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How to Hack it as a Working Parent

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How to Hack it as a Working Parent

The problems faced by working parents in technical fields in libraries are not unique or particularly unusual. However, the cross-section of work-life balance and gender disparity problems found in academia and technology can be particularly troublesome, especially for mothers and single parents. Attracting and retaining diverse talent in work environments that are highly structured or with high expectations of unstated off-the-clock work may be impossible long term. (Indeed, it is not only parents that experience these work-life balance problems but anyone with caregiver responsibilities such as elder or disabled care.) Those who have the energy and time to devote to technical projects for work and fun in their off-work hours tend to get ahead. Those tied up with other responsibilities or who enjoy non-technical hobbies do not get the same respect or opportunities for advancement. Such problems mirror the experiences of women on the tenure track in academia, particularly women working in libraries, and they provide a useful corollary for this discussion.

We present some practical solutions for those in technical positions in libraries. Such solutions involve strategic use of technical tools, and lightweight project management applications. Technical workarounds are not the only answer; real and lasting change will involve a change in individual priorities and departmental culture such as sophisticated and ruthless time management, reviewing workloads, cross-training personnel, hiring contract replacements, and creative divisions of labor. Ultimately, a flexible environment that reflects the needs of parents will help create a better workplace culture for everyone, kids or no kids.

By Jaclyn Bedoya, Margaret Heller, Christina Salazar, and May Yan

Background

North American culture gives lip service to an idealized version of the nuclear family while our systems and society consistently fail to support parents and extended families in meaningful ways. One might expect that academia (and libraries) with its stereotypically liberal environment would be more progressive in this area. Yet the tenure-track process and maternity leave policies highlight that many colleges and universities are as — or even more — unfriendly to families as the corporate world. We were inspired to write this article to prepare those thinking of becoming parents or trying to cope as new parents. We want to shed light on some of the gender inequalities that come with being a working mother in a technical environment and spur a dialog that can bring about necessary social change. This situation does not just negatively impact parents, but all workers. We all want to be able to pursue meaningful careers without having to give the best hours and years of our lives to careers that take precedence over relationships.

How disheartened I've been at all the times I've heard "I learned this programming language" or "I installed that operating system" in the wee hours of the night when we're officially off the clock and

hopefully in bed. As a mom I no longer have the luxury of spare time.
— Christina, single mother of 4 year old

As working mothers, we are especially aware of how social and cultural expectations affect women, and indeed research bears out that working mothers have special challenges. Women (particularly low-earning women) on average make less after having a child, whereas men on average make more money after becoming fathers (Budig & Hodges, 2010). Much of the research on working parents focuses on women, but we believe that a technical working culture based on expectations for constant productivity without regard for personal life is damaging to everyone with caretaking responsibilities, and indeed to all workers (Kantor, 2014). Thus we will use the word “caretaker” when we are discussing these general problems, and “mother” or “parent” when those words are appropriate.

All workers have interconnected personal and professional lives, and life events such as taking care of a sick pet or driving aging parents to medical appointments are a part of life for many without children. Such events may prevent caretakers from participating in the professional world to a degree that can seriously hurt or end their careers. The library technology community becomes richer by including everyone, regardless of the events and circumstances in their lives. Allowing flexibility by respecting different levels of ability to participate means that everyone — kids or no kids — can remain active participants throughout their professional lives.

We looked to the literature in a few separate domains to understand this problem including articles on the role and interests of women in technology as it intersects with their personal lives, sexism in academia, parenting in academia (particularly in academic libraries), as well as advice about productivity from a theoretical and practical view. What follows is particularly relevant to librarians working in technical positions in academic libraries but draws inspiration from across, and outside of, the academy.

I started my year-long maternity leave just six months after getting my permanent position. So when a service opportunity came up as an association division president, I went for it even though I knew I was going to be taking on a lot of responsibilities during the leave. I was naive and thought I was going to have quiet time and more help with my baby. Reality hit when I was struggling to plan a conference while juggling a very active infant with no help from our families. Luckily my partner was a very involved parent, so I did my association work after he came home from work, and late at night whenever I wasn't up tending to the baby. — May, mother of 23 month old

Tenure productivity expectations have been historically set to measure against the ideal worker: a man with a supporting wife taking care of his home, allowing him to devote time to his research at all hours of the day (Wyatt-Nichol, Cardona, & Drake, 2012; Sotirin, 2008). The tenure schedule for the typical academic also coincides with the times many wish to start families or struggle with the challenges of parenting young children. Women working in academia are generally disadvantaged compared to male counterparts because of obligations at home as a primary caregiver and the demands of a tenure-track career. Many women find themselves unable to stay on the tenure track or even start such a job in the first place (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Mason, 2013; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). It is not just women who feel

the pressures of parenting in academia; research shows that men, as they take on more caregiving responsibilities in the home, struggle to find balance between work and family while navigating tenure (Sallee, 2014; Philipsen & Bostic, 2010).

Tenure track academic librarians have an additional pressure of a different working environment compared to their teaching faculty counterparts. The place-based nature of library work and the service environment of the library means many librarians are working full time in the library all year without the summer break afforded teaching faculty to pursue research and professional development. These librarians have to move research and service work out of regular office hours and into their own personal time in order to get tenure or qualify for promotions (Templer, 2010; Spires, 2007; Zemon & Bahr, 2005).

Considering these challenges, it is not surprising that many librarians choose to opt out of pursuing tenure-track positions in libraries or are forced out after starting. But in many libraries, even non-tenure track librarians have to work with promotion and advancement expectations that depend on service, research, and professional development (Templer, 2010; Graves, Xiong, & Park, 2008). Caregivers are at a significant disadvantage. In addition to the quotidian struggles with work-life balance, how can they work on research and service during their personal time, when that has been significantly reduced or is completely nonexistent due to their caregiving responsibilities? Those working in technical areas have an additional need to learn new technology skills to keep pace with developments in the field. If this time is not built into the work day, how are workers to find the time to do this outside of sacrificing sleep — assuming children do not need them during those hours when parents should normally sleep?

Many librarians struggle with work schedules that do not support their roles as new parents. It is not easy to maintain breastfeeding a baby (and pumping at work) if one is scheduled to be on the reference desk for several hours a day. For technology workers trying to minimize impact on patrons, scheduling system downtime for off-peak hours means juggling to arrange childcare because daycare and schools are closed. For single parents with limited support, it may mean being forced to choose between family and work on a regular basis.

Because libraries are open to patrons for extended hours, staff have to make sure systems are functioning, which may also include supervising staff in person on evenings and weekends. The “*always on*” nature of digital systems and electronic resources sets up expectations from patrons that the materials will be available at all times. Technical library workers feel pressure to maintain a level of service to patrons past regular business hours. The same technologies that allow catching up on email during the commute to pick up a child are the same ones that impose pressure to answer patron requests for help when parents should be helping toddlers brush their teeth.

To increase their productivity despite having fewer hours available, successful faculty parents have learned to be more efficient with the time they spend at work (Philipsen & Bostic, 2008; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006, Sallee, 2014; O’Reilly & Hallstein, 2012). Technical caregivers can learn to be more focused and productive at work. This will help maximize the time when they have childcare and not sacrifice personal time.

Giving up even as little as eight weeks away from my professional commitments seemed impossible, so I worked all through maternity leave using my phone and tablet to stay connected even while

holding my baby. I returned to active professional life so early thanks to a dedicated husband who went against American cultural norms and took an equal length of paternity leave after my maternity leave ended. — Margaret, mother of 15 month old son

Proposed Solutions

The following practical solutions to some of the caregiving problems highlighted above model a better culture that we as a society should work towards. Some of the solutions can be taken up at the personal or departmental level, while others require changes at the administrative level.

Personal Productivity Solutions

Time Management and Tools

David Allen's *Getting Things Done* (2001) and Cal Newport's blog *Study Hacks* address productivity techniques particularly relevant to technical work. Both methods suggest that one can identify all the "things" one needs to get done as a series of projects, though they differ on the ideal way to plan those projects.

Getting Things Done suggests dividing up each project into a series of tasks called "actions", which are captured in a trusted system (whether digital or paper), organized by context (i.e. phone, computer, office), and updated weekly. By arranging work in this way it is easier to identify appropriate times to accomplish work, and to keep focus on the current project by knowing that all the other work is accounted for.

Ubiquitous computing means that for people who work on computers there always seems to be something to do, which leads to answering emails or other busy work at all hours. Newport suggests setting a fixed schedule with strict limits on the amount of time to work in a week — for instance, 40 hours — and careful planning to ensure that the most important projects happen that week (2009). By dedicating long blocks of uninterrupted time to projects, it is easier to accomplish "deep work" (solving problems that can't be subdivided into smaller tasks), into which much programming and other technical work falls.

Success requires strict time management, but even more importantly, it requires managing expectations of patrons and co-workers about availability. Lightweight project management tools such as Asana or Trello can keep project work out of email, reduce the need for meetings, and clearly indicate what team members are accomplishing even if they are not physically present. Using such tools to track personal and work projects helps prevent individuals from taking on more than they can reasonably handle. Keeping work out of lengthy email discussions is best, since these can lead to misunderstandings, as well as create expectations for answering emails outside of work hours.

Administrative Solutions

Reviewing Workloads and Division of Labor

After having children, accomplishing extra work outside of normal working hours may no longer be possible. Individuals should reset expectations of what is a reasonable workload for a given work day and set out to meet those new goals, with support from their supervisors. This means reevaluating priorities within

departments. Projects must be planned realistically without relying on absorbing failures by increasing workload without warning for staff.

Balancing work and the rest of life requires managing expectations of others and one's own project load. Some of this is through personal choices, some of it institutional. In academic institutions where service is a part of promotion and tenure, administrators who might be tempted to ask women or members of underrepresented groups to serve on committees should ensure that they are not overburdening these people with service commitments. In fact, too many service appointments may be the cause for the gap between women and men in achieving tenure (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). Individuals should ensure that they are not taking on too many commitments as well by culling projects and committees.

Cross-training Personnel and Creating Backups

Take time to identify all mission-critical systems and tasks, and ensure there are backup personnel or contingency policies in place. Cross-training ensures critical library functions are protected by having multiple people versed in all work functions. This makes the institution more resilient at times when key personnel leave or a position is cut. In many situations, it is advisable to train both within and outside of a department. Learning new skills and working across departments create opportunities to seed new ideas and may lead to better collaborations in the library. Day to day, this means that employees are able to take sick time and vacation time without the work of the library coming to a standstill. Sharing ownership of responsibilities helps alleviate scheduling problems should they arise. Managers can shift staff and librarian responsibilities when someone takes a planned or unplanned extended leave of a few weeks or a few months.

Policy Solutions

Many of the following policy recommendations taken from research into supporting academic faculty in work-life balance will also make a big difference in the library (Templer, 2010; Philipsen & Bostic, 2010, Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Making changes in policy will require the support of leaders in institutions. Union activism may help push things forward in an organized labour environment. Elsewhere, working with shared governance or other structures may be required, as long as policies set for teaching faculty are equally available to faculty librarians.

Parental Leaves

Library administrators must offer paid leaves for workers who are becoming new parents, and must encourage the use of these leaves by creating a culture where this is supported. Unlike its counterparts in Europe and the Americas, the United States is alone among industrialized nations in having no paid maternity leave (WORLD Policy Forum, n.d.). Many US employees plan for the caring of their infants by coordinating their pregnancy to meet the requirements allotted by The Family and Medical Leave Act for *unpaid leave*, but rely on any provisions provided by their workplace for funding. Many parents simply cannot afford to take unpaid leave. Pregnancy and having children are a natural part of life and should not be stigmatized by looking upon it as a disability. As such, parental leaves should be separated from sick and disability leaves (Philipsen & Bostic, 2008, 2010; Templer, 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Employees returning to work from parental leaves still need to have sick days for when they or their children become ill.

Hire replacement workers when employees take leave so others do not feel

burdened by having to take on additional responsibilities, and employees will be willing to take leave knowing they will not impose upon their colleagues. The profession can benefit from creating a pipeline of qualified workers when librarians train in high learning curve technological skills by taking on these contract positions.

The private sector is starting to see the real benefits of paid and longer maternity leaves on employee retention (Wojcicki, 2015; McGregor, 2015; Carrns, 2013; Florentine, 2014). Administrators that wish to retain talented workers (particularly those with specialized technical skills) should do the same in order to remain competitive.

On-Site Childcare/After-School Care/Emergency Childcare

Providing onsite childcare and afterschool care is ideal. However, even in organizations that provide it, there is often much more demand than spaces available. There will always be demand for more, and so offering assistance in locating or affording childcare may be an acceptable alternative.

Practically, for most parents, what often is most needed, but missing, is emergency childcare. When regular care providers fall through because of weather or illness, being able to make alternate arrangements makes it possible to meet work commitments without having to take time off. This can be accomplished by subscribing institutions to a service that provides emergency care, allowing employees to make use of the service to make arrangements as needed. This system has been put in place at several American universities (Mason, 2013). Additionally, allowing extra “family-friendly” days, outside of regular vacation and sick time, leaves room for unexpected absences.

Telecommuting

The same technology that makes it possible to keep working at all hours should imply that work can be done from anywhere. Telecommuting might not be suitable or possible for all positions, but it might be ideal for caregivers working in mainly technical roles. A couple of days per week for parents with young children, or a few months while someone needs to take care of an ailing parent in another city, are viable options for both the library and employee to help navigate difficult periods (Luce & Hartman, 1984; Duncan, 2008).

Unfortunately for many librarians working in a service environment, there can be resistance to telecommuting, even for positions that can be done off-site. Think carefully about how critical that “necessary” face time really is — can technical staff get enough idea of work culture by being in the office a few days per week? Consider if someone locked in her office all day is really accomplishing more in-person when compared to telecommuting? The flexibility to telecommute can improve work satisfaction and help libraries retain employees during times in their career when they are experiencing time pressures or other caregiving stresses.

Job Sharing/Part-Time Work

Additionally, job sharing or part-time work solutions should be made available to employees, at least on a temporary basis. This traditionally might be offered only for someone who has a role where they must be physically present but cannot commit to the same hours they previously had (Brustman & Via, 1988; Laynor, 1988; Stennett, 1993). Why not for technology positions as well? Since technical staff are in such high demand, administrators may find that it will help them recruit high quality workers by offering non-traditional hours. That said, while academia is moving toward more part-time workers in the form of adjuncts (National Center

for Education Statistics, 2014), those positions usually do not come with benefits or long-term stability. Library administrators must be mindful of offering flexibility without exploiting workers.

Scheduling Flexibility/Flextime

For many caregivers, those responsibilities place external time demands on us that cannot be changed. Daycares, pet boarders, and schools have set hours of operation. Medical appointments are almost always scheduled for the middle of the work day. Flexible and thoughtful schedules alleviate the stress of having to be in two places at the same time.

Create a culture of support by setting core hours to reflect time for parents to drop off and pick up children from school, and for all workers to be able to leave at a reasonable time. Discourage meetings from running late, and do not schedule them late in the day without plenty of notice. Allow departments with public service expectations to shift schedules so that some staff members come early and others stay late as works for the individual.

Our library used Google Analytics to track usage of online services and identified that our lightest traffic is on Friday, which does not correspond to our in person counts. With data to back us up, we've begun to schedule server and software updates for Fridays – which also works best for the programmer, as both of us have small children and find it difficult to do them on weekends. — Jaclyn, mother of 2

Change the Picture

Before having children, the authors used to easily allow work to bleed into personal time. We are now more deliberate about respecting these boundaries. Work-life balance is something that we were immediately forced to juggle when we returned to work as new parents. We looked for technologies and strategies to try to handle just as much as we did in our pre-children working lives, but the reality is that perhaps, it is just not physically or mentally possible, even desirable.

The ideal white collar worker works constantly and puts in “face time”, which is a norm celebrated and set as an example of good work ethic (Davis, 2014). Nowhere is this mythical ideal worker image more prevalent than in the technology sector. Endless hours of coding and working all night on projects is a huge part of the image of a successful technology worker. The culture of “always on” may in fact not lead to greater or more useful productivity. Hours worked does not correspond to wisdom gained or progress made (Norton, 2014).

Upholding this cultural lifestyle hurts our profession. The culture of endless hours of code and working at all hours hinders current technologists from career advancement, and forces the caregivers among us to have to choose between career or family. Further, both research and anecdotal evidence have shown that young women will opt out of or not pursue technology careers because they do not identify with this lifestyle (Margolis, Fisher, & Miller, 2000). We as a profession need to change this pattern.

The authors know that many of these issues are larger than any one of us can solve—these solutions will require a change in social norms over time. Beyond social justice considerations, there are real effects on institutions. One of the authors left a tenure-track position because it was having too negative an effect

on her family. We all know people who have had to leave libraries because they could not afford daycare or could not find an amenable schedule (Cohany & Sok, 2007).

A common theme in library technology circles is *changing the image*. Bourg (2015) suggests changing the image of technologists because stereotypes are self-reinforcing. Library technologists — who have both borrowed and shielded themselves from the cultures of libraries and Silicon Valley — have a chance to forge a new culture. Instead of “always connected”, “all-night coding sprints”, and “brogrammers” can we instead become a haven of family-friendly, flexible, and well-rounded but still smart and committed professionals? Let’s take our liminal positions and use them to create a new vision for the kind of profession that we would like to be.

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