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Going back to work means staying home for these moms

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MetLife News Service

Imagine a job you could do while in your pajamas. You could set your own hours and no one checks to see if you're late. Sound too good to be true?

For many, becoming their own boss is appealing. Yet starting your own business requires a great deal of effort.

For women seeking to transform their dream business into a reality, home-based businesses have become a viable and successful alternative to the cubicles of corporate America.

According to the Center for Women's Business Research, in Washington, D.C., in 1999 women owned and operated 3.3 million home-based small businesses.

These businesses provide full-time work for 5.6 million Americans, as well as contract work for another 8.4 million.

Women-owned home-based businesses make up a substantial portion of several different work sectors, the center reported. About 31 percent of wholesale and 28 percent of service businesses are home-based and owned by women.

"They have the potential to make substantial contributions to the economy," said Sharon Hadary, executive director of the Center.

Technology helps

Hadary added that the number of women beginning small businesses at home has grown in response to the evolution of technology. "Because we now have computers and the Internet, you can work from anywhere."

Working from home also significantly reduces some of the biggest expenses businesses incur, such as rent.

"With a home-based business, the woman doesn't need to carry the overhead of rent in a big downtown office building. You go to your customers and if you want to have a meeting, you can rent a conference room somewhere," Hadary said.

However, "a home-based business is not a substitute for child care," Hadary said.

In fact, many women with home-based businesses have a childcare provider during the day to care for the children while the mother focuses on her work.

"Working at home does offer flexibility, but to take care of a 3-



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Jennifer Reed started a home business called RTech Solutions in Elmhurst after giving birth to twin girls in 2000, but she's on call 24 hours a day and has to guard against spending all her time on work.

year-old and an 8-month-old baby and be on the phone with a client is unrealistic," Hadary explained.

Rejoining work world

Lara Pullen, 35, of Oak Park, began her company, Environmental Health Consulting Inc., in 1997 after working with the Environmental Protection Agency as a human health risk assessor for three years.

Pullen had her first child while at the EPA in October 1997. While on maternity leave, Pullen said she began thinking about whether she wanted to be at home or go back to work.

"I decided to create a situation where I would be professionally engaged, and at the same time, I could dictate my own terms," Pullen said.

Pullen earned a Ph.D. in microbiology/immunology from Northwestern University Medical School in 1993, and did medical research for one year at the University of Chicago, where she met her husband, now director of infectious diseases at the American Medical Association. She left medical research because she wanted more balance between work and her personal life.

"When I decided to stay at home with my daughter, I wanted to find something I could do at home and people would pay me for. That's when I came upon writing," Pullen explained.

Pullen's company provides technical writing and grant proposal preparation for a number of clients, including the EPA, pharmaceutical companies and



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Health consultant Lara Pullen works out of her Oak Park home.

physician associations.

Pullen employs three women, who also work from home. They meet weekly, and e-mail and talk on the phone constantly.

Environmental Health Consulting grossed about \$250,000 this year and is expected to grow. Though Pullen said she works every day because she has numerous clients, she is happy with the work-at-home lifestyle.

"I can go and exercise or throw in a load of laundry, and that's not a problem." Pullen has a nanny to care for her two children while she is working.

Flexibility at a cost

Jennifer Reed, of Elmhurst, agrees that working at home provides flexibility, but at a cost. Her company, Rtech Solutions Inc., which provides Web design

and hosting services for small businesses, keeps her on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Because the Web is operational at all times, if a server shuts down, she has to be available to fix it.

"Working at home is not as easy as it may sound," said Reed. "At this point in my life, I would never consider going back to work at a regular job. You do have a lot of freedom, but on the other side, it is just you, and you are responsible for your successes and failures."

Reed said starting your own business involves some financial give-and-take.

"It is difficult to get the business to a point where you can pay yourself a decent amount consistently and make enough money to support yourself," she added. "It really does take some discipline."

Often finding herself working both nights and weekends when she first started RTech Solutions in September 2000, she now recognizes that balancing home and work is key.

"Your office is right there in front of you, and you feel drawn to it all the time. You need to know when to walk away," Reed said.

She graduated from Lake Forest College in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in mathematics and computer science. Afterward, Reed worked for a software company for two years.

In April 2000, she gave birth to twin daughters and decided she wanted to run her own business at home. She found her first Web design client through one of the moms in her local twin support group, and eventually quit her job. RTech Solutions was incorporated in May 2002.

In 2002, Reed's company grossed about \$20,000. This year it has grossed about \$100,000.

"The business has grown dramatically, and I'm on track to keep it growing."

She has 500 clients, five servers and hosts 1,200 Web sites. She employs a virtual assistant and baby sitters, and also hires design subcontractors when her design workload gets heavy.

Motivations vary

Not all women begin working at home because they became mothers. Faith Kiehart's job as a commercial designer sent her to places like Singapore and Mexico City, and the travel

appealed to her so much that she wanted freedom to do more of it.

After 12 years of that work, on the old job, in October 2002, she began operating Faith Kiehart's Residential Design Inc. from her home in Lincoln Park.

"I needed a more flexible schedule to travel," said Kiehart. "I'm also fascinated by other cultures. Travel is a way to rejuvenate physically, emotionally and creatively. It's a fabulous education. The only way I knew to be true to both of these criteria was to start my own business."

Since she always enjoyed residential design, Kiehart decided she wanted to concentrate on it with her own business.

"I was just very restless and I really liked being in control. I had a vision of how design should be," Kiehart said.

Kiehart concentrates on providing mostly high-end clients with "quality, artful and functional interiors." She works one-on-one with them to create what she described as "an environment that enhances the general productivity and general well-being of an individual."

She also wanted to work from home to keep business expenses as lean as possible.

"I wanted to focus on giving clients great service and not worrying about how I'm going to pay my rent," Kiehart said.

Networking key

The women said they rely on networks of home-based women business owners to provide support and referrals. Organizations such as the National Association of Women Business Owners, Women's Business Development Center and Home-Based Working Moms Inc. provide avenues for advertising, business advice and ideas to start or improve businesses.

Kiehart said she took advantage of a business plan-writing class offered by the Chicago chapter of the Women's Business Development Center.

Regardless of their area of expertise, all of the women said they gained knowledge and insight into the business world quickly.

"You definitely learn a lot. Everyone makes mistakes along the way and it's always a challenge," said Pullen.