

# What (*Working*) Women Want



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When our mothers told us we could have it all, they left out a couple of key phrases. Specifically, "but not necessarily all at once" and "as long as you're creative, determined and understand the trade-offs," and, in the words of noted author and feminist Anna Quindlen, if you "have the courage to refuse to be cowed by the opinions of others."

BALANCING ACT / *Susan Sorrells, a Fort Worth attorney, put her high-powered legal career on the back burner to spend more time raising her kids, Ellen, 12; Andrew, 9; and Will, 7.*

**T**oday's working woman is a force to be reckoned with. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, we now have 26 million moms who work outside the home. Another 5.6 million are stay-at-home moms, who would be pulling down around \$134,121 a year if compensated fairly for the work they do, according to a recent survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And for those 26 million others who have full-time jobs outside the home, their uncompensated work once they do get home is valued at an average of \$85,876 per year. Whether compensated or not, women face a unique set of challenges that today are being met with increasingly creative solutions, but still many often find themselves too exhausted to enjoy the lives they have created.

So what do working women really want? The question and working title for this article posed to me by my editor caught me off-guard at the end of a particularly harrowing day, the last in a two-week stretch of rapid-fire deadlines. So I just laughed—hysterically—as I visualized the dust-and-dog-hair bunnies the size of chihuahuas last seen rolling across my otherwise beautiful hardwood floors. Then I realized she was serious, and that I didn't know the answer.

I did a non-scientific sampling of Fort Worth's working women in various fields and work situations to see what they had to say. Although we bandied about terms like balance, flexibility and support, eventually I learned what working women of today want is the ability to take charge of their own life—the power to decide how, where, when and under what conditions they work in order to better juggle their responsibilities. And unlike generations past, many of them seem to be doing just that.

As a freelance writer, I have embraced a career choice described by many as “too risky” for a single mom putting two kids through school. I have struggled with the challenges of working from home and the continuous struggle to put edges on my workday. I have learned how to work in sometimes wildly fluctuating stretches of time

and in just about every conceivable location. I once even interviewed Congresswoman Kay Granger while sitting in a carpool line. (Hey, I was early, she was on her way out of town and there I was, in a nice, quiet car with a phone, a pad of paper and just a couple of short questions that needed her answers.) Surprisingly, the admission of my unlikely location made both of us laugh; it put us at once on the same page as women who have chosen to juggle family and career.

Perhaps the best strategy for achieving what we want as working women lies in simply getting clear on our personal needs and priorities and having the courage to stand up for them, regardless of the opinions of others. “Be not afraid,” Anna Quindlen charged the graduating women of Barnard College in her now-famous commencement address. “Have the strength to say no to the wrong things and embrace the right ones ... have the courage to honor your own character, intellect, inclinations and soul by listening to its clean, clear voice of direction instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.”

#### *Finding the Incremental Steps on the Corporate Ladder*

Women who bought into the “have it all” mentality tossed caution to the wind and climbed the corporate or professional ladders in a society that Quindlen describes as “unaccustomed still to the full participation of women.” In this hard-fought battle for equal pay and equal opportunity that still rages today, many corporate and professional women blossomed and thrived, often at the expense of family life. Some simply threw in the towel and left the arena, never to return because there was no way they could catch up after a long absence to raise their kids. Still others have found their own solutions to balancing family and career with strategies such as “job sharing”—dividing the responsibilities and salary of a full-time job between two or more people to allow each more personal time and still get the job done with no additional cost to the employer. Others go part time

*“Have the courage to refuse to be cowed by the opinions of others.”*

— Anna Quindlen



*Sorrells says her secret to success is organization and prioritization.*



WORKING TOGETHER / For Suzi Rodriguez, having her own store provides her with the flexibility to take her kids to work with her, where they gain knowledge of the business world.

while their kids are young, telecommute or create flexible schedules that work for them and for their employers. However it should be noted here that employers who truly embrace these ideas still seem to be fairly few and far between.

A brief survey of Fort Worth's present-day generation of working women now reaching career prime time revealed those who courageously take a leap into the unknown, either as independent contractors or consultants or as entrepreneurs starting their own business deliberately designed to accommodate the needs of their families.

Susan Sorrells is a Fort Worth attorney who made the decision several years ago to move her high-powered legal career to the back burner to spend more time raising her kids. She says the conflict for a working woman today is often that she can't give of herself completely anywhere, so she ends up feeling like a failure everywhere. "Although I tremendously enjoyed working in the legal profession, I also knew I wanted to spend more time at home," she adds. So in 1997 on a day she was at home with a sick child, tagging up with her husband in the afternoon so she could go to her office for the evening, she knew it was time for a change. By virtue of some of her earlier career connections, Sorrells joined Employment Practices Solutions, a group of formerly practicing attorneys who now specialize in human resources/employee relations consulting. As an independent contractor with this group she could work as much or as little as she wanted to—and, for the most part, arrange her work time around her family's schedule. "After my husband and I looked at our budget and figured out the best and worst case scenarios to see if we could make ends meet long enough for me to give it a shot, I took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff."

Within the first year Sorrells says she realized she had found the perfect solution for balancing work and family—and one that would keep her active enough in a related field to make her re-entry into the legal profession easier once her children

are grown. "By maintaining my professional contacts and continuing to acquire new knowledge and expertise in my field, there won't be that 10- to 15-year gap on my resume where I 'didn't do anything,'" she says. Right or wrong, Sorrells says the onus is on us to justify the child rearing gap in our resume, and staying marketable is the key that allows corporate and professional women to jump out at age 25 to raise a family and jump back in at 45 to refocus on career. "But for now I am able to make as much money as I need to make and spend significant time with my kids."

### *Make Way for a New Kind of Entrepreneur*

While it seems most male entrepreneurs launch a business with the hope of achieving greater financial success, growing numbers of women are finding that owning their own business means taking charge of their life and finding a new way to get what they want in the workplace. Cathryn Simpson, director of the Women's Business Assistance Center, says that it's common for women to start their own businesses in order to follow their own dreams, have more time with their families and create their own definition of success. And although the start-up of a new business is grueling, time consuming and sometimes downright scary, if it is planned and structured right, once up and running it can be the perfect solution for juggling responsibilities and schedules.

Through a variety of education and training programs, Simpson and the WBAC have provided resources and support to more than 6,000 local women (and even a few men), particularly in areas of planning, finance and getting a good firm grip on the reality of their situation. "We always encourage them to be visionaries about their own business," she explains. "Rather than just focusing on how am I going to pay my bills today, it is important to think to the future. Where will this business be in five years?"

In helping women entrepreneurs lay the correct groundwork for a new business, Simpson says she hopes to

help them avoid the grim statistic that more than half of new businesses fail within the first three to five years. Simpson says that the initial enthusiasm she so often sees in her clients is one part of the entrepreneurial mind-set that is particularly hazardous for women who have so much at stake. "We are always putting the brakes on," she says. "People come here thinking, 'I have to do this right now or I'm going to blow up.' But the truth is there will always be another opportunity, and to be successful they need to slow down, think things through and plan carefully."

"It's OK to be enthusiastic and even to jump into an exciting business opportunity," she adds. "Just don't jump with a blindfold on."

Suzi Rodriguez, a WBAC protégée who owns Señorita Frogs on Camp Bowie Boulevard, says that the beauty of her solution is that it allows her to bring her kids to work. When an unexpected roadblock stalled her counseling career at Tarrant County College, she helped her sister-in-law open a hair salon, and at the same time fell in love with the import retail store next door. When the owner announced plans to sell, Rodriguez decided to give it a try. Although she still works as a part-time counselor for TCC and teaches English at night, she says that creating family time after school with her sons, ages 10 and 7, has made all the difference. She has outfitted a room in the back of the store where they can have a snack, do homework or even watch a little television. Another bonus of having her sons at the store every day, she says, is offering them firsthand exposure to running a business.

The ongoing challenge of creating that delicate balance between family life and career success, however you define it, Simpson says, is a personal choice that changes from family to family and stage to stage. As circumstances change, she says, we must always be ready and willing to rebalance. "The critical thing is to decide where you want your trade-offs to be," Sorrells says, "and then to focus on accomplishing what you want. You will always have to give up some things in order to have others,

but as a business owner or independent contractor, you get to choose what they are and change them as necessary."

Sorrells says her secret to success is organization and prioritization. On Sundays or Monday mornings she sets some goals for the week, both for work and for home, and then estimates the time each goal will take and blocks it out on her calendar. This she says, helps prevent the Impossible List, the bane of overachieving women everywhere. After that, she asks herself, "Of these goals, what absolutely has to be done this week?" These move to the top of their respective lists. "Keep those lists before you," she advises, "and ask that same question at the start of every day. As things change, adjust your list. Sometimes I look at my list midweek and revamp it completely." Although Sorrells' system sounds simple enough, she is the first to admit that sometimes it works—and sometimes it falls apart. "Some weeks I'm a complete failure at it," she laughs, "but the next week I make a new list and start all over."

Perhaps it is this kind of tenacity—and ongoing commitment to making conscious choices about how we work—that gives us the courage we need to abandon failed strategies in favor of successful ones. It seems that, as Anna Quindlen told that emerging generation of women ready to enter the workplace, simple courage may just be the magic key to achieving the oft-elusive balance that brings working women exactly they want—however they define it. When we combine this courage with creativity, determination and patience, the result is an exhilarating roller coaster ride through both the best of both worlds—and sometimes the worst—with evolving solutions as individual as the women who dream them into existence. With new alternatives in the work world that our foremothers could never have imagined, we have now managed to tweak their rose-colored prediction to our liking and make it come true. I, for one, wouldn't have it any other way. ■



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THE KEY TO HAPPINESS / Catbryn Simpson, director of the Women's Business Assistance Center, found happiness when she started her own business which enabled her to juggle her kid's schedules with responsibility.