



Motherhood Changed My Priorities

This Mother's Day marks the second celebration of the most amazing and life-altering event in my life, becoming a mother. From conception to pregnancy to delivery to rearing, motherhood is amazing. Children bring out of us amazing and unrealized love. A 64 year-old mother and co-worker said it to me best, "I bet you never thought you could love someone so much."

I also never thought my life would change so much. I'm not just talking about the insomnia and larger shoe size, but my way of thinking and living has changed completely. A vice-president recently asked me where I see myself in five to 10 years, and before I could craft the perfect answer to secure my next career move, I responded, "Being a good mom is my priority. I'm not willing to sacrifice that for the C-suite."

Before becoming a mother, I never thought I would make a statement like that. I was the driven, career woman breaking the glass ceiling, climbing the ladder of success, and paving the way for others to follow. Though I thought it was admirable, I didn't fully understand why women gave up or took detours from corporate success to stay home and care for children. I was puzzled when I heard of mothers crying the entire first day they enrolled their child in daycare. Then came Gabrielle. Guess what happened to me after my first visit to a daycare center we were considering to care for our daughter! Let's just say the center director called later that day to comfort me. I even postponed my anticipated return to work several times. It wasn't that I didn't want to work anymore; I just didn't want to leave my baby in someone else's care for 45+ hours per week. Almost instantly, my priorities changed. I talked with my supervisor about flexible office hours and working from home some each week, and it was granted.

I'm fortunate to work for an organization that makes motherhood a priority. Unfortunately, most working mothers are not employed by organizations that do the same. According to the US Department of Labor, only eight percent of workers have paid family leave to care for newborns and other family members. The Multistate Working Families Consortium sites that the US is one of only four countries worldwide that do not guarantee paid leave and/or a substantial birth payment for parents to care for their newborn babies. Fifty-two percent of private sector employees are entitled to paid sick days and 30% are entitled to stay home with pay when a child is sick. These policies persist even as more mothers are now in the workforce. Today, just 30% of families with children have a stay-at-home parent, down from 70% in 1960. Seventy-one percent of mothers are in the workforce.

With workplace policies that don't make motherhood a priority, many mothers feel they have to choose between being a good mother and being a good employee. According to a study

conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2007, mothers who work full-time are harder on themselves when rating their parenting on a scale from zero to ten. Only 21% of working mothers say full-time work is the ideal situation for them. Sixty percent say part-time work would be their ideal and another 19% say they would prefer not working at all outside of the home.

Working mothers have various preferences for work. While some only want to work part time, others want to work full time and receive paid maternity leave and sick days. Other mothers prefer compressed work weeks or telecommuting options. If you are a mother working in a manner not conducive to the priority of motherhood, here are three tips on how to work with your employer to make your preference a reality.

1. **Demonstrate that you are invaluable to the organization.** Produce quality work. Go above and beyond tasks assigned. Do your job well and be an employee of integrity even in little things like not stealing company pens and abusing lunch breaks (ouch!). Organizations are not as inclined to be flexible with average and mediocre employees.
2. **Do your homework.** Take your employee handbook out of the bottom of your bottom desk drawer, read it and know the policies in place for maternity leave, sick days, and work hours. I also researched organizations similar in size and purpose to compare their benefits with those in my organization. Find out if other mothers in your organization are granted work schedule flexibility. Be mindful of the type of position you have before comparing your flexibility options to those of others. If you answer phones and greet visitors for your organization, you likely won't be able to work from home 40 hours per week, but you may be able to come in to work earlier and leave early enough to pick up your children from school while a co-worker covers the front desk for you. Likewise, if you directly supervise a number of employees in your office, working from home the majority of your work week may not be a feasible option. Advances in technology also allow for greater work schedule flexibility. Much of our jobs are performed through e-mail and conference calls. There is even technology that allows you to remotely access your office network drives. Know the technology you will need to make your work preference feasible.
3. **Dare to ask.** Just because your employer has not provided flexibility before doesn't mean they won't grant flexibility when asked, especially after you have demonstrated your value and done your homework. It is also important that you communicate your motherhood priorities and preferences up-front. I scheduled meetings with my supervisors while I was pregnant to discuss my work schedule preferences. This gives your organization time to make any needed adjustments through job-sharing and the delegation of assignments to other co-workers.

There is no job more important than motherhood. Wise employers understand this and the mothers they employ have increased productivity and loyalty, reduced stress, and are able to do what matters most—nurture and shape generations to come.

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