

The Best of Both Worlds: Balancing the Role of Care Giver and Online Educator

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Introduction

Working parents strive to achieve the delicate balance of succeeding in the workplace along with caring for those who depend upon them the most: their children. A sense of pride can come from finding professional success in a rewarding career path just as personal pride can develop as working parents spend quality time with and watch their children grow and evolve into well-rounded individuals. Giving the proper attention to both areas often results in a juggling act of sorts where working parents worry that they will drop one of the “balls” they desperately try to keep in the air on a daily basis.

In a unique twist, online educators perhaps struggle with the issue of balance more than professionals who work outside the home; very often the day does not end at 5 p.m., work hours are not always consistent, and the balancing act then continues as many times these educators continue to work throughout the evening while attempting to spend quality time with their families. Achieving this balance will help online educators become more involved parents as well as more effective educators, working to their best possible capacity in both areas. In doing so, we are also serving as positive role models for our students as many are adult learners who manage hectic personal lives along with completing their degrees.

Online educators experience a deep sense of satisfaction from their work; on the other side of the coin, those who also care for their families desire to feel satisfaction in this area as well. Ideally, both of these needs would be met as work is completed without complication and the daily machinations of the home run along as smoothly as possible, the tasks and events flowing from one into the other without interruption. This is not often the case as working from home can provide online educators with a host of distractions that vie for their attention as they respond to discussion board posts, lead seminars, and grade assignments.

Methodology: Research and Personal Interviews

According to Isabel Isidro managing editor of PowerHomeBiz.com, there are some very common problems that plague telecommuters, and the following applies directly to online educators who also have families who depend upon them for daily care.

- Separating work and family life
- Not enough space
- Being taken seriously
- Cannot do any work
- Lack of privacy
- Strain on family relationships
- Working too much
- Feeling isolated
- Self-discipline or self-management (2005).

Knowing these obstacles to success exist, how can we, as online educators, balance work with family to create a well-rounded, fulfilling experience in both our careers and personal lives? To find this out, we sent out a questionnaire to a group of employees from a large online university; 90% of those, who were mailed this survey, responded. From these results, a number of trends were revealed.

A full-time male faculty member in the department of Social Science, who is the parent of young children, elaborated on one of these obstacles, establishing boundaries between the often-blurred lines of work and home life. His biggest challenge in working from home is “Establishing boundaries between work and family time. Rarely do I have a day off” (personal communication, July 28, 2008).

As in many aspects of life, taking this issue one point at a time and breaking it down to manageable components can help us focus our energies on reaching our full potential. Getting your at-home office and work in order first can ultimately free up more time to spend with family and at that time, the online educator is one step closer to achieving that highly valued balance.

As experienced online educators, the authors utilize a variety of tools in order to stay connected to their online classrooms as they also care for their families. One way both instructors stay on track is by developing schedules for themselves, grading specific assignments on specific days, while remaining flexible enough as there are interruptions in these schedules that much be accommodated as well. Getting up and “going to work” at a certain time every day can help online educators develop a schedule that keeps them on track. While work hours can vary greatly for online instructors, some like to work

early in the morning, some late at night, etc., keeping to a schedule can help these instructors accomplish their ultimate goal of finishing their work in a timely manner so that they can best serve their students' needs. "The number one mistake people make is thinking they can work whenever they feel like it. This can backfire, so make sure you set regular working hours such as 10:00 am to 5:00 pm and stick to it as much as you can" (Krishnan, 2005, p. 3).

When online educators are on the go, shuttling their children back and forth to various activities, using a handheld computer can assist in staying connected to email and the university website. Many times, parents are left waiting for their children to finish school or extracurricular activities and using a handheld or PDA allows online instructors to effectively multi-task and make the most of their downtime. In short, a handheld computer can help online instructor practice good time management skills, just as we advise our students to do as they work on their assignments and juggle their busy lives as well. Many handhelds come equipped with everything an online instructor needs; for example, the Touch by HTC (offered by Sprint) gives its users the ability to use Windows Mobile, connect to Outlook, and access the university website with ease (Sprint, 2008). Using this type of tool can also cut down on the frustration of carrying a much more bulky laptop in order to complete necessary work outside of the home office. PDAs or other handhelds can also help an online educator stay on top of the "extras" that fall outside the realm of teaching classes, performing administrative duties, and answering emails. Full-time instructors at X University are required to complete professional development activities and adjunct instructors are encouraged to do so as well. These can take the form of subscribing to professional publications, publishing your own work, taking additional college courses-toward a degree or as a refresher-attending/presenting at conferences, and X University also provides professional development opportunities in the form of monthly CTL (Center for Teaching and Learning) live events. These are all worthwhile endeavors, designed to create well-rounded educators, but they also require balance as online educators strive to complete more tasks on their already overflowing plates. Using a PDA to read a professional journal or attend an online event is yet another way handheld computers can help online educators better manage their time. In addition, one can maximize "downtime" by printing out necessary documents and keeping these in a purse, briefcase, or even a diaper bag to read when waiting for a doctor's appointment or for soccer practice to end.

Even when effective time management skills are implemented, some factors cannot be anticipated, such as a personal emergency or a child who will simply not cooperate while mom and dad try to finish the day's work. According to the article titled *Home Based Business Owners: Balancing Work with Family*, "Emergencies, of course, can never be scheduled. Set up an emergency strategy with your family so that you will be prepared should a dire family situation take you away from your work" (2008). Here, planning once again comes into play as those who work from home try to anticipate any potential emergencies as they create a plan to keep up with work as they handle whatever arises. In situations like this, it is important that online educators have an open line of communication with one's supervisor so that he/she can help cover necessary work, i.e. seminars, wrapping up the discussion for the week, etc.

One factor online educators with children must keep in mind is that children do not always behave in the manner we wish; they are not adults and have needs that are different than ours and therefore, we must make time to fulfill these needs and also show them understanding when their actions disrupt our workday. We cannot expect our children to act like adults because they are, of course, children. Younger children in particular might not understand that mom or dad are home to work; they want to interact and play with you, something that is not always possible when a deadline is looming in the distance. A few ways to work around this issue is to work either early in the morning or late in the evening while the children are asleep; parents of school-aged children can also take advantage of school hours to complete a good portion of their work. Set boundaries, letting your children know that your office-no matter where it is in the house-is your office and should not be disturbed, used for play, etc. (What to expect from children, 2007). Alternately, while it is important to set clear boundaries with our children on expected behavior when we are working, it's also important that we focus on our children at our "off" times. Often times, it can be hard to solely focus on our children's needs while at home so it may be necessary to leave the home each day (or as often as you can); many online instructors sign their children up for activities during the day, including dance lessons or art classes, so that the parent knows that the child will get some special time with the parent during the day.

There are a variety of techniques an online educator can put into practice when attempting to keep their child or children busy during the at-home workday. Projects and activities to keep children entertained are a must for any parent who works as an online educator, and, as stated previously, activities that take place outside the home are also useful tools. Many local park districts offer fun and educational courses that do not require parent attendance, and a structured environment such as a day-care, even when used on a limited basis, can help an online educator and parent make the most of their work time. Assistant Dean of Programs at X University takes advantage of the wonderful programs offered by a day-care located in the city of Chicago and shares her thoughts here.

As an administrator, I need to be available during regular business hours, and there are often meeting in the early afternoon. Kayla's school has an after school program that offers care until 6:00 PM. Although she does not have to stay there until 6:00, 2:45 is still early in the work day. There are many benefits of the programs including allowing more time in the workday, as well as offering the opportunity for her to participate in activities. Instead of running all over the city for various lessons, last year she participated in Girls Scouts, opera for all, Lookingglass acting lessons, and violin lessons. All activities were held after school at the school, reducing the stress of trying to find activities in the different parts of the city (personal communication, July 27, 2008)

If outside care or activities are not a viable option, children can have fun and keep themselves busy while you work by completing a craft project while mom or dad types away on the laptop. Not only will this occupy children and give the online educator more

time to work, arts and crafts projects are far more beneficial for children than simply parking them in front of the television all day. Some of the benefits associated with completing craft projects include helping children learn: creativity, perseverance, concentration, delayed gratification, social interaction, task completion, planning, expression of emotion, openness, and [positive] self-image (Joubert, n.d.). The comparisons between what online educators must learn and the benefits of children completing craft projects while their parents work from home are striking, and shows that both parent and child can benefit from working in an independent and creative manner.

When the workday is finally over and the laptop closed, how can online educators make the most of their downtime in order to reconnect with their children? There are simple ways this can be done including: playing together, quick board games are a big hit, listening to music together, cooking a special, yet quick and simple meal and eating it together, and establishing a bedtime routine.

The bedtime routine is another great way to regularly connect with your kids. More than just a "bedtime story," your routine can include prayer time (which is a great way to find out what's going on in your child's world), sharing the day's "highs" and "lows," and the opportunity to ask questions or simply cuddle with one another. Keep in mind, too, that the bedtime routine doesn't disappear once your kids are old enough to tuck themselves in. Look for ways to adjust your routine, and yet still connect, as your kids get older (Wolf, 2008).

When posed with the question of how to balance working from home with an active family life, we turned to the experts, the faculty members of X University. They provided insightful replies when questioned on how they manage to lead stimulating online classrooms all the while caring for their family members.

A full-time female faculty member, a mother of three children, balances her work and family life by maintaining a schedule that allows her to spend time with her children while also completing her work. "I do not work in the mornings, other than to check email. I spend mornings with my children, and then have childcare in the afternoons and evenings. My workday is usually from about 3-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday, and then several hours on the weekends" (personal communication, July 24, 2008). Much like this faculty member, her chair, a parent of a high school son, maintains a structured schedule in order to complete his work each day. "I usually set hours from 8:30 – 6 PM ET. My son is in school or after school activities during this time so it is not too bad. Though, he is 14" (personal communication, July 21, 2008). No matter the type of schedule, sticking to one is an essential component in balancing both home and work life in order to enjoy both, equally important, aspects of your life. It is also important to note that these schedules allow online educators to close their laptops at the end of the "workday," no matter at what time the workday is finished. Setting limits and boundaries is crucial as without them, many online instructors are tempted to continue working and this very often interrupts equally important family time.

A full-time instructor, who is also the mother of two young children, shared her detailed weekly schedule:

Wednesday –check e-mail often and monitor DB while my kids run around; when my toddler is napping I try to grade papers; teach one class in the evening while my husband watches the kids

Thursday – heavy day – again, check e-mail and be caught up on the DB; teach two classes at night while my husband watches the kids; do as much grading as possible

Friday – I try to get someone to help me with the kids this day – usually a neighbor. I like to have all my grading done by Friday night (at least the projects!).

Saturday & Sunday – Enjoy as much of the weekend as possible (like a person who works “normal” hours). Still check e-mail regularly and get caught up on the DB during my Sunday night office hours. We usually go camping or skiing on weekends, so I like to devote that time to my family as much as possible.

Monday – A bit lighter load; monitor e-mail and DB while kids run around.

Tuesday – Contact my mentees; wrap up the DB and check e-mail. I try to get together with my girlfriends on Tuesdays (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

Her schedule is a great example of balancing work and family life as both are very active aspects of her day-to-day existence. As shown in her schedule, some days will be heavier work days than others and this is where balance comes in again as we make every effort to integrate some play in with our work.

Finally, a full-time faculty member, who is the father of a young son, has also developed a work schedule that works well for both him and his family.

It’s actually much easier to balance these things than when working at a traditional school, mostly because of my former commute. I have more time to spend with my family now. I am able to work in the mornings before my child gets up and then after he goes to bed, but sometimes I do feel like I have to be available for my students more than when I taught at a traditional school. That is perhaps my issue, though, because I feel I must sign in 7 days a week or the work will pile up. If something does come up, though, I have far more flexibility. I can close out and come back to emails or db work later, whereas that might not have been possible working in a traditional college (personal communication, July 22, 2008).

Another common issue among online educators is the lack of understanding regarding the nature of our work; while we are home, we are also at work and need the time to complete that work so that we can best serve our students. Members of X’s faculty also weighed in on this matter as well. A full-time faculty member, who is also the mother of four girls (13 and younger), discusses this in detail.

It is impossible for my extended family and friends to understand the intensity of my work. They think that when I'm at my computer, they can have conversations with me...it looks to them as though I'm just surfing the net! They simply cannot understand that I'm actually working...no matter what I tell them. However my daughters ages 12, 10, and 8 are awesome. They totally respect the time that I need to work. My 2 year old is coming along (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

A full-time faculty member, who is also the mother of seven children, including a baby, concurred with conclusions raised by others, stating that there are times when her family and friends do not realize she is indeed working in a diligent manner as she "stares" at her computer screen throughout the day. According to this faculty member, one of the biggest challenges she faces as an online instructor comes about when "[...] no one really believes I am working...I think they all think I am surfing e-bay" (personal communication, July 22, 2008).

One common theme that ran through all of the responses received was the connection online educators feel when working in what many might view as an isolated manner. All respondents indicated that they do not feel lonely; rather, they stay connected with local friends and families by seeing them on a regular basis and also by communicating, in many cases daily, with online colleagues and friends, no matter the physical distance separating them. One interviewee summed it up well by saying. "[...] I often try to reach out and connect via IM or phone with my peers. I also try to attend our dept. meetings as a way to stay connected, and visit the company websites" (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

Conclusion/Findings

To truly achieve a healthy balance in our lives, online educators must give attention to both our families and work-related obligations. By doing so, we truly can have it all, a satisfying career in the field of education and a family life where those who are important to us know we will make them a priority as well. It is this balance that will help us continue to evolve into well-rounded mothers, fathers, and educators.

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