

As the gig economy grows, parents find flexibility and fulfillment — and pitfalls



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By **Ambreen Ali**

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The Starbucks in my New Jersey town takes on a noticeable calm by 10 a.m. on a weekday, after the morning trains have whisked all the city commuters off to their full-time jobs. It now belongs to the gig workers, who are busy typing away between sips of coffee or conducting meetings from their de facto office.

The gig economy is most associated with Uber drivers and food delivery, but the [largest and fastest-growing segment](#) is knowledge-intensive industries and creative occupations. These workers are conducting from laptops the work that once required an office space and came with a full-time salary, but can now be done from anywhere for per-project pay, affording a flexibility like never before.

That's why so many gig workers are parents who, in addition to the responsibilities of taking care of children, are squeezing work in between pickups and drop-offs, after bedtime, or in the wee hours of the morning.

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“There are very few things anymore that you have to be in person for,” said Michelle Santoro Lamuscio, who runs an [indie rock station](#) out of her house in Maplewood, N.J. “Everything is always open on the Internet, so it's not like there is a window when I have to get my work done.”

An estimated 16 percent of gig workers are stay-at-home parents, according to research conducted last year by [Harris Poll for Prudential](#), and their ranks are rising alongside those of other gig workers. In 2017, 31 percent of adults made money through the gig economy, up from 28 percent the year prior, according to [federal data](#). By next year, [Intuit](#) — which put the 2017 figure at a slightly higher 34 percent — estimates it will reach 43 percent.

For the parents in that segment, gig work offers a way to keep one foot in their careers while they focus on the kids, or a way to pivot into a new career that offers better work-life balance. The moms in my town include an employment lawyer who has launched a human relations consulting business; a corporate writer who is now a sleep consultant; an actor who teaches classes on weekends when her husband can watch the kids; and a former high school math teacher who tutors and teaches dance classes.

Most parents with such unconventional work schedules are women. The Pew Research Center reports that, in 2015, [89 percent of men](#) in two-parent households worked full time. Women made up the overwhelming majority of part-time workers in those homes.

Lamuscio worked in book publishing until shortly after her first child was born. She said she loved her job but decided to quit because her salary was going directly to the nanny, and she wasn't getting home until 10 most nights. Now, she can work around her kids' schedules.

“When people go to bed, I put my headphones on and I sound-edit,” she said. Last summer, when her family went on

vacation, she broadcasted from their rental house on the Jersey Shore.

It's not uncommon for women to scale down their hours at work after having children or even pivot to jobs that are more accommodating of parents, according to Liana Christin Landivar, author of "[Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?](#)"

For some, the gig economy simply allows them to meet responsibilities at home that they want to take on or cannot afford to outsource.

"It seems like being a stay-at-home mom is a privilege, because you can depend on a partner's income as breadwinner, but it is often the result of a financial calculation regarding child care," Landivar said.

Lisa Mills, who runs [Work at Home Mom Revolution](#), a blog that helps people find remote work, started working from her home in Garner, N.C., around the time she got divorced. She felt she had no choice.

"I really, really wanted to be home for them," she said of her children. "If I got a call during the day, if they were sick at school, I wanted to be available."

She tried a host of avenues to make money from home, including selling collectibles on eBay and day trading, before getting trained in medical transcription work. Mills worked as a contractor in that field for 10 years and started the website in 2007 to help other moms navigate the world of at-home work. Traffic to the site has increased tenfold in the past decade as working from home has become more common.

"A lot of women have no choice," Mills said. "They really need to work from home."

That is the case for Debbie Weingarten, a freelance writer in Tucson who is divorced and has two sons, ages 4 and 7. She says she can't afford to hire help, so she assumes all the stay-at-home responsibilities and still works more than 40 hours a week.

"It's taken a huge toll on my body. I'm exhausted," said Weingarten, whose younger son was sick when we spoke. She expressed guilt at not being able to give him her full attention

but said she feels guilt at other moments for not being able to give more to her career.

“I feel that guilt on a constant basis. I’m constantly letting somebody down,” she said.

In that way, gig work can be less flexible than it seems on the surface, says Susan J. Ashford, a professor of management and organization at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. Workers get paid only when they are productive, so they often hesitate to turn work down and end up stretching themselves thin.

“You’ll eat your own flexibility by taking on too much work because you’re anxious about not having work in the future,” Ashford said.

For parents who are already shouldering the bulk of the child-rearing responsibilities, trying to work on top of that can come at a cost.

“If you are a parent, you are subject to far more disruption and interruptions in your work. The centerpiece of the reality of working in this manner is the hyper-focus on productivity,” Ashford noted. “You only get the money if you get the thing done.”

That pressure is one reason Weingarten said she would rather have a traditional full-time job. So would Aishah Farooki, an architect and interior designer in Oakland, Calif., who runs a part-time design consultancy.

“I more came to it for flexibility after kids,” Farooki said. “It would be nice to have some [job] security, but right now I still feel like I’m needed a lot at home.”

Others, such as Michelle Park of Jersey City, say gig work has enabled the ideal work-life balance. Park had a busy career in broadcast television before she had her daughter. When she left that job, she found herself “super bored,” she recalled. “I remember watching the clock tick-tock down to 7.”

Now, she manages social media accounts for a few clients, and that allows her to still occasionally appear on television.

“I honestly feel like I’m the most fulfilled I’ve been in my entire life. I pick and choose what I want to do,” she said.

Finding that balance took some time. At one point, Park dropped most of her clients because work had become too consuming. Though she spends only a few hours in front of the computer each day now, she does have to be available at all hours for social media emergencies — which happen with surprising frequency. Park said she feels bad when she has to post something while at a restaurant with her daughter.

“I just need to come to terms that it could be a lot worse,” she said. “I could just not be at the lunch.”

Ambreen Ali began her career reporting on Congress, grass-roots activism and lobbying for CQ Roll Call. She has covered the media and tech industries as an editor and is now a freelance writer and mother of two based in New Jersey. Find her on Twitter [@ambreenali](#).

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