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# Flex and Balance: Exercising Reform in Twenty-First Century Library Work Environments

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## Flex and Balance: Exercising Reform in Twenty-First Century Library Work Environments

I am an assistant librarian on the tenure-track and responsible for all aspects of the electronic collections at a large research university. I am also the mother of a two-and-a-half year old little girl. Those two identifying characteristics make me one of at least 26.2 million U.S. working-women with children at home.<sup>1</sup> According to my favorite reference source, *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, I am also one of 229,000 civilian librarians, of whom 84% are women.<sup>2</sup> I couldn't find a statistic for how many women librarians have children at home, but, by extrapolation, you can see that there are probably a lot of us. Oh, and by the way, I'm exhausted. Finding time to be an excellent mom as well as an excellent librarian is a challenge, but both roles are very important to me. In fact, being the mother of a little girl makes me even more determined to have a successful career so that I can be a good role-model for my daughter.

I don't think that I'm exceptional. While work-life balance may have been primarily a women's issues in the past, I would like to suggest that it really should be a *family* issue and will become ever more important for the employers of both sexes. It may be that women *currently* bear the primary care-giving responsibility, but increasingly fathers want to participate in home life in a real and meaningful way.<sup>3</sup> My husband, who is an associate professor and was granted tenure last spring, is a great dad who steps up for at least 50% of our domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, this is certainly not an issue pitting those with children against those without. One survey indicates that fully 35% of employees of both sexes have provided care for a family member 65 or older in the last year.<sup>4</sup> As someone who cared for her elderly grandmother for two years, I can certainly attest that eldercare is perhaps even more exhausting than childcare because

there are fewer of the attendant joys. A recent report commissioned by the Families and Work Institute noted that “employees with families report significantly higher levels of interference between their jobs and their family lives than employees 25 years ago (45% versus 34% report this ‘some’ or ‘a lot’).”<sup>5</sup> There just has to be a better way to balance work and family and reduce this interference.

I don’t claim to have a magic bullet, but I do firmly believe that two of the most obvious options are flexible scheduling and telecommuting. As of May 2004, over 27.5% (27,411,000 out of 99,778,000) of full-time workers 16 years and over (excluding the self-employed) reported working at least some hours on a flexible schedule.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, 20.7 million people regularly worked from home at least once per week as a part of their primary job.<sup>7</sup> While these types of working arrangements are somewhat unorthodox for libraries, there is really no reason that one or the other would not work for most librarians, at least on a limited basis.

I myself have experimented with both types of working arrangements and recently detailed my six-month experience telecommuting from Washington, DC to my library in Utah in a recent article in *College & Research Libraries News*.<sup>8</sup> I found the experience to be both personally rewarding and professionally challenging. I returned to my library building in July 2007 and discovered that my home life continued to have a way of intruding at work. When my Thursday daycare arrangement fell through, my supervisor agreed to allow me to resume a more limited telecommuting arrangement, whereby I would stay home one morning and make up the hours in the evening, at home, after my daughter had gone to bed. Because I had proven that I could make telecommuting work on a large scale, my supervisor was willing to allow me this opportunity.

I am fortunate in that what I do is naturally suited to telecommuting. Because I work with electronic resources, I can grab my laptop and have access to my collection as well as all the tools I need to work with it (ILS, ERM, e-mail client, web-editor, productivity tools, etc.) When I stay home, I have my cell phone handy for questions from colleagues. But many librarians, even those who don't work primarily with electronic collections, will find that there is plenty of work to bring home, particularly if they have a computer with Internet access. For example:

- E-mail can keep most people busy for at least an hour a day and dispensing with it at one setting frees you for more productive tasks in the office.
- Professional reading, which often gets pushed to the bottom of my list, is more easily accomplished without distractions of colleagues or a ringing phone.
- I almost *always* work on research/writing at home after my family is in bed because it is the only time—either at work or at home—I can guarantee to be interruption free.
- Depending on specific job responsibilities, possible work-at-home tasks could include on-line reference; creating instruction lesson plans; reviewing catalogs for collection development; scheduling employees; authoring reports, budgets or evaluations; developing web pages.

The list could go on and on.

Libraries are also naturally suited to accommodate flexible schedules because they are often open for long hours. Many public libraries stay open until 9:00 in the evening and academic libraries until midnight or later. However, while public services

desks are generally staffed at all hours, other employees are often expected to work from 8-5. When I was a reference librarian, it was always very helpful for me to work a night or weekend so that I could be off during the regular work-week to handle my grandmother's affairs. Technical services librarians rarely are offered the option to work during off hours. I am pleased to say that my library makes an effort to accommodate those who request a variation in schedule. For example, one of my colleagues cares for her mother in retirement facility. She temporarily worked a split-shift, coming in mornings, leaving at lunch, and returning in the late afternoon to complete her hours. In this way she overlapped her colleagues, but also was able to accommodate her family needs. The situation made for a long day, but was less stressful than worrying about her mother's care. Frankly, librarians are faculty or professionals and need to have some control over their own time, just as the teaching faculty does, providing work is completed. This is a sign of professional respect.

Many people will think that workers who expect to be able to strike a balance between work and family are demanding too much of their employers. I suspect some readers might think working caregivers should not complain and muddle through without demanding institutional changes because isn't that what we have always done? However, I would argue that the working world has changed and work patterns must change with it. As more women have entered the workforce, the stay-at-home spouse has become a luxury; as job markets have nationalized, working families have given up the support of extended family networks; as we become more aware of the negative impact that daily commutes have on not just our environment but also our paychecks, remote work becomes more socially and financially responsible. Over the past several years, libraries and librarians have prided themselves on their adaptation to the 21<sup>st</sup> century information

environment. Now it is time to make similar strides in adapting to the 21<sup>st</sup> century labor market.

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<sup>1</sup>"Employment Status of Women by Marital Status and Presence and Age of Children: 1970 to 2005," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2008*.

<sup>2</sup> "Employed Civilians by Occupation, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2006," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2008*.

<sup>3</sup> See Lisa Belkin's recent article "When Mom and Dad Share it All" in the June 15, 2008 *New York Times Magazine* for a portrait of a particularly egalitarian household.

<sup>4</sup> Families and Work Institute, *Highlights of the National Study of the Changing Workforce: Executive Summary*, No. 3, 2002, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Families and Work Institute, *Highlights of the National Study of the Changing Workforce: Executive Summary*, 3(2002): 3

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Workers on Flexible and Shift Schedules in May 2004," U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/bls/newsrels.htm#OEUS>.

<sup>7</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work at Home in 2004" U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/homey.nr0.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Duncan, "Working from Afar: A New Trend for Librarianship," *College & Research Libraries News* 69(April 2008).

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2008/april08/workingfromafar.cfm>