

#UPCYCLE YOUR JOB



The smart way
to balance family
life and career

ANNA MELLER



#Upcycle Your Job:

The smart way to balance family life & career

By Anna Meller

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Foreword

Career-life balance is a challenge that most of us - especially working mothers - struggle with throughout periods of our working lives regardless of the jobs we hold, our family backgrounds, or the country in which we reside. The effective management of work-life relationships matters not only for our careers, families, and personal satisfaction, but also for our productivity and well-being on and off the job.

Given the importance of managing career-life balance for women's health, their families, and societal gender equality, over my career I have conducted seminal work-family research and leadership development to help advance the work-life movement, toward more sustainable careers. Elected the first President of the Work Family Researchers Network, and a Fellow in two scientific academies: the Academy of Management and the American Psychological Association, I have had the good fortune to receive invitations to speak on work-family developments in more than a dozen countries around the globe. It was during one of these talks in the U.K. at the British Psychological Society's Work-Life Balance working group, where I first met Anna Meller about a decade ago. Starting in the later-2000's, I travelled to the U.K. every year or every other year to give invited talks on current developments in work and family and managing work-life boundaries, flexibility and interventions. Anna and I would interact at these gatherings of professionals who were interested in learning about state-of-the-art work-family research and practice.

During these conversations, what impressed me about Anna was not only her passion to helping individuals and organizations to improve work-life practices, but her commitment to keeping up with the latest research on work and family and engaging in on-going dialogue with work-life academics. Throughout my career, I have often witnessed a research to practice separation of the work-life communities; where academics tend to congregate with other academics, and practitioners and consultants with each other. Such a social division leads to a lack of conversation and learning across communities of practice on a growing societal challenge. The research to practice gap negatively impedes the transfer of best evidence-based research to the field; and also knowledge transfer in the other direction- where academics learn about the most challenging work-life problems facing individuals and companies and how to overcome barriers to implementation of best practice.

Individuals such as Anna are able to bridge this research-practice gap and promote learning and updated discovery across practical and scholarly fields. It is no surprise to me that Anna is the author of this book, *Upcycle your job: The smart way to balance family life and career*, as she was able to draw on her knowledge-bridging background and many years of consulting in the U.K.

Anna organizes the book into three sections. In Part One, she summarizes why many of the current strategies women are following to manage work and family are not

working. Anna shows an ability to strip down and focus on the essence of issues in an easy to understand manner. For example, she clearly identifies the three main “choices” working mothers see for managing motherhood; and how none of them are working very well. These choices include: taking a career break but never being able to catch up in pay in lifetime earnings; working part time but ending up working more hours than the pay cut, or working fulltime but having careers stalled anyway as mothers try to control hours or demands.

In this section and throughout the book, Anna also shows an ability to integrate and provide a high-level overview of some of the current issues perpetuating many women’s work-family challenges by integrating a number of current research-based concepts in a simplified streamlined explanation. For example, she discusses employer preferences for “ideal workers”- those workers who act as if their job demands always come first over their families and personal lives; and “the flexibility stigma” - the backlash that many workers (often women) face for working flexibly – terms that researcher Joan Williams helped popularize in research reports and books.

Anna also applies some current gender discrimination and organizational behaviour concepts to the work-life conversation. An example is “implicit bias” - the almost automatic assumptions that colleagues make about women who don’t pretend to work 80 hour weeks, and how these perceptions can stall women’s careers. Another example of the useful application of organizational behavior concepts to the work-life terrain involves “job crafting.” Job crafting was coined by researchers Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton when they observed that employees often do it; and involves changing physical, relational, or cognitive boundaries of their jobs to add meaning to their lives. Readers will appreciate the simplified explanations of these relevant social science concepts.

Anna also refers to agency theory and notes that women do have more agency than socialized to believe. She then concludes this section with the presentation of the PROPEL model that women have the agency to apply to improve their working lives.

Part Two, *Your Tailored Upcycling Strategy* is the heart of the book. Organized into six chapters, it takes you on the content journey of many topics: work-life preferences, roles, options, possibilities, skills and leadership. Readers will find many meaningful questions and tips that they can use to diagnose, reflect and make a plan to improve their work-life situations. They will be able to experience work-life coaching and likely move forward on strategies for work-life improvement. I especially enjoyed the “work out” questions in the possibilities section. Readers are asked to make a list of their job tasks and reflect on how to discard low value tasks and focus more on those that are of the highest value. In chapter 7, key skills for flexible working are identified. This is a great list of competencies for individuals and companies to develop and support. All of us over the course of the career, regardless of where we are in the child or elder care life stages, can benefit from work-life

coaching and taking a step back to refocus on activities that best fit our calling and/or improving our flexibility skills in order to upcycle our lives.

Part Three offers closing thoughts. We are encouraged to draw on principles of positive psychology to manage change. Such an approach moves dialogue away from focusing on barriers and why something can't be done, toward a conversation on solutions and possibilities.

In conclusion, career-life balance is something that many high-talent individuals care deeply about as they seek to excel not only in their careers but also in their personal lives. That is one reason I first wrote the book: *CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age*, which focuses on the different ways in which we integrate, separate or shift how we manage work-life boundaries in ways that align with our identities and give us greater control in our increasingly 24-7 connected world. Through my research, consulting and personal life experiences, I learned that in our digital world, it is important to challenge ourselves to continually learn, reassess, and improve how well we are "walking the work-life talk." Based on her years of experience working with clients, Anna's book will help readers do exactly that- assess how to better navigate the on-going career-life balance journey at pivotal times in their lives in order to close what Professor Jeff Pfeffer refers to as the "knowing-doing gap" on work-life issues.

Dr. Ellen Ernst Kossek, Basil. S. Turner Professor of Management, Purdue University
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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a younger version of you. An ambitious recent graduate now working in the perfect first job at the start of her professional journey. You're excited, hopeful, committed to your career. You've just bought your first 'power suit' which cost an arm and a leg but was well worth it. It's a fabulous designer creation that makes you feel great when you wear it to those important meetings and interviews.

Fast forward ten years and the suit is still in your wardrobe, still looking great. You've taken good care of it, but you've not really thought about it recently as you've been undergoing some big life changes. Now you're ready to put it on again – and when you do it no longer seems to fit. Somehow it seems to restrict your movement and doesn't quite reflect who you are any more. You still like it and remember how great it used to make you feel. So what do you do? You have two choices – discard it or upcycle it.

Now imagine we're not talking about a suit, but about the corporate career you've been developing for the past ten years. Since you became a mother it – like the suit – no longer seems to fit. What are you going to do?

Every year thousands of women discard a corporate career that no longer seems to fit their lifestyle. It's a decision that could cost them up to £300,000 over their working lives; but it doesn't have to be like this. In an era where we upcycle other parts of our lives, why not upcycle your corporate career?

When I search for an online definition of upcycling I learn that it means to improve something we would otherwise discard in such a way that we create something of higher quality or value than the original.

There's been an exponential rise in the popularity of upcycling in recent years. When we upcycle we take an item of clothing or furniture we may have once loved – or where we see the potential for creating something we will love. Where we were once tempted to discard our belongings as they got older, now we're consciously choosing to transform them into something better.

When we upcycle we'll often draw on skills passed down to us by our mothers and grandmothers. Then we'll add a modern twist – perhaps an eco-conscious paint or an up to date restyle of a jacket. And voila! We're left with an item that reflects our new lifestyle. One that we can love all over again.

For some time I've been thinking about applying those same principles to our jobs and our careers. There's a lot about the corporate world that needs upcycling: cultures based on mid 20th century norms; working practices out of line with 21st century social expectations; models of career progression grounded in outdated stereotypes. We'll be considering all of these in detail in part one.

As a consequence, when we transition to parenthood too many of us discard the careers we've been working so hard to build. Sometimes we're seduced into thinking that something new will suit us better. We believe becoming a mumpreneur is our best choice.

And sometimes we simply feel we have no choice. Intransigent corporate cultures refuse to adjust to the new shape our lives have taken. We cut our cloth according to our circumstances. So we take a step back onto the "mommy track" or decide to take a break until our offspring are ready for school.

These are costly decisions; and in many cases our earnings potential will never recover.

What if I told you there was a better way?

Women started breaching the corporate world in large numbers during the 1960s and 70s as the economic boom fuelled demand for labour. They encountered workplaces set up for 'ideal workers' – organisations that ignored women's dual roles as both caregivers and employees. For over half a century we've been waiting for employers to shift culture and mind-set. And the lack of women in the top layers of the pyramid confirms that progress has been slow – we're still waiting.

Just as our mothers and grandmothers took things into their own hands, so it's time for new generations of women to do the same. As an organisational psychologist and work-life balance expert I know it's possible to restructure your working arrangement in ways that will both make you more productive and support your work-life balance.

The idea is to empower you – as an ambitious professional woman – to develop a personal route map that supports you in navigating both your work-life balance needs and your workplace culture. I want to open your eyes to new possibilities and inspire in you the confidence that you can be a Balanced Leader.

Why this book?

Recent years have seen a steady stream of books by high profile role models sharing their corporate journey. Women are hungry for new role models so that should be a good thing, right? While these books are inspirational the challenge lies in applying their wisdom to our own – often very different – life circumstances.

For the past twenty five years I've been consulting on work-life balance matters in the corporate world. I've supported both private and public sector clients to improve work-life balance policies and practices. I've trained and coached women to make those small adjustments that make such a big impact when it comes to finding a balance that works for them. I've conducted ground breaking research into the work-life balance challenges faced by professional women. And as I've learnt more about the research evidence I've shared this with a wide range of audiences.

Based on all this, I've developed a practical six step process – PROPEL – that will enable you to create a working and living arrangement that meets your specific work-

life balance needs while supporting you to remain on the corporate career ladder: so you get to lean in on your terms. The first two steps will help you pinpoint your own work-life balance Preferences and how you can combine the Roles of parent and employee in ways that support balance rather than creating conflict.

Steps three and four offer practical advice on how to upcycle your job for better balance. You'll consider the Options open to you – given the nature of your employer's corporate culture; and the Possibilities for restructuring your work. Step five provides an opportunity to evaluate your Essential skills. And finally, in step six I offer a new model of balanced Leadership.

Think of it as three projects that will show you how to upcycle your work-life balance, your working practices and your leadership skills.

As with any upcycling project we'll strip out what's no longer working; reshape our pared down structure; and assess our current skills and resources. This will result in the clarity of focus we need create a life that makes us smile.

What to expect from this book

The book is laid out in three parts. In the first I've provided a summary of the complex issues that get in the way of women's corporate career progression and what we can do to change the situation. I hope you'll find this background useful, but if you're itching to upcycle your own work-life balance you can jump straight into part two (leaving part one for bedtime reading at a later date).

Part two provides you with the opportunity to work through the PROPEL process, understand each step and apply it to your own life. The result is a more balanced life and a new way of thinking about balanced leadership.

Part three introduces two powerful techniques from the school of Positive Psychology that you will find useful in navigating a more balanced future. Again, you don't need to read part three to gain the benefits of the PRPEL model. However, if you're unfamiliar with the techniques discussed (Appreciative Inquiry and Solutions Focus) you will benefit from understanding the new – and very different – approaches to change taken by them.

I've tried to keep the theory to a minimum. But I'm assuming that as a smart and ambitious professional woman you want to know why I'm suggesting a particular approach. And as a proponent of evidence based practice I want to demonstrate why the approach works.

So, before you discard your corporate career join me in the pages of this book. I want to inspire you to upcycle it instead - so you can be your best self and offer your best contribution to the world. You'll discover how much potential you have to upcycle your life. And the positive impact that will make on your wellbeing and your finances will delight you.

About the Author

For the past twenty five years Anna Meller has specialised in work life balance issues and their impact on women's careers. Her consultancy work has supported a range of employers in the private, public and not for profit sectors to improve work-life balance provision for their staff. She has considerable experience of coaching senior managers to improve their work-life balance – adopting a pragmatic and evidence based approach. She continues to share her expertise with a wide range of audiences both as a speaker and regular blogger.

Anna works with ambitious professional women seeking to combine a satisfying corporate career with a balanced family life. Her focus is on empowering them towards better choices so they can make their fullest contribution at work and live a life in balance. To guide her coaching and training services Anna has developed an innovative model (PROPEL) which draws on Positive Psychology, her own published research and her consulting experience.

Anna has researched and written three ground breaking reports into work-life balance challenges in Professional and Financial Services and her previous book on how to get the best from part-time workers was published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. She has worked as an accredited consultant to the government's Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund and since 2009 she has been an active member of the BPS Division of Occupational Psychology's working group on Work-Life Balance.

Anna served as a trustee for the charities New Ways to Work and PARENTS AT WORK which subsequently merged to form the UK charity Working Families. Prior to starting on her work-life balance journey she had a successful early career in HR - mostly in the Financial Services Sector. She has a Masters Degree in Organisational Behaviour and is a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Learn more about Anna on her website: www.sustainableworking.co.uk