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## More Women Choose Entrepreneurial Path

BY PAMELA RYCKMAN - Special to the Sun

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On a recent weekday afternoon, Cindy Swensen's 2-year-old daughter, Nikki, came by her desk to say hello. In one hand, Ms. Swensen held a telephone; in the other, she cradled her newborn as he nursed.

Juggling her job and motherhood - simultaneously - has been the norm for Ms. Swensen ever since she started working from home as an executive career coach.

"This is how it's done - amidst total chaos!" Ms. Swensen said, speaking from her office at home on the Upper West Side.

After working on Wall Street for 11 years, then as the director of national accounts for the Disney Channel, Ms. Swensen decided to make a change. She is one of a growing number of women, mothers mostly, who are choosing entrepreneurship over the corporate world.

"We're definitely seeing this as a trend," said the executive director of the Forte Foundation, Elissa Ellis, who leads a consortium of companies, schools, and nonprofits that encourage women to seek leadership roles in business. "And balancing work and family is one of the top things Generation Y women are thinking about right now."

Ms. Swensen relished her previous jobs, but the pace of the work was frantic, and though she tried, she had trouble

conceiving her first child. This led Ms. Swensen to consider other options. In late 2001, three colleagues, feeling reflective, asked Ms. Swensen for advice on how to steer their careers. She found she enjoyed advising them and that they thought she was good at it. After training online at Coach U, Ms. Swensen opened her own business, Start Button, and became an executive career coach.

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"I couldn't do the job I had before and have the flexibility I want," she said.

Because she caters mostly to clients working in broadcasting and entertainment, Ms. Swensen has capitalized on her contacts, experience, and knowledge of the industry. For now, her business is entirely referral based, and she adjusts her work pace to suit her personal life. Since the birth of her son in August, she has scaled back considerably.

Like other mothers who work from home, Ms. Swensen shapes the work to fit her personal needs. Owning a business offers greater flexibility to accommodate a family, and a chance to use her unique skills as an entrepreneur.

According to an informal survey of aspiring women business leaders published recently by Forte, 59% of respondents in their 20s and 30s say being a woman will hurt their chances of reaching the highest ranks in business.

Meanwhile, 86% are concerned about how to balance work and family and, on a scale of one to 10, 74% chose seven or higher to quantify the importance of a flexible work environment. The foundation said in a study published in July that, of women who re-enter the workforce after a hiatus, 45% are self-employed.

Because many companies have not kept pace with their needs, these women say, a new breed of woman is emerging - one who is neither fulltime mother nor full-time breadwinner. According to the Department of Labor, 29.4% of women were self-employed in 2004, up from 27.3% in 2001. Also, 74.2% of self-employed women worked in home-based businesses.

"Women don't lose the desire to succeed after they give birth," Ms. Ellis said. "They still have the same ambition they had in corporate America. These are women who want a challenge, who want to work hard and take risks, but need to do it at their own pace."

To be sure, the traditional path for working mothers is still to return to a corporation. "Many women don't want to be entrepreneurs because they're seeking a professional environment and interaction with other adults," the co-founder of a recruiting organization for women exploring nontraditional work options, Women@WorkNetwork, Kathryn Sollmann, said.

Yet for those who don't mind the lack of community, private consultancies and home-based businesses have proved satisfying and lucrative.

The owner of a consulting business and the mother of two, Michelle Master Orr, now earns more money working fewer hours at home in New Canaan, Conn., than she did as a fulltime buyer at a major department store. After her first son was born - she is now pregnant for the third time - she started Retail Relief, which provides consulting and business analysis to her former vendors.

"My clients know that I'm a mom first, but my services are valuable to them and they're willing to work around that. They know I work from home. They might occasionally hear my kids screaming in the background, and if they can't deal with that, I can't work for them," Ms. Master Orr said.

In nearby Darien, Conn., Casey Considine Lange runs the Lange Group, a corporate gift business; she also started Take Me 2, a T-shirt line for children, six months ago. After working at Cartier and Tiffany, Ms. Considine Lange hoped to juggle work and family by starting her own business. The Lange Group was very profitable, but she found herself laboring long hours, and decided to turn away business to reduce her workload.

Take Me 2 has brought her closer to her children in unexpected ways. "The best way to teach work ethic is through example. I found I could teach my children life lessons through starting my own business," Ms. Considine Lange said. "As parents one of the best things we can show our children is that it's okay to fail."

Yet another example is Lacy Doyle, who lives in Carnegie Hill. Ms. Doyle capitalized on her background in the art world by starting ArtView, an art advisory business that hosts lectures and conducts tours of artists' studios. Ms. Doyle refers to the starting of her business as an "organic process." Seven years ago, when her youngest child was in kindergarten, friends began asking her to help them choose and buy art. She was able to launch ArtView from home. Ms. Doyle's earnings now exceed those of her previous job as a full-time corporate art adviser at the Museum of Modern Art. "In New York, you either have stay-at-home moms or full-time go-getter career women, but women need to know there's a middle ground," she said.

Of these women, Ms. Swensen is the only one who says she would consider a return to the corporate world.

"Women are coming up with a creative third way to fit work into their lives," the founder of the Work + Life consultancy, Cali Williams Yost, said. "It's not all or nothing the way it was with a previous generation of moms. There are countless ways to manage work and life."

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