

Part-time working moms struggle to stay 'in the loop'

Women say the juggling act has its rewards, but excellent communication skills and flexibility are essential

By **Shari Held**
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Many mothers are trading their 40-hour-per-week paychecks for less time at work and more time with their children.

We talked with five working moms to see how part-time status has affected the way they do their jobs.

All five went part time with the arrival of their first child and say they see it as being the best of both worlds.

"I get to watch all the first smiles and the first steps. And I also get to stay in touch with and advance in my career," said Heidi Jennings, senior staff member in charge of assurance for the Indianapolis small-business group of Crowe Chizek and Co., an accounting firm based in South Bend. The mother of three spends 25 hours a week in the office, reverting to full time during tax season.

Even so, working part time comes with its own set of challenges: staying in the loop, dealing with co-workers' perceptions and setting boundaries. It takes flexibility and excellent communication skills to make it work, the women said.

E-mail, voice mail, personal digital assistants, fax machines, cell phones, conference calls, pagers—technology has made the mechanics of communication a breeze. E-mail, which offers the most flexibility in terms of response, is the preferred method for most of the five mothers.

Not all solutions are high-tech, though. Jennings keeps a white message board in her office that details where she is, what she is doing and how co-workers can reach her. "I probably over-communicate, but I think that's best for Crowe so they know what's going on," she said.

Bulletin boards are the main "information zones" for Patricia Warner. She is an occupational therapist for RepuCare, a local rehabilitative-services company that provides supplemental staffing to medical facilities.

Warner's hours, the services she provides and her work location are all subject to change weekly, so bulletin boards at the various medical facilities where she works enable her to keep up with changes in patient information, staffing changes, etc.

Her unpredictable schedule also requires her husband and 11-year-old son to be as flexible as she is.

Warner prepares for new assignments by calling supervisors before arriving on the job—getting a head start on her responsibilities and clients' expectations to optimize efficiency.

Informal communication

Even though the urge to stay at their desks and take advantage of time at the office is compelling, all five women believe that lunching with co-workers and having conversations around the water cooler are necessary to stay in touch.

Lynaire White, director of marketing for IU Medical Group in Indianapolis, said one of her challenges is ensuring her staffers are up to speed and have the information they need to do their jobs



Heidi Jennings has a white message board in her office that informs co-workers where she is from day to day.

when she is not there.

She spends Wednesdays and Thursdays at the office, but works at home sometimes on Tuesdays. Hesitation over managing full-time staff on a part-time basis is one reason she asked for a trial period before assuming her directorship position—a position previously filled by a full-time employee.

White wears a pager to stay in touch with staff and clients around the clock, delegating when necessary. It has worked out well. Her part-time schedule allows her to spend time with Riley, her 7-year-old son.

White also makes sure to "carve out time to attend meetings where the decisions are being made"—in her case, monthly board meetings. "It's important to hear what the agenda is for the month, what decisions were made and the discussion around them," she said.

Attending meetings on days when she is not scheduled to be in the office is difficult for Amy Johnson.

Johnson, claims legal counsel for the Carmel office of Columbus, Ohio-based Nationwide Insurance, works 2-1/2 days at the office and one morning from home. Her biggest challenge is finding unscheduled child care for her 5-year-old twins and 3-year-old.

Cost is another factor. "That's extra money out of my paycheck," she said. "Still, it's necessary and important to do that for really important meetings."

In person

Face time is crucial even for those who

"Part time will remain part time depending on your ability to honor and enforce the agreed-upon schedule."

Amy Johnson, Nationwide Insurance

work independently. "Out of sight, out of mind" can be deadly for part-timers. That's why Rebecca Scholer, public relations manager for a major product line for Cynthia, Kentucky-based safety equipment maker Bullard Co., makes monthly treks from her Carmel home to Kentucky whether or not there is a pressing business reason to do so.

"The biggest challenge is maintaining relationships over distance, especially with new people," Scholer said. Personal touches—recognizing birthdays, accomplishments and providing encouragement—work well for her.

However, relationship-building is secondary to consistently exceeding work expectations, Scholer said. "If I don't see their needs first, they won't see the benefits of maintaining this long-distance relationship."

Scholer, who is also working toward her MBA, schedules her 24 hours per week around the needs of her two preschool-age children and her class schedule.

Co-worker relations

Despite solid relationships based on peer respect in the health care communi-

ty, occupational therapist Warner said her part-time status is sometimes an area of contention. "I have the same job responsibilities as full-time people, but I don't have to deal with the politics or the cyclical system events [audits, surveys or year-end reports] that they do," she said.

Her 10-plus years of experience allow her to recognize and nip those feelings in the bud by being understanding, sympathetic and offering to help.

Boundaries between part time and full time can get blurred in the process of being available around the clock or working on "hot projects," the women said. Maintaining part-time status requires a balance between flexibility and "sticking to your guns." Even then, job creep is bound to happen.

Warner has to finish everything she starts each day because she may not return to that facility or job. That can turn her scheduled 24 hours into 30 hours or more.

"Part time will remain part time depending on your ability to honor and enforce the agreed-upon schedule," Johnson of Nationwide Insurance said. "I don't feel like I have to apologize for having to draw the line. I started drawing the line at Nationwide immediately because I had experience with working part time before at Safeco. I knew where the pitfalls were."

Challenges aside, Crowe Chizek's Jennings said she loves the fact that she has the opportunity to work part time. "I know a lot of women who are envious of my work arrangement."