

Life-work balance – a constant struggle

By Hannah Seligson, New York Times

Kelly Azevedo used to work upward of 70 hours a week.

It wasn't really for the extra money. It's just that she doesn't have children. When colleagues were on kid duty, she had to pick up the slack.

"Parents are a special class, and they get special treatment," says Azevedo, 27, who left her job at an Internet marketing firm to start She's Got Systems, a website for entrepreneurs based in Sacramento. While she was covering for her former colleagues, she says, she sometimes sacrificed her own obligation to take care of her ailing grandparents.

On this Labor Day weekend, when we celebrate the American worker, or at least the last unofficial days of summer, Azevedo is giving voice to what many people feel in their bones: the pursuit of "work-life balance," which sounds so wholesome and reasonable, can be a zero-sum game in the office.

In theory, flextime seems like an everyone-wins proposition. But one person's work-life balance can be another's work-life overload. Someone, after all, has to make that meeting or hit that deadline.

As a result, many Americans who work for companies that embrace flexible hours are confronting a sort of office class warfare. Some employees have come to expect that the demands of their children, in particular, will be accommodated – and not all of their colleagues are happy about it.

These tensions are hardly new. But at a time when many

Americans are struggling to find or keep jobs – and when many of us are being asked to do more with less – the issue has come to the fore.

Child care has long been the third rail in this conversation, and it is receiving renewed attention in no small part because of a recent article in *The Atlantic* by Anne-Marie Slaughter. She discussed the moment she realized that she was unable to hold down a high-level State Department job and attend to her two adolescent boys. While advocating workplace flexibility for everyone, Slaughter stressed the special problems that women face balancing their careers with children.

Slaughter, 53, says both mothers and fathers should be “open and indeed proud” to leave early for the sake of their children and deplors the notion that spending more hours in the office automatically translates into getting more work done. But sometimes there is no substitute for office face time.

It’s not just the moms who are juggling.

“My kids have swim classes that start at 5pm,” says Aziz Gilani, 32, a director at DFJ Mercury, a Houston-based venture capital firm. “The net result is that I’m sure there are times when my partners are expecting me to be in the office and my office is empty because I’m doing one of these parental commitments. I’m sure it creates a burden for them.”

Gilani says it helps that two of his four partners also have young children, but that also means he’s often on the other side. “Sometimes I need an answer immediately, because what we work on is often time-sensitive, but my partner is at soccer practice with his daughter and that has created a decent amount of inconvenience.”

“It’s rough,” he says, but office technology enables them to work around the problem.

Gilani says there has never been a major spat at his firm over the issue. But Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, has found that colleague resentment is very common. “It’s the reason that a lot of work-life balance programs fail,” says Henry, whose firm, based in Ardmore, Pa., advises law firms and other organizations on flexibility policies. “In an ideal world, no one else is saddled with more work if their colleague works a reduced schedule.”

However, reality often strays far from the ideal.

Megan, 31, an associate at a large law firm in Washington who asked that her last name not be used because of the delicacy of the issue, says that when she worked on a case with a more senior lawyer who had a part-time schedule because she had several children, Megan ran the whole case. “She swooped in at the last minute and took all the credit,” says Megan, who is married but does not have children. “Getting the experience was the upside.”

Some employees don’t mind filling in for their colleagues with children – in fact, they see it as paying it forward and advancing the feminist mission to “have it all.”

“I put a high priority on helping other women achieve career success and time with their family,” says Jessie Kornberg, 30, a litigator at Bird, Marella, a Los Angeles-based law firm. But recently she ended up covering for a man – her boss – when he could not make it to a court hearing because of child care responsibilities.

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