

Double Duty Takes a Toll on Working Mothers

Struggling with the demands of jobs and child care, working moms are feeling the strain—and leaving the workforce in droves.

By Theresa Agovino | December 2, 2020 | SHRM

Alma Miranda was excited about landing a job at a company with a reputation as a great place for women to work. Her enthusiasm deflated quickly.

Miranda started as an accountant at North Chicago-based pharmaceutical firm AbbVie Inc. just as the pandemic hit the U.S. last spring, and was quickly thrust into juggling her new paying job with an unpaid position as de facto teacher to her three children: Cosette, 16; Isaak, 13; and Alyssa, 9. She says her bosses piled on assignments and ignored her requests for a slower pace until she could adjust to her dual identity.

“It was just too much between the job and then the schooling, the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry,” Miranda says. “I was working 12 hours a day.”

She quit her job in May and opted not to seek another so she can help her children with their schoolwork. “It’s just easier this way,” she explains, adding that her husband is an essential worker who hasn’t been able to help much at home.

RISING RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME

60%

of **working parents** have **no outside help** in caring for and educating their children.



Parents now spend **an additional 27 hours** a week on household chores, child care and education.



Women currently spend **15 more hours** a week than men on domestic labor.



Close to half of respondents feel that their **performance at work has suffered** because of these added responsibilities.

Source: COVID-19 Caregivers Survey, Boston Consulting Group, 2020.

In a statement, AbbVie said it is committed to helping employees succeed. Part of that strategy includes offering flexibility that allows employees and managers to determine when, where and how the work is accomplished.

Flexible scheduling has become a common practice at most companies as the pandemic drags on, keeping physical schools and day care centers closed in many parts of the country. But it just isn’t cutting it anymore for many of the working moms who are trying to do their jobs while raising children. In September, 865,000 adult women dropped out of the workforce, more than four times the number of men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In

addition, one-quarter of all women are considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers, according to a study by McKinsey & Co. and LeanIn.org.

A Growing Burden

“There’s no wishing this pandemic away,” says Joan Williams, a law professor at the University of California-Hastings and director of its Center for Worklife Law. “If employers don’t come to terms with this [crisis], we will come out [of it] a workforce bleached of mothers.”

Study after study show that women have been shouldering more of the domestic and child care responsibilities this year. That typically means they’re on a virtual high-wire act that requires getting up early and going to bed late to complete the work they’re paid for so that they can tend to their children during the day.

In 55 percent of U.S. households, women are twice as likely to have primary or sole responsibility for cooking, cleaning, child care and education during the pandemic, according to a survey by Boston Consulting Group. Women are spending 15 more hours a week on domestic labor than men—equivalent to a day and a half.



Alma Miranda quit her job in May to have more time to help Alyssa, 9, and her two older children with their schoolwork.

The resulting exhaustion has led many women to quit their jobs or scale back their hours. Those who don’t have that option—such as single mothers—worry about their job performance and how it may affect their career path. Women still make 81 cents for every dollar earned by men, according to PayScale, and women of color earn 75 cents. Experts worry that the pandemic is destroying the strides women have made in the workforce and will put gender equity further out of reach.



VERIZON'S CHRO ON PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Chief human resource officers have been in overdrive since the pandemic hit, developing ways to help employees—especially those with children—maneuver through the crisis. Christy Pambianchi, Verizon's executive vice president and chief human resources officer, leads the team that created a plan to address the needs of the telecommunication giant's 135,000 employees.

New benefits include granting caregivers eight weeks of fully paid leave and 18 more at 60 percent of their salaries. Verizon also lifted monetary caps on access to backup day care providers and began reimbursing employees who found care options on their own. Flexible work has always been an option, and in the middle of the pandemic, the company began providing full benefits to those working part time, a move that was in the works before the public health crisis began.

Pambianchi discussed with HR Magazine how Verizon has been addressing the crisis and what the pandemic could mean for women's careers.

How do you convince employees it's OK to take advantage of benefits when we're in the middle of a recession and people are afraid of losing their jobs?

Company leadership has to set the tone. The CEO and I have daily broadcasts at noon. We openly talk about what we're doing and how we're going to come through this tighter as a company. We tell employees what we're doing to help them. We put up highlight videos [on internal channels]. We broadcast it on Twitter every day.

How did you get skeptical managers to agree to the leave?

We put together a leave team [in HR]. All the requests are handled under one person. It isn't being decided on a local leader level. This is a crisis. [Employees] don't want to have to call their supervisor and say, "My husband has this condition" or "I have this issue." HR is like an emergency room triage right now. People are scared, and we need to be there to help them. We need them to be comfortable asking for help.

Are you bringing employees back to the office?

Late in the second quarter, we reopened our administration office and we have four groups of rotating employees, so 25 percent of people go in each week. We encourage people to go into the office only if it's business-critical. We have safety protocols in place. We'll revisit this at the end of the year. In June, we started bringing all the

stores online. [Editor's Note: Thirty percent have been open during the pandemic for emergencies.] We have touchless retail and curbside pickup.

Are you concerned that the pandemic could hurt progress of women in the workplace overall?

I think if women quit outright, it's hard to break back in. If that's a trend, it would be bad. I had four kids of my own. I encourage women to not drop out even if they want to take a pause. Keep working a little. Keep connected. I've watched women drop out, and they lose the connectivity to work and the workplace. They lose their confidence.
—T.A.

New Work Structures Needed

"People are reaching a breaking point," says Pam Cohen, Ph.D., president of WerkLabs, the research division of The Mom Project, a Chicago-based company that provides job-placement services and other support for mothers in the workplace. "They aren't seeing a finish line. It's like a never-ending ultramarathon."

One upside of the pandemic, experts say, is that skeptical employers learned that people can work from home and be productive. The next step is for companies to add child care benefits and truly embrace job sharing and part-time work for career-track positions. "We need new work structures," Cohen says.

Women have disproportionately suffered pandemic-related job losses: From February through September 2020, **women lost nearly 5.8 million net jobs**, accounting for 53.9% of overall net job loss since the start of the public health crisis, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Earlier this year, Verizon Communications Inc. started allowing employees to work part time but with full-time benefits, though the program had been in the works since 2019 when unemployment was at historic lows.

"The economy will rebound, and companies need a way to keep people tethered," says Christy Pambianchi, Verizon's chief human resources executive. "You can't let all that talent walk out the door."

Support Systems

Some organizations, especially larger ones, are stepping up to the COVID-19 challenge. Aside from Verizon, tech behemoths Google, Facebook and Microsoft are among the companies that have added more paid leave to accommodate employees. Analog Devices Inc., a tech

company based in Norwood, Mass., and Synchrony Financial, a financial services firm in Stamford, Conn., hosted virtual activities for children over the summer and added elements such as tutoring for the fall. Cisco Systems Inc., a San Jose-based tech giant, is creating a special hybrid school/activity center where employees can leave their children while they work.

“We’re still figuring out what to do,” says Sylvia Mahlebian, Analog Devices’ senior director of learning and leadership development. Companies are facing an unprecedented landscape, she notes, and Analog wants to ensure that it spends its resources wisely.

The situation has triggered more conversations at the company about addressing the needs of its female employees. “We’ve been working one way for so long,” Mahlebian says. Meanwhile, managers are being told “to focus on outcomes, not hours,” she adds.



TraLiza King is grateful for her boss’s support as she splits her time between work and daughters Armalin, 19, and Zoe, 5, but she worries about her productivity level and her longer-term career prospects.

Career Concerns

The hours for many working mothers are exceedingly long, however. TraLiza King, an Atlanta-based director in PwC’s tax department, says the interruptions from her two daughters, Armalin, 19, and Zoe, 5, drag out the workday as she stops and starts her projects to deal with their requests. “I’m exhausted to say the least,” says King, a single mom who is also caring for her mother. She says that “having no support with the kids is just a different beast.”

Even though her boss is very understanding of her situation, King worries about her career prospects and productivity. Communication with management is key in making clear what she

can take on and when she needs to say no. “I make sure I’m checking in with [my boss] to let her know what’s going on,” King says. “You have to be a better version of yourself.”

THE COST OF CHILD CARE

Research conducted by co-working specialists Instant Offices shows that more than half of parents are more concerned about paying for child care than they were before the pandemic. The data indicates that parents are struggling to balance their work and home life, suggesting more child-friendly co-working spaces are needed. Among the key findings:



Parents spend up to **42% of their income** on child care.



Lost productivity caused by child care issues is costing employers **\$12.7 billion a year.**



63% of working parents **have made career or workplace changes** to afford child care.



1 in 3 mothers have lost a day’s pay due to child care arrangements falling through.



More than **50% of women have scaled back** their working hours to reduce child care costs.

Miranda Davis was extremely unhappy with the iteration of herself that was emerging as she tried to educate her two sons while working as a project manager at an educational publisher. “I was screaming at the kids,” says Davis, who requested that her employer’s name not be used. “I was feeling disgruntled at work.”

Davis says her employer was fine with her working at home but that “no one was discussing how the workload is getting done if you aren’t able to get to it in daytime hours.” She eventually took a six-week leave and started to work part time in July. “Something had to happen; otherwise, I was going to have a breakdown,” she explains, noting that her husband doesn’t have the option to work from home. The promotion she was discussing with her boss before the pandemic has been put on hold.

Working part time is going well, though Davis finds herself addressing business needs on her off-hours. “I sometimes wonder if it’s really worth it,” she says.



SCHOOL CLOSURES LEAVE SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN WITHOUT CRUCIAL SERVICES

Remote learning is difficult for many children, but it isn't even an option for 11-year-old Colin Lindsey. His cerebral palsy and autism have left him unable to communicate, walk easily, or feed or clean himself.

"Colin looks at an iPad and sees a toy—he hits and throws it. He can't sit in front of one," says his mother, Ammie Knowles, a strategy and execution manager at Voya Financial Inc. "His type of education plan is using a fork, putting a shirt on, life skills. You can't do that over a computer."

Parents of children with special needs face unique challenges that make trying to balance their work and family lives amid the pandemic even more stressful. Like Colin, many of these youngsters received specific services at school to address their issues—services that can't be delivered via remote technology. It has also been tough to find skilled help to provide targeted types of in-home care amid COVID-19-related restrictions.

Nearly 7 million children between the ages of 3 and 21 receive special education services in public schools. That's 13 percent of students, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that nearly 1 out of every 5 children in the U.S. has a special health care need. Those needs can be for physical, intellectual or developmental disabilities, as well as for chronic medical conditions, such as asthma and diabetes.

Only 7 percent of companies offer employees benefits specifically for children with special needs, according to a study by Willis Towers Watson.

"I don't think there's broad enough awareness of how many children have some kind of special need," says Rachael McCann, a senior director at the consultancy. "Employees tend not to raise those needs as easily" as they do needs for other children.

Benefits for special-needs children aren't on companies' radars. Business has doubled at Wellthy, which provides a wide array of services and benefits for corporations such as Voya, according to Lindsay Jurist-Rosner, the company's co-founder and chief executive officer. However, she says, most companies have added child care and elder care benefits while only a few have introduced services for children with special needs.

"It's almost a full-time job to manage care, to manage logistics, for a special-needs child," Jurist-Rosner says.

And the pandemic is making that job much harder. Nearly 70 percent of individuals who either have a special need or care for someone who does said they were extremely or very concerned about the pandemic, compared with 60 percent of those with no connection to the special-needs community, according to a study by Voya.

It's a worry Knowles understands. She and her husband, also a Voya employee, borrowed from their retirement accounts to enroll Colin in an in-person, private school in July where the tuition is \$22,000 a year.

“Colin wasn’t getting what he needed at home,” Knowles says, adding that she feared he was regressing because he wasn’t receiving enough specialized care. “We were doing as much therapy as we could.”

But the couple also has two daughters, plus their careers. Says Knowles: “We can’t give him the constant hands-on learning that he needs and care for our girls and do our jobs.” —T.A.

Mothers File Lawsuits

Some mothers—notably single moms and those who otherwise support their families—can’t pare back their hours, and their employers’ alleged inflexibility is resulting in lawsuits. Drisana Rios of San Diego sued her former employer, insurance brokerage HUB International, for gender discrimination, harassment and wrongful termination in a suit that alleges she was fired for failing to keep her two children quiet during business calls, according to various press reports. Rios also alleges that her boss badgered her for not having child care even though day care centers were closed. Representatives from both sides didn’t return requests for comment.

Single mother Stephanie Jones, former director of revenue management at Eastern Airlines LLC, sued the company and two of its executives for allegedly firing her for requesting leave under the federal coronavirus relief law to take care of her son because his school was closed. Passed in mid-March, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) requires certain employers to provide employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specific reasons related to COVID-19. In response to Jones’ request, one of the executives wrote in an e-mail that the new law was there as “a safety net and not a hammer to force management into making decisions which may not be in the best interest of the company or yourself.”

Jones says she was working from 5 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. with few breaks as the Wayne, Pa.-based company shifted its strategy to provide repatriation flights for those stranded outside of the U.S. amid the pandemic. That meant she couldn’t help her 12-year-old son, Brian, with his schoolwork when he asked.

“It made me feel like a failure as a mother that I didn’t have the time to help him during the transition,” Jones says. “We also had connectivity issues. We couldn’t get into lesson plans.”

Jones requested to work from home and have two hours a day to help her son. She was expecting to discuss it with a company official on March 27 but instead was fired for unspecified “conflicts,” she says. The company has alleged that the FFCRA wasn’t in effect when the leave request was made, according to Jones’ lawyer, M. Frances Ryan, who denies that claim. Eastern’s lawyer declined to comment, and company representatives didn’t return requests for comment.

Jones had relocated to Pennsylvania to accept what she once called her “dream job” with Eastern. But in October, unable to afford her rent, she and her son moved to Texas to stay with family.

HOW CAN HR HELP?

Experts share the following tips on how HR can best help women (and men) who are working from home while also caring for their children:

Communicate openly and frequently with your employees. Listen to their needs and concerns, and be as accommodating as possible.

Remind employees of your organization’s mental health benefits, and bolster those benefits if feasible.

Encourage workers to take vacation or paid time off, and make sure managers understand the importance of allowing time away from work.

Promote the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which requires certain employers to provide workers with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for reasons specifically related to COVID-19.

Set standards for work/life balance. For example, instruct managers and supervisors not to send nonurgent e-mails at all hours and not to expect immediate responses to questions that can wait.

Prioritize which projects are most important so workers know where to focus.

Explore paying for or subsidizing virtual or in-person tutoring services or babysitting.

Consider introducing job sharing or part-time work for positions where those options don’t exist.

Reduce the number of meetings, and carefully choose participants.

Record meetings or have someone take notes for those who can’t attend.

Take employees’ overall record into account when conducting performance reviews and determining raises and bonuses. Right now, employees are navigating challenging circumstances. —T.A.

The Digital Divide

Cisco Systems is taking a big step to ease the pressure on its working parents. In late August, it started an onsite, all-day program for employees' children at its San Jose, Calif., office, from kindergarteners to 12-year-olds. The company isn't developing any curriculum, but it hired teachers to help students with their remote learning, as well as to keep them occupied after the school day ends.

"When we realized schools in the Bay Area weren't going to reopen, we said, 'What can we do?' " says Katelyn Johnson, senior manager of global benefits at Cisco. "Parents, particularly women, because they do carry more of the load, were not going to neglect children's physical, emotional or academic needs."

The company had a head start on developing safety protocols in its San Jose day care center because the facility, which initially had been closed due to the pandemic, was later opened for children of first responders. There are daily temperature checks, and masks and social distancing are required. Children are assigned to small groups with a dedicated teacher, and intermingling is prohibited to limit infection risk. Parents are not allowed in the center.



After relocating to Pennsylvania with her son Brian for her 'dream job,' Stephanie Jones was fired and had to move again, this time to Texas.

Cisco is exploring other benefits, too, such as providing private tutors or hiring a teacher to instruct a small group of children in what are known as learning pods, pandemic pods or micro schools. The concept has become popular in affluent neighborhoods throughout the country where parents hire tutors to teach their children or band together with other families to form small classes. Pods eliminate the risk of being in a large group and provide children with more attention and guidance than virtual classes, according to advocates.

The pods have also been called out as a symbol of the income inequity that the pandemic has laid bare. Wealthy families can hire tutors, buy the latest technology and renovate their homes to create distinct learning spaces. Children from lower-income families may lack reliable Internet connections, up-to-date computers and a quiet place to learn.

Synchrony is exploring that dichotomy as it develops strategies for its working families, including the roughly 10,500 employees who work at its call centers, many of whom are women. Liz Heitner, senior vice president for talent and transformation, says that while Synchrony pays call center workers fairly, company leaders worry that some employees' children may lack the essentials they need for school.

"We are aware of the digital divide," Heitner says. Synchrony gave about 400 Chromebooks to employees based on their needs. It also expanded its backup child care and mental health benefits.

"This is one of the most stressful times to be a working mother," Heitner says.



FOR SOME, THE CHALLENGE IS FINDING WORK

As many working mothers struggle to find a balance between career and family, other women are simply desperate to land a job. Overall, working women—especially those of color—have endured a higher unemployment rate than men since the pandemic hit the U.S. last spring. In September, the unemployment rate for women was 8 percent compared with 7.7 percent for men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The rates for Black and Hispanic women were both 11 percent.

That's an improvement from earlier in the year: In April, the overall unemployment rate for women was 15.5 percent (for men, it was 13 percent); the rate was 16.4 percent for Black women and 20.2 percent for Hispanic women.

There are several reasons for the gender difference, according to experts. One is that more women are quitting their jobs to stay home and take care of their families because schools and day care centers remain closed in many parts of the country. And

while one bright spot of the pandemic is that it convinced many skeptical employers that employees could be productive working from home, women are widely employed in industries such as health care, hospitality and caregiving where remote work isn't possible.

"There's no silver lining if you can't work from home," says Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Gould adds that women make up a large segment of government employees and could be at risk if there are widespread layoffs in the public sector.

Charissa Ward was furloughed from her position as a server at Walt Disney World in April and hasn't been called back, even though the theme park reopened at a limited capacity this summer. The mother of three was her family's primary breadwinner and doesn't know how she'll find another job when there are scant openings for waitstaff and so many other servers are also out of work.

On top of that, alternate job options are limited. Even if they weren't, Ward has worked as a server for 15 years and doesn't have recent experience doing anything else.

"I'm not against trying new things," she says, "but you're competing against so many other people."

On some days, Ward admits, "I just feel hopeless." Yet she acknowledges that her family is better off than many. They have savings, though they have plowed through half of their reserves already. Her partner has a job, and her colleagues held a school supply drive that helped outfit her children as they started classes.

It's still a struggle. Ward says she has visited food banks to help the family stretch their dollars as they cut back on spending. And the future remains uncertain. Even if Ward is called back to work, her salary won't return to pre-pandemic levels. "We worry," she says. "How much longer can this situation go on?" —T.A.