

## MARKETPLACE

## WORK &amp; FAMILY

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In Real Life,  
Hard Choices Upset  
Any Balancing Act

**M**ULTITASKING may be all the rage, but applying it to family life can produce pretty trivial advice.

"Learn to do two things at once!" shouts an article stuffed with "How-I-Do-It-All" tips. Among them: Pay bills in the bathroom while watching your toddler in the tub; do errands while spending quality time with your spouse; call in catalog orders while feeding the baby in the middle of the night.

Such tips may make it easier to get two lifetimes' work done in one. But conspicuously absent from the pop-culture rhetoric is any discussion of making tough choices—when a job demands too much, when the urgent needs of an employer and a family member can't be reconciled or when you find yourself unable, ever, to leave the office behind.

"Even the words we use about work-life conflict—'juggling,' 'balancing,' 'managing'—all imply that if you just do it all skillfully enough, everything will be OK," says Faith Wohl, director of the federal Office of Workplace Initiatives. "There's an implicit arrogance about the idea that you can manage your way through some of the crises that people encounter—crises that affect their soul, their spirit and their being. Integration is a better word," she adds.

We looked last week at some examples of work-life balancing skills used by successful people, as identified by the Wharton-Merck Roundtable, a group of academics and corporate managers, including Ms. Wohl, organized by Merck and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. This week, we look at two examples from the group's research, showing how people's lives change when work-family conflict pushes them beyond juggling into a realm the roundtable calls "life lessons." Both reflect a truth that should guide employer policy on issues from child care to career planning: The drive to integrate work and family is often a lifelong process, and it is powerful enough to reshape careers in unforeseen ways.

**T**RUDY DESILETS has spent much of her career searching for an employer who would allow her to satisfy personal and professional values. The first step, after her child was born 16 years ago, was learning when to bail out of a repressive corporate environment. Though she was performing well in a fast-track sales job, travel demands left her exhausted. When she asked to job-share, her bosses turned her down.

By the time her daughter was three, she hit burnout. "I felt like I couldn't do anything right. I wasn't doing my job right. I wasn't doing my mothering right. I wasn't being a wife right," she says. "One day I just broke down and cried. I said, 'I've got to quit my job.'" a wrenching decision because "I loved what I did."

But Ms. DeSilets soon learned she could thrive outside a big company. She started a successful marketing firm, enabling her "to work at 2 a.m. if I wanted and still deliver the goods to the client," she says. She also got

her M.B.A. But work and personal values collided again during a stint for another employer, where she was required to work through a religious holiday with "no recognition of the fact" that it was important to her and her family, Ms. DeSilets says. She soon resigned.

By the time she joined retailer Eddie Bauer 1½ years ago, Ms. DeSilets, 45, knew how to spot a corporate culture that matched her values. As



Carol Liny

Bauer's manager of marketing systems, she says, she has found an environment that is rigorous in strategy and flexible with employees. She can start her day at 6:45 a.m. so she can leave for afternoon activities with her daughter.

**N**O SUCH flexibility marks the workplace of options trader Steve Bloom, 38. Efforts to blend a consuming career with fatherhood got off to a rocky start when his first child was born just before the 1987 stock-market crash. "My wife said, 'I really need you here now,'" yet market turmoil forced him to work 100-hour weeks, he says. Caught between two once-in-a-lifetime events, Mr. Bloom did his best. But "my wife had to be more understanding than humanly possible," he says.

As his family grew by two more children, Mr. Bloom found his work so demanding that he "was constantly making an effort to turn it off" and be psychologically present at home. He managed more than many traders to be present, getting home by 6 p.m. and cutting a business trip short to attend his son's birthday party. But the psychological demands of his work intensified when he switched to the 24-hour-a-day currency markets.

When the compromises weighed too heavily, Mr. Bloom took a break. He quit the firm where he was founding principal and, for two years, has attended mostly to family, renovating a house and traveling. While the family time has been "terrific," he says, he's "getting itchy. For the first 10 years I probably over-weighted the professional life. For the last two years, I've overweighted the family side," he says. "I'm still searching to find that balance." He says he has defined a crucial value: A work environment where family concerns are recognized.

There is, many would say, no right or wrong way to integrate work and family. There are only more or less costly ways in terms of career, relationships or health. Roundtable members hope their research on self-management will help students, managers and workers anticipate their own life dilemmas and be more sensitive to those of others, says Stewart Friedman, an organizer and Wharton professor. "What we hope to do," he says, "is to get people asking the right questions."