

should you work from home?

It seems like a win-win solution for women seeking a work-life balance. But are you cut out for it? **SIOW YUEN CHING** seeks the answers from three mums and a work-life consultant.

YOU DREAM OF giving up your nine-to-five job to raise your kids, but figure the family may not be able to survive on a single income.

More often than not, the need for a regular income is the main reason many mums remain in the workforce. In fact, the Working Mothers Forum (WMF) Survey 2008 revealed that 71 per cent of stay-at-home mums would like to contribute to their household income.

Of the 1,000 mums surveyed, 32 per cent don't think it's possible to juggle effectively between career and motherhood; and about 60 per cent of working mums are dissatisfied with their current work-life situation and want to seek alternative arrangements.

If you've ever considered joining the ranks of mums who work from home – whether to run your own business or freelance – the option may be more feasible than you think. Here's what our expert and work-from-home mums have to say:

What motivated you to take the leap from an office-based job to working from home?

HUANG RUI LIN (RL) My work at a non-profit organisation was keeping me away from home from 7am to 7pm every day. I felt that there was a black hole in my life as I didn't know what my children were up to for a good part of the day.

JOANNE SIM (JS) I've been teaching piano mostly from home after the birth of my baby in January this year. Being a first-time mum, I'm

“60 per cent of working mums are dissatisfied with their current work-life situation and want to seek alternative arrangements.”

quite protective of my little one and don't trust anyone to take care of him. I've always wanted to be a stay-at-home mum, except my husband and parents didn't entirely support my decision for financial reasons.

JOANNE TEO (JT) I never thought

I would be a stay-at-home mum. I'm the kind of person who can't sit still. But after Claire was born, I felt a need to take care of her myself. I worked out a deal with an ex-client that allows me to work from home before I left my public relations career of seven years.

CHERYL LIEW (CL) I gave birth to my two elder boys while working in an organisation. I was able to juggle my career and motherhood because I had a great boss and working environment, with a reasonable workload and flexible working hours.

But I realised that many of my friends aren't that privileged. This was one of the factors that pushed me to set up a consultancy to facilitate and advocate work-life balance. I love what I do now, not forgetting the fact that I get to work from home. I love the flexibility, and I don't have to miss my boys' sports meets anymore!

OUR SUPPORT GROUP

- Cheryl Liew, early 40s, a certified career coach, work-life consultant and founder of Lifeworkz, a consultancy that aims to create dynamic organisations and individuals in the workplace. She has three boys, aged between one and 10.
- Huang Rui Lin, 34, is a freelance branding and editorial consultant with two children, aged one and five.
- Joanne Sim, 29, is a freelance piano teacher and jewellery designer. She has a 10-month-old baby boy.
- Joanne Teo, 29, is a work-from-home PR consultant and mum to 10-month-old Claire.



What is the toughest challenge of working from home?

JS An irregular income. When my students have school exams, my music classes get cancelled. The jewellery business is also quite erratic – business is good during festive periods like Christmas but slow at other times.

RL I'm expected to be available all the time just because I'm not working in an office. While I identify with my neighbours who are stay-at-home mums, they feel that I'm somewhat different. I stay home to take care of my kids, but dress up to go for meetings. On the other hand, my friends who work full-time are envious that I get to stay at home.

JT Time management is my biggest problem. My most productive time is at night, when my baby is asleep. So I've been working until 4am, which is exhausting!

CL I don't want my kids to think that mum is home but doesn't want to play with them; some of my friends manage such expectations quite well. For example, if mum's room door is closed, it means she's working and shouldn't be disturbed.

“Working from home gives mums a chance to socialise and build a network.”

What factors do we need to consider before becoming a work-from-home mum?

JT You must have a strong conviction. For some, it may be hard to venture out of the monetary comfort zone. But I started working from home instead of being a stay-at-home mum so that I wouldn't have to give up too much of my current lifestyle. I've cut down on luxurious items for myself, but when I see something cute for Claire, I want to be able to buy it for her.

RL You should spend quality time with your children. To do that, you need a strong support system in

terms of your family and in-laws.
CL It's worthwhile to explore the possibility of working from home, whether you're with an organisation or working for yourself. As your child grows up, she will learn that you have to work, but that she has your undivided attention when you're with her.

Apart from adding to the family income, what other advantages are there of working from home?

CL Socialising and building a network. It's a chance for mums to get out and have some adult conversations for a change. For instance, if I were a stay-at-home mum, I think I would drive my kids up the wall. I'm a better mum when I'm a working mum.

RL It's also about using the skills you've honed over the years. Like Cheryl, I would be happier if I've other things to do, apart from parenting.

How do you juggle work and caring for your baby? Should your child be a certain age before you work from home?

JS For me, the first few years of my baby's life are the most important, and I don't want to miss any of that.

RL When my girl turned four, she began to outwit her grandparents. My mother-in-law said she asked a lot of questions and the answers they gave her didn't seem to satisfy her. I want to be there to impart values to my kids.

CL The critical ages are below six years old, between 13 and 14 years old, and just before they enter NS – that's the final phase when parents can have any influence on their child. To me, those are the key phases of their lives when you can mould the way they think and act.

Should a person be of a certain temperament to work from home?

CL You need to have some degree of



self-discipline.

RL I've met people who can't work from home because they love the office environment, the socialising and gossiping with colleagues. For me, I keep in touch with friends via e-mails, online chats or phone calls.

JS It's also important to have family support. Plan a system that includes your extended family helping out.

“To be able to work from home, you need experience and a skill that makes you employable.”

What type of jobs can women do from home?

CL Any industry, with the exception of frontline service jobs, just as long as they implement the right infrastructure and technology. Communications technology is so advanced now. For example, customer service phone calls can be

re-directed to someone at home. Or take on project-based work with a start and end date, which allows you to work based on your own schedule.

RL You'll need a skill that makes you employable. With specialised expertise, you would be an asset to the organisation even if you're not a full-time employee.

JT Experience is also important. After all, you can't really train a newbie to work from home.

Do you worry that you'll have difficulty re-entering the workforce later on?

JT Sometimes, I do wonder whether prospective employers would take into account my freelance work: Will I return to the same position before I left? Will all my years of freelancing go down the drain? When I see my peers advancing in their careers, I hope that I won't lag too far behind if I do go back to work.

CL That's why it's important to keep your skills current and stay connected to the job market. Working from home means you're still working and upgrading your skills and network. Employers need to understand that every experience is valuable, whether you're working in the office or from home. **SH**

THINKING OF WORKING FROM HOME?

Quitting your job to work from home shouldn't be an overnight decision. Before taking the plunge, you need to ensure you're financially stable, have a strong support network and work opportunities, advises Cheryl. "It is important to give yourself two to three years before evaluating whether you're happy with the arrangement and if it's working out for you in all aspects."

Here are some things to consider:

> **FINANCIAL** If you're not

convinced you can live on one income, give it a try on paper. Note every dollar you're spending now. Then, see if you can trim your expenses to a level of spending that matches a single income.

> **PASSION** It helps if you're passionate about what you do. Otherwise, you'll be running back to your old workplace at the sign of the first obstacle.

> **SUPPORT SYSTEM** Talk to your family about what to expect when

you start working from home so they better understand your new role. You may need babysitting help when you're working.

> **MENTAL MAKEOVER** Leaving a full-time job requires more than just a financial adjustment. You will need to be organised and disciplined so you get a lot of work done. It's also your responsibility to keep yourself motivated as it's very easy to be distracted while working at home.