only for a few hours." Two women simply did not see themselves cut out to be stay-at-home moms: "I just don't think it would fit my personality." Three women talked about being a role model for their children or keeping "one foot in the door" for future connections. Whether it is for a sense of identify or to feel challenged and stimulated, women provided many reasons for why they continued to work. It is clear that while financial rewards are compelling, the reasons women work go much deeper than money.

Knowing How

The women in this study all talked about the sense of accomplishment, intellectual stimulation, and challenge that they derived from their careers. They also talked about specific strategies for making their professional lives work. Using the "knowing-how" lens, we explored how these professional women were opting in between. Women carefully chose organizations that accommodated their family lives or started their own businesses, focused on the positive aspects of their experience rather than on guilt, and created a realistic sense of balance in their lives.

Finding the right organizational fit. Organizations that offer formal and informal policies intended to help employees manage their work and family demands are considered "family friendly" and may offer benefits such as flexible work schedules, part-time work, child care and eldercare referrals, job-protected parental leave, support groups for working parents, as well as onsite child care (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). However, simply offering family-friendly benefits is not enough; employees must feel that the culture of the organization is supportive toward families (Burke, 2006; Thompson et al., 1999). The women we interviewed emphasized the importance of support and flexibility from their organizations and supervisors.

Hewlett (2007) describes flexibility as a top choice on women's "wish list" when choosing an organization. This was clearly demonstrated in this study. The majority of women in our study reported flexibility in their work hours (n = 15) or worked at home at least part of the time (n = 7) and said their work schedules were critical to their success. Others were able to bring their children to work with them on occasion (n = 4) or had supportive bosses or colleagues (n = 10). For example, one human resources (HR) recruiter said that "they offered me the flexibility to work from home, and I would say that this flexibility is probably one of the best benefits."

Ten women also talked about the importance of finding a supportive boss and colleagues and did not hesitate to make changes in their work situation as necessary. For example, a participant explained that she was able to go home on her lunch hour to nurse her baby for the whole first year. A foster care mother explained how her organization modified the maternity policy to allow her to take a semester off: "Thursday the new maternity policy was announced. A week later the department chair called and said we had a meeting and we've taken over all your classes ... stay home, we'll see you in January." Three women told stories of bosses who placed a high priority on their own family lives and so were more understanding of the issues. In contrast, a consultant who ended up leaving her organization told a story about an HR manager who said to her "The day you return from maternity leave you will be expected to travel." Women not only make shifts in their careers but they are willing to change organizations to better fit their needs.

Getting over the guilt. Participants discussed how easy it is to fall into the trap of feeling guilty and conflicted (not spending enough time with children, having a clean house, or making home-cooked meals) but simultaneously recognized that much of women's guilt is irrational (n = 9). One woman described a situation that many working mothers find themselves in: "We had a babysitter who would watch the kids until 6:00 p.m. every night. Sometimes I would wrap up work early but I would never feel comfortable going to get my nails done or even running to the store. I would feel like I needed to get in the car and rush over and pick them up early ... so that's been really tough, just trying to let go of that guilt." Recognizing the irrationality of guilt and being less of a perfectionist were crucial steps for women opting in between. These findings are consistent with previous research that demonstrates the guilt that many women feel. According to Bolton (2000), professional women engage in a "third shift" in which they assess their day in terms of their ability to measure up to their own need for identity, completion of important tasks, and balance.

Shifting one's paradigm of balance from equality to fit. Frone (2003) notes that the most widely held interpretation of work—family balance presupposes a "lack of conflict" or smooth interface between work and family roles. However, he adds that balance is more than a lack of conflict; it should include positive factors such as the enrichment that various roles can provide. Others have approached balance from a work—family fit perspective that focuses more on how people feel they are doing in each of their roles and their level of satisfaction with those roles rather than an equality of contribution to all roles (for a summary see Carlson & Grzywacz, 2008).

We asked the participants in our study to define balance and reflect on whether they currently felt they had achieved balance in their lives. Participants discussed the concept of balance in four primary ways. Five participants indicated that balance was elusive, and yet highly satisfactory when achieved, even if only temporarily. In the words echoed by several of our participants, "Balance means you have a good day—it's temporary. I have it today, maybe I don't have it tomorrow." Six participants described balance as a fit between work and family roles. They did not describe one role as taking precedence over the other, but as being in sync or fitting together. Fit was epitomized by this quote: "Balance is trying to get satisfaction in your own goals and what you want for yourself and providing for your family and your kids. Being a

mom, a wife, an employee, a career person all at the same time. And doing this without losing your sanity and not feeling like your head's spinning. I am always striving for it." Or more simply put, "Balance for me is being happy and successful, both at work and at home." Four participants described balance as always putting the children first. Five of the participants felt that being in balance was an issue of resources related to either money or help, a point of view reflected in statements such as this: "Balance is about having enough people to help you like a nanny or babysitter."

Even though balance was described differently by participants, the majority of our participants (n = 15) characterized themselves as satisfied with their current state of balance.

The majority of participants who described themselves as satisfied described balance more as a matter of fit or as involving a sense of satisfaction with their management of their roles, rather than in terms of their ability to achieve equality in their roles. The participants who seemed most dissatisfied seemed to feel that balance was something other people have. Participants were savvy about their own priorities and carefully chose organizations that met their unique needs. Not all women experienced balance on a daily basis, but the majority shifted priorities as needed.

Knowing Whom

The literature on boundaryless careers suggests that knowing the right people and keeping up networks are critical components of managing a career. Maintaining business and personal contacts and building a strong reputation will help women move between positions and organizations or reenter the workforce, if they choose to take some time off. Building formal and informal networks has many professional benefits (e.g., de Janasz, Dowd, & Schneider, 2002).

Establishing professional contacts. Although only one of the women specifically discussed career networks and the importance of keeping her "foot in the door at work," others (n = 8) talked about the importance of their contacts in finding their current position. In fact, five women were contacted by a former boss about a position that would be a "perfect fit" for them. For example, a family law attorney who was well established with a law firm, but planned to quit after having her second child, said, "A former boss called and said, I want you to come work for me ... you don't have to work full time, you can work from home, you can work 1 hour or 20 hours." She is now consulting 5 to 7 hr per week for this lawyer. This suggests how important it is to build and maintain strong networks to find the right fit and reenter the workforce, if one takes time off.

Seeking personal support. In addition to those critical business networks, personal support is vitally important. Evans (2006) discusses how isolating it can be when someone feels as if she is the only working mother. When asked about their friendships and support systems, the majority of the women (n = 11) discussed having

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friends "across the board" or from "two separate worlds" and explained that their friendships with working moms and stay-at-home moms were different but that both were critically important to them. The women described the different types of support they received from different friends. One comment summarizes this well: "It is great because on a down day I know which one I need to talk to ... If I am having a child issue I know I am going to gravitate toward the mommies that are staying home ... but if I am feeling 'Who am I? What am I going to do with this business?' I am going to call someone different." Six moms described most of the friends as working mothers and noted that because of the similarity in experiences there was more of a connection. For instance, a participant explained, "I had a hard time at Mommy and Me classes with my son because I would get there and I would be playing but I just did not resonate with a lot of the moms that did not have careers. Your conversations are very different." Three mothers described most of their friends as stay-at-home moms (2 of these women worked fewer than 10 hr per week). The women in our sample talked about how important their friendships were to them, regardless of the type of friendship; women were more likely to say that they relied on their friends for all types of support (e.g., girls' night out, calling with any problems, picking up kids after school, or babysitting) than on their family members.

Finding satisfactory child care. Finding the right child care solution was an essential component of building a network of support. In keeping with the results reported in Evans's (2006) national study of working mothers, our participants used a wide range of child care options: 50% (n=10) of the women used a child care facility or preschool, 3 took their child to an in-home day care, 5 had a full- or part-time nanny, and 2 used alternative options.

Mixed feelings about child care were evident, as the women talked about who cared for their children while they were at work. The satisfaction many women felt with their child care arrangements was reflected in comments like these: "I can tell my children are well cared for when I go to pick them up and they don't want to leave; knowing they're enjoying their time helps me to continue working." But even women who were satisfied felt torn in many ways. One mother commented that "we have someone who has been watching our kids since they were 3 months old. She is like a grandmother and is great for the kids. She takes care of them and reads them stories, but she doesn't take them out, so they're cooped up all day. And then I feel guilty that they're spending so much time with the sitter." The child care stories that women told did not convey the message that finding the right provider was easy, but finding the right solution paid off.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the specific strategies that women use to effectively balance career and family using the boundaryless career framework. It is important to recognize that opting in or opting out is a temporary and highly mutable state. We

found that most of the professional women we interviewed were functioning in between these two choices by working flexible hours, by working part-time, and/ or by being involved with home-based entrepreneurial endeavors. We suggest that opting in between can also refer to a set of attitudes around compromise, balance, and being good enough, rather than being perfect. Opting in between is about keeping options open. We examined how women keep their options open using the boundaryless career competencies of DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) of knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom.

Although finances were a key consideration in why these women stayed in the workforce, core issues of identity and challenge proved critical. This finding has several practical implications. Professionals need to begin planning their careers and thoughtfully integrating balance, identity, and challenge almost from the outset. Many universities make career centers available to their students and offer curriculum related to career planning and decision making. However, little content is available in terms of assessment or curriculum that specifically focuses on achieving work, family, and life balance. This should be available and emphasized for both women and men. Shapiro, Ingols, and Blake-Beard (2008) provide excellent recommendations for career counselors in addressing the double bind that women face in managing work and careers. These authors suggest that career counselors provide assistance in skills that will enable women to act as free agents and better negotiate for better working conditions for themselves.

With respect to knowing how, our results yielded three major recommendations: (a) find the right organizational fit, (b) get over the guilt, and (c) shift one's paradigm of balance from equality to fit. Finding the right organizational fit pertained to organizational policies that supported work and family balance as well as flexibility. What can one do if not offered flexibility? Ask for it. Maintaining an active network to find organizations that do offer flexibility is the key.

Getting over the guilt and shifting one's perception of balance from equality to fit are related in that both suggest that cognitive restructuring can be a useful tool for careerists. The burgeoning field of positive psychology suggests that our perceptions—or how we choose to regard challenging situations—accounts for a significant portion of our well-being and productivity in our jobs (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Organizations can be helpful in offering training and coaching that focuses on cognitive-restructuring techniques.

The knowing-whom competency, a critical part of creating a boundaryless career, suggests that relationships are very important. Women built strong professional and social networks and were not afraid to ask for help in managing their multiplicity of roles. Our respondents discussed the importance of effectively recruiting and retaining caregivers for their children, which were a crucial part of their helping network. However, most of the recruitment seemed to happen without any formal guidance and operated on a word-of-mouth basis. Organizations would be well advised to offer guidelines, assistance, and mentoring to their employees who have families to connect them with excellent helpers.

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Although this study yielded some interesting results, it was not without its limitations, some of which may be a fruitful source of inspiration for future research. The study draws from the experiences of a small, demographically homogeneous sample of professional women. Although the women represented a variety of industries, they were all highly educated, similar in age and ethnicity, married, and hailed primarily from Southern California so that the study has limited external validity. In addition, because of their backgrounds and experiences and ability to make a choice about employment, it is clear that the women in this sample had a certain level of privilege. A study that includes women from more diverse backgrounds would be a critical step in this line of research.

Because this study specifically focused on women, future research that includes men in the sample and contrasts their experiences with those of their female counterparts would be valuable. Although not to the same degree as women, men are opting in between (by choice or necessity) at various points in their career. Barnett and Rivers (1996) describe the changing role of fathers during recent years as "the era of the involved father" (p. 74). Even with these societal changes, women's experiences are still likely very different. It would be useful to ascertain whether there are gender differences in men and women's experiences and coping strategies.

In conclusion, this study makes several distinct contributions. First, the study suggests that an integration of the research on careers and work–family balance can be a helpful lens through which to examine working mothers coping strategies. Second, examining the positive effects of work–family balance and the ways women with children perceive an integration of their professional and personal lives as an enhancement rather than a source of stress can increase our understanding of successful strategies. Finally, the three boundaryless career competencies can be a useful form of assessment for individual careerists.

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