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A new mommy track

Why does the choice have to come down to stay-at-home moms or traditional jobs? Some women have found a third option: mom-friendly business ventures.

By Laura Vanderkam, USA TODAY

Dorit Zeevi-Farrington was the ultimate modern career woman. Born in Israel, she became an Israeli Defense Forces officer, then moved to New York and earned her MBA. She climbed the ladder of a Wall Street trading firm to the first vice president level. She logged long hours. She traveled the world. She earned "close to seven figures."

Then in 2001 she had a baby. That changed everything.

"I couldn't see a nanny raising my daughter," she says. Within a year of returning from maternity leave, she volunteered for the next round of layoffs. Her superiors protested, but she insisted, and soon Zeevi-Farrington joined the ranks of high-achieving moms "opting out" of the traditional workforce.

Such stories are legion these days -- and they send both sides in the war over women's life choices racing to the ramparts.

Traditionalists applaud stats showing that the number of children with stay-at-home mothers rose 13% in the past decade. They cheer when surveys of young college women find most hope to cut back their hours after having kids.



Feminist lament

Traditional feminists lament the exodus's results. Forty-two years after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* cajoled women into the workforce, a recent Catalyst survey found just 5.2% of Fortune 500 companies' top earners are female.

Both sides miss what's happening on the front lines. Zeevi-Farrington's story doesn't stop with her severance check. She took the money and built a custom-design 62-foot yacht, the *Noa Danielle*, decorated like Jay Gatsby's sitting room. Now Manhattan Steamboat Company, her new family business, whisks revelers around New York's harbors. With clients including IBM and Novartis, Manhattan Steamboat is not yet clearing "close to seven figures," but it's getting there, with Zeevi-Farrington's daughter, now 4, often playing onboard.

"Opting out doesn't mean opting out of work. It means looking at all your options," says Ellen Parlapiano, co-author with Patricia Cobe of the book *Mompreneurs*. A growing number of women have decided that starting their own ventures that let them combine work and family beats slogging through the male-constructed traditional workforce. These women are showing us a third way -- that it is possible to have it all.

The debate over women's choices certainly turns acrimonious at times, though I don't see why. As someone who has been earning a living without having a "real" job in years, I'm hardly shocked that young women with a world of options don't want to spend their lives in the traditional workforce.

Plenty of parts of the corporate world stink. Think meandering meetings. Hierarchies built by men obsessed with organization charts. Commuting. Getting only two weeks of vacation a year. Politics. Two percent raises. Overtime. And, yes, bosses. As Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, writes in *Winning*, "The truth is, your boss wants 150% of you and, if you are good enough, he will do almost anything to get it."

A bad bargain

You don't need to be a mom to think that's a bad bargain, especially when income can be earned other ways and benefit

packages seem to shrink by the year.

Entrepreneurs, in general, have a better shot at controlling their lives. And moms have advantages in the new venture game. "Running a business is a lot like raising a family," Parlapiano says.

You have to be organized and patient, and moms, she notes, tend to be more careful with budgets than other entrepreneurs. They borrow less for start-up costs and choose less capital-intensive businesses. They grow their businesses slowly, getting bigger as their children become more independent. Men, on the other hand, try to borrow a lot of capital and get big quick.

That's why most small businesses fail. Not so with moms. Parlapiano and Cobe were researching a book called Mompreneurs Online when the dot-com bubble imploded. They called their subjects a year later to count casualties. Turns out, "every single one of these women dot-com entrepreneurs was still in business."

Since then, the technology that enables people to succeed in mom-friendly start-ups -- such as accounting or selling mom-and-baby exercise videos on eBay -- has only gotten better. With today's cellphone-BlackBerry combos and laptops, face time is about the only reason knowledge workers need to commute.

So it's no wonder talented women decide that hanging out with their kids beats meeting -- again -- with their colleagues. The number of women-owned businesses rose 17% from 1997 to 2004, according to the Center for Women's Business Research, vs. 9% for all firms. These firms are making moms plenty of money; the median self-employed worker's income, reports the National Association for the Self-Employed, is higher than the median salaried worker's. That means extra cash to buy the benefits you're forgoing, though I won't pretend that losing corporate-subsidized health insurance is easy. Many mompreneurs' husbands stay in the grind for this reason. Other moms buy policies, build this into their revenue models, and wager that a few thousand dollars a year isn't sufficient reason to tie themselves to the male work model that says hierarchies, meetings and spending 70 hours a week away from your loved ones is living.

Mompreneur Chris McCurry of Blowing Rock, N.C., considers the good life to be spending time in the woods and with her son. A former holistic nurse, she had always worked part-time with her husband on Highland Craftsmen, their environmentally friendly wood products company. When they started a family in 2003, she joined the venture full time. She promptly doubled Highland Craftsmen's business. Unlike most construction company higher-ups, though, McCurry eats breakfast, lunch and dinner with her son. The little guy spends some time with a babysitter, and some time in the office or forest with mom trying to "help."

"I feel extraordinarily lucky," she says. It beats a cubicle any day.

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