



Entrepreneurial Lives

Mompreneurs

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I'm MariaLaura Di Domenico from the Open University Business School and this podcast is the second in a series called 'Entrepreneurial Lives.

When we think of celebrated entrepreneurs they are, more often than not, men. But this is changing as more and more women are deciding to run their own businesses. In this podcast I look at *Mompreneurs* - *mothers who* are also business women.

Are they entrepreneurial through choice or even necessity? Perhaps they have had to turn away from traditional jobs? What do working mothers see as the challenges and rewards of balancing the demands of business and family?

Many of the women entrepreneurs I've interviewed bucked traditional gender stereotypes and praised the fact that their husbands and male partners supported them with doing household tasks. Some of the women were the ones working while their husbands stayed at home. Or sometimes they both worked together from home running their own businesses. And of course there are also single mompreneurs.

So, we should recognize the success stories of all working parents – men *and* women - who manage to juggle family and work ... and even become successful entrepreneurs. We all have anecdotes about people who have done just that. An interesting example is the children's author J K Rowling who wrote the Harry Potter books and who, supposedly, penned her first novel as a new single mother whilst her newborn lay next to her ... napping. The cynic in us would say this is no more than a story, part of a well-oiled PR machine to get us to buy more of her books. Perhaps. But there's no denying the power and seductive appeal of being able to do just that Look after our family while engaged in economically productive and stimulating work. Combining family and career successfully. And JK Rowling has of course now built a massive commercial empire including lucrative film deals from the huge success of her Harry Potter books.

For this podcast I spoke to women entrepreneurs to hear about their experiences and what they have to say about combining parenthood with being an entrepreneur. And the stereotypical gender-biased traditional view that women can't do both well.

Jo Winchcombe is a mompreneur who runs Simply Stuck, a business creating personalised name labels for children. She feels strongly that being a businesswoman has actually made her a better mother:

Jo Winchcombe

I don't think I would have given my children as much as I have given them, from being a mother and a businesswoman, because I think I have a broader view on life and can give the children more direction in terms of the need to work harder and to apply themselves for getting on in life and if you want to do something, you know then you just have to go and do it, don't just accept where you are in life.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Some women who eventually decided to set up their own businesses have talked to me about how they initially chose to give up work temporarily in order to focus on family and bringing up

children. Many of them told me how their confidence initially took a bit of a dive as they felt 'out of it' and wanted to have back the mental stimulation, social interaction, creative input and other things they missed from going to work. For them at least, career had become an important identity marker. After a while, they really wanted to get back to work but preferred to have more autonomy and flexibility than their previous job allowed. So they decided to set up their own businesses.

This is how Kate Hopewell-Smith felt. She runs her own photography business. Having decided to stop working in order to devote herself to having her children, her motivation to set up the business came from her feeling that she was missing an important sense of purpose and achievement that she got from working. She missed the respect and identity that had been afforded to her as a businesswoman before she became a full-time mother:

Kate Hopewell-Smith

I had a difficult 2 years, I would say, post having my first child when I was 100% happy with the decision to be at home and committed to that decision but thinking about the future and struggling with who I was before children and how committed I was to my full time jobs then and what I was able to offer as a mother. And in many ways the photography business was something that has naturally benefitted from being able to be something I, I can control the hours and I do find myself working at weekends and late at night to be able to manage that so I think that certain jobs might be trickier than the one that I've chosen.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

There are many tensions between being committed to being a good parent and succeeding in business. However, just as being a parent is an important part of an individual's self identity, so too are other aspects of their lives. Our work and careers, can be very personal and emotional experiences. So for Kate, setting up a business on her own was in part an effort to regain that lost sense of career identity.

Kate Hopewell-Smith

I think for me it's building your self esteem back up. I think a lot of women, certainly my experience with myself and my friends has been that there's a period of time after having very small children when you perhaps aren't at your most confident and your self esteem takes a bit of a knock but it doesn't mean you can't get it back but you probably need to find the right kind of job or extra activity to help you find your way.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Entrepreneurs like Kate found that having their own business allows them to prioritize as they see fit. They don't have to fit around the demands of an employer or be part of a faceless organizational bureaucracy with lots of red tape. In fact, research has found that entrepreneurs on the whole actually put in *more* working hours compared to the average employee who works for someone else.

Sure, employers have to consider requests for flexible working but, at the end of the day, women have told me that they wanted more control. To be in the driving seat. To work as and when it suits them. This is what made them gravitate towards being an entrepreneur. You know, attend school sports day and then make the hours up again in the evening or when the kids have gone to bed.

Being an entrepreneur needn't be all consuming. It can be family-friendly in terms of the autonomy derived from being your own boss.

Kate Hopewell-Smith

Still my family come first and small children get ill, often, and I'm lucky in the sense that if one of them is ill then I stop working and my clients understand that or have to understand that but I know that friends who work in full time jobs in an office environment struggle with that kind of issue but if I get a call from the nursery then I can pretty much drop everything and leave but my husband also works from home so we have some level of flexibility on that.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

So there are also lots of challenges in being a parent and an entrepreneur. It's certainly not all plain sailing. Yes, there is new-found flexibility and autonomy. But it's also a negotiation – juggling with lots of balls in the air, none of which can be allowed to fall.

But, you may not want to shout too loudly about your family commitments at work. In most workplaces as an employee this would probably do you no favours as your colleagues may assume that you can't put in the overtime and may even dump on them the lion's share of the work.

On the other hand, some people may not want to hide the fact that they have children and run their own business. Children may even conceivably make good business sense if the product or service your business provides is centered on children. They can give you a useful bit of free market research and insight into your target market. Not hiding the fact that you have children can even give you added credibility as prospective clients would think that you know what you're talking about!

For instance, I spoke to Sarah Hodgkins, who is both a mother and an entrepreneur, about her experiences of running her own design business, Charlotte Designs. She specializes in designing children's bedrooms. So for her, having her own children is actually good for business and they can also help with creative ideas:

Sarah Hodgkins

My daughter particularly, who's 8 and a half now, has a very good eye for colour. Actually she likes to help me choose paint colours. They are also very good at coming up with ideas and very often I will say "right you know I've got this project you know, what do you think I should do in here?". And they are really good at coming up with ideas and I even use my children's friends as well to say look you know, if you were painting this what would you do, because you know at the end of the day they're the ones that are the contemporaries of my client so they do have very good input and I do, I do use them for quite a lot actually.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Of course any business needs to be run in a financially astute way if it's to survive. And in itself that's no mean feat. But for many women small business women it's not all just about high profits and hitting the usual financial yardsticks. Like their male counterparts they want to be financially successful as well as having more control over their own lives and careers. All entrepreneurs tend to crave independence and freedom as well as having a high need for achievement. But, as the businesswomen I've researched have also had significant family commitments, then it figures that they need to make decisions that will benefit them both at home *and* at work. But of course this can be difficult in reality. Here is Sarah Hodgkins again on what she sees as her main challenges.

Sarah Hodgkins

Finding time to do both jobs well for me is the biggest challenge. Making sure that I have work time and mum time and of course you time and relationship time as well, as sometimes it's very easy to forget that there's you and there is also your relationship, your marriage, your partner and finding time for all of those things is a real challenge. It isn't just work and mum, there is all the other bits and pieces that go around it as well. For me it is having those set times where that is the priority. It doesn't mean that you just do that but it means that that's the priority so from 9.30 till 3.00 work is the priority and from 3.00 till 7.30 children is the priority. After that it's me or its partner or we have set nights where we go out and do things. I need routine. I need to know on this night I'm going to be doing this, at this time I'm going to be doing this, otherwise I would just get confused.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Balancing work and home commitments is of course not a challenge that only entrepreneurs must grapple with. This applies to anyone who has dual work and family, or even more, responsibilities to contend with. Increasingly many men are in this situation. And we also need

to recognize that some women have no such commitments and can be exclusively business-focused. So, one shouldn't generalize. But, in my experience, it is fair to say that for both men and women whatever their age – no matter how strong the entrepreneur's profit orientation may be 'making as much money as possible' - is only one of many possible motivations for starting and running a business. Developing a business which fits a desired lifestyle is often equally if not more important - - and this is especially so for mompreneurs.

The idea of work-life balance therefore comes to mind. The American sociologist Arlie Hochschild came up with the concept of 'time bind' when she did a study of employees working for a large company in the US. The idea is that family life and time spent at home can suffer as many parents are putting in more hours at work outside the home to support their families. This results in more stresses at home. For many employees, she found that work became almost an escape and a preferable alternative to home life. The roles of home and work had reversed: work was offering stimulation and a sense of identity and belonging. And home had become less enjoyable and even stressful as there was always a time pressure to get things done.

But I've found the opposite is the case with the mompreneurs I've spoken to. They're very different to the employees studied by Hochschild as they have effectively turned their backs on more traditional jobs and careers. Yes, that means foregoing possible job security but it also opens up other opportunities. These women are entrepreneurs *and* mothers. Both identities reinforce and stimulate enjoyment, commitment and creativity in the other sphere. They have made a deliberate choice for their families and careers *not* to be in conflict. They have solved the problem of the time bind! Of course, there are always going to be tensions and challenges. But these mompreneurs need to be congratulated! Yes, there are blurred boundaries between home and work for these women. But they have embraced motherhood and at the same time actively pursued their careers in a way that fits their own individual priorities and lifestyles. By doing both in the way *they* choose – rather than the dictates of a company or someone else - they are celebrating these different aspects of their identities – motherhood *and* business success. They are candid about their experiences and choices. It's not just about trying to have the best of both worlds. It's more about combining and managing both worlds effectively. They are far from apologetic about being family focused as well as business savvy. Quite the opposite! They wear the fact that they are mompreneurs as a badge of pride.

In this podcast we've been looking at entrepreneurs who want to combine parenthood with running a business. We have been mainly focusing on women. Of course, some men also choose to start their own businesses while at the same time balancing childrearing or other family commitments. Although we have been looking squarely at the mompreneur for want of a better phrase, I think the dadpreneur deserves a bit of attention too. So let's not forget him as many of the issues faced by the mompreneur will be shared by the dadpreneur.

So in the postindustrial economies in which we find ourselves, the days of a secure job for life are now increasingly numbered, and the flexible-minded individual is increasingly rewarded. We can see that different qualities are emerging and are increasingly valued. The idea of a portfolio career is now commonplace ... and being an entrepreneur can fit into this portfolio approach.

Thanks for listening and do join me for my next podcast when I'll focus on the benefits and drawbacks of running a family business.