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Are all work-life balance experts self-employed hypocrites?

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If it's so doable to find satisfaction in both your personal life and your career, why have so many work-life balance experts left corporate America?

This spring, a female startup president made waves by [publicly confessing](#) on Fortune.com that she'd been prejudiced against working moms during her early career, dismissing their contributions and schedule constraints, only to realize the error of her ways when she became a mother.

While her apology struck me as a thinly veiled ploy to publicize her company, which matches remote technology workers with businesses that need project-based labor, one fact stuck with me after the hubbub died down. Here was yet another refugee from corporate America offering a solution to the work-life balance problems that afflict working mothers, not to mention working fathers and people with elder care needs or time-consuming hobbies and interests outside the office.

And it made me wonder, as I often have in a dozen years as a workplace journalist: if it's so doable to find satisfaction in both your personal life and your corporate career, why have so many work-life balance experts left corporate America?

"It's like all the anorexic and bulimic nutritionists. We all study what we're trying to solve in ourselves," says Deborah Epstein Henry, who founded the consultancy Flex Time Lawyers after finding the time demands of corporate law incompatible with raising her family. "When I first started getting interested in these issues nearly 20 years ago, I was very much focused on work-life issues because my kids were young."

These two examples are just a few of the many who have dropped out of the rat race to write, consult, and propose solutions that give others the workplace flexibility they themselves lacked. Former State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote her call-to-arms Atlantic Monthly article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" after she left behind the long hours and travel demands of her government career, hypothesizing that those who are both mothers and top professionals are either superhuman, rich, or self-employed. The founders of iRelaunch, which helps people restart careers after a break, launched their company after leaving the workforce to focus on raising families. And my Fortune colleague and friend [Laura Vanderkam](#) writes about productivity and time management for corporate executives, having never worked a "real job" herself.

"I write for a living and I always have," explains Vanderkam. "I embarked on the book writing part of it pretty young, so there was limited time for working for anybody or anything."

Indeed, I myself began writing about work-life balance issues as a national correspondent on staff with Newhouse News Service, where I negotiated a reduced hour work schedule and learned to manage the politics of leaving the newsroom at 5 p.m. for daycare pickup. But since 2008, I've covered this beat from the comfort of my home office, as an independent journalist. Are we all a bunch of hypocrites, dispensing advice about office mores while sidestepping that minefield ourselves?

I prefer to accept the explanation that Vanderkam and Henry offer, that when you're deeply interested in work-life issues, career paths, and leadership, you're naturally inclined to seek out an independent perch from which to write and research.

I am certainly aware of the danger that I'll lose touch with the pressures and demands of those who read what I write, and I try to take extra time in my reporting to make sure my work is relevant.

Vanderkam has gone beyond journalistic anecdote in her forthcoming book, *I Know How She Does It: How Successful Women Make the Most of Their Time*, in which she analyzes time diaries of 1,001 days in the lives of working moms who earn at least six figures. Among other things, she found that those of us who sought the flexibility of self-employment aren't the only ones "having it all," as Slaughter posited.

"People who are self-employed have more absolute freedom about how they can move around work, but women in corporate jobs often have a fair amount of autonomy too," she says. Three-quarters of the women Vanderkam studied used core work hours to attend to a personal matter, and many of them left the office before their work was complete, finishing up in the evenings after a family dinner and bedtime. Others strategically worked longer days so they could enjoy shorter days when either work permitted or family needs demanded it.

So, perhaps those of us who research and write about work-life balance and flexibility should take another look at those corporate jobs. It could be that the workplace has changed dramatically since we fled. Certainly, more employers are trying to create [more inclusive workplaces](#) for women, working parents, and others who don't fit the mold of the ideal worker, available 24-7 to an employer. (Although it remains to be seen whether [these efforts](#) by the likes of Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and others will succeed.)

Or maybe, our years of teasing out effective strategies for managing work and home commitments has created such a useful body of knowledge that those who stick with the corporate grind are able to manage their work and personal demands better than we could in our previous jobs. One can dream.