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The pre-mommy mentality: Just work harder

By Wency Leung

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Many female workers feel pressure to furiously climb the career ladder before taking time off to start a family

To Toronto marketing manager Janine, 29, the discrepancy between how hard her male and female colleagues work is obvious.

"On project teams and stuff, all the women are meeting deadlines and ... have things done in advance, and you can look around and men are like, 'Well, I'm at 50 per cent.' "

That's not to say her male counterparts are slackers. It's just that Janine, who did not want her full name published for fear of repercussions, says she and many of her female co-workers are trying to make up in advance for time they will take off to start families.

"There's a lot of us that are trying to prove who they are before they go on mat leave," she says. "You're working so hard [so] that when you come back, it's not seen as, 'Oh you took a year off.' "

Sure, women are delaying having children till later in life. But until that day comes, many are furiously climbing the career ladder as quickly as possible - sometimes surpassing their male peers in salary and time spent at the office in the process.

Janine, who is getting married next year and is considering having children soon after, says she can't afford to be seen working at the same level as her male colleagues: She needs to be beyond it.

"I think I feel that pressure, like 'Hey, I've got two years to prove what I've got.' "

The drive to front-load work can be all the more compelling for women who are primary breadwinners in a relationship, says Carolyn Lawrence, president of Women of Influence, Inc., a Toronto-based company that produces events promoting the advancement of professional women.

As an entrepreneur who was married to a "starving artist" for two years, Ms. Lawrence, 32, says she felt the need not only to secure her credibility at work before having children, but also to secure the finances to afford them.

"So I kept working harder ... so that one day I could at least pay for someone else to raise them," she says, noting her career ambitions may have contributed to the strain on her relationship with her husband.

The couple is now separated, and Ms. Lawrence says the likelihood of having children seems "even farther away from the realm of possibility."

But among her female friends in their 30s, all of whom earn equal or more than their partners, the challenge of squeezing in as much work as possible before maternity leave remains a hot topic, she says. With biological clocks

ticking, they're constantly debating whether to plan for a pregnancy before or after a promotion, the company's annual sales conference and other major business events.

Pamela Jeffery, founder of the Toronto-based Women's Executive Network, which offers career mentoring programs, says she encounters women on a daily basis who are racing for career advancement while they're in their late 20s and early 30s.

"The No. 1 question I find in our mentoring programs is 'How do I do it all? How do I have a great career and be a mom?' "

Her advice: Put in the extra work early on.

"The reality is that if you're going to take up to a year off, it does require a certain amount of extra effort because you are in a competitive marketplace," Ms. Jeffery says, adding that this can mean that women end up working harder, longer hours than their male counterparts. "Until they figure out a way for the men to get pregnant, we're the ones who are going to have to keep doing it. ... It's not necessarily fair, but [that's] the reality."

Whether women plateau at work once they have children depends on three factors, Ms. Jeffery says: the support of their workplace, their individual commitment to keep up with their peer group, and the support they receive from their spouse, daycare, nanny or family.

Ms. Jeffery uses her own career path as an example of how to become established at work before starting a family. She earned a master of business administration degree in her mid-20s and then worked hard to solidify a consulting career before having her first child at 30.

Now in her late 40s, she has both a successful career and family life, she says. "I wouldn't have done it any differently."


On the other hand, Amy, a 30-year-old manager in London, Ont., wonders whether delaying starting a family has been the best decision. (She declined to have her full name published since she believes it could be a "career-limiting move" to make her desire to have children known.)

"When I was in my early 20s, it probably would have made a hell of a lot more sense [that] I had my babies then, when it didn't matter if I took a year off and you're still trying to figure out what to do with your life," she says.

Now that she's more confident in the direction of her career, she feels she needs to work much harder to meet her goals before starting a family. As devoted as she is to her job, she acknowledges she doesn't know how motherhood might affect her work.

"I expect that my priorities will change. ... I guess I wonder about myself, whether I'll stay as committed," she says. "I say that I will because I love my job, but people always say things change once you have a baby and I guess that's kind of scary."

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