



## The counterintuitive guide to a balanced life

Hit the gym, hang out with your kids—but ditch emptying your inbox and watch less TV. Author **Laura Vanderkam** on how to earn more and still have time for yourself **BY SHARON COTLIAR**

**T**alk about time management. Journalist Laura Vanderkam found a way to write five books in five years while raising four kids under the age of eight. Yet the soft-spoken author of 2012's *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast* says she's not one of those über-organized, color-coding perfectionists. "I'm organized, but I'm not *organized*," says the 36-year-old Princeton grad. "My office is a wreck. I have

50,000 emails in my inbox. I keep a paper calendar." So what's the secret to her success? "I find the key to making myself happy is *not* to be a perfectionist," she says. That and maximizing her time, as she did when she delivered her newborn son in just 19 minutes. "My friends joked that I was even efficient at childbirth," she says. Vanderkam researched her latest book, *I Know How She Does It*, by studying time logs that detailed in

15-to-30-minute increments how 133 working moms who earn six figures spend their days. These women work an average of 44 hours a week (with a range of 25 to 69 hours a week), not including lunch breaks or commuting time. Conversely, moms who work an average of 35 hours a week earn considerably less, about \$37,000 a year. All of which suggested to Vanderkam that you can make big bucks without sacrificing that much family

time. “The women in my study worked more than the average working mom, about nine hours more per week,” she says. “On the other hand, they earned three times as much. Nine hours isn’t nothing, but these results show you don’t have to work until 8 PM every night. Almost half these women worked at night at home after the kids went to bed—but not every night. Or they did some work on the weekends. They managed to keep their work hours at a point where they were eligible for promotions and raises, and they still got to spend time with their kids.”

We talked to Vanderkam about women’s key strategies for a balanced life.

“**My office is** a wreck. I have 50,000 emails in my inbox. I keep a paper calendar. The key to making myself happy is *not to be a perfectionist.*”

**In your book, you say women “massively limit” their earning potential by not going for “big jobs.” What’s stopping them?**

We assume that top jobs require 80 or 90 hours a week and that there will not be space for anything else. But I’ve found that’s not true. I have time logs from people in every white-collar sweatshop industry—finance, law, accounting, consulting, technology—and they still have time outside their work. There are 168 hours in a week. If you spend 44 hours working and 54 hours sleeping, there are 70 hours left over. That’s a lot of time. The London School of Economics recently did a CEO time-use survey, studying CEOs working in more than 1,000 manufacturing companies across different countries. The average CEO worked 52 hours a week. That still leaves room for other things.

**Some of the women in your study worked 60-plus hours a week. Were they able to have a life outside the office?**

I talked to one woman who was a consultant. When she travels for her job, usually in the first half of the week, she works 15-hour days. She said, “Why not? I’m not with my family, so I may as well work.” By clocking

in a big chunk of time during the first half of her week, she was able to carve out more family time in the second half: She’d do the school drop-off with her kids, she’d talk with the teachers. I’m not saying long hours don’t happen. Sixty hours is a long workweek if you’re actually focusing those 60 hours on work. But it’s not 90 hours. It’s not 100 hours.

**What habits do successful women have that positively affect their week?**

Ninety percent of them made time for regular exercise. Exercise gives you more energy, and that’s key if you want to have a full life. They didn’t watch nearly as much TV:

4.4 hours a week on average, compared with the national average of 34 hours. They also weren’t skimping on sleep. They got about 54 hours a week, which is eight hours five days a week, seven hours two days a week.

**Where do women typically make mistakes managing their time?**

Not taking breaks during the workday is a big mistake, because if you don’t take intentional breaks, you’ll take unintentional ones. You’ll work through lunch and then find that you spend 30 minutes shopping online later. You’re better off taking those 30 minutes to go outside, eat your lunch, come back and be able to focus on work in the afternoon. One woman told me she started taking an exercise class in the middle of the day. She said she had her best year at work because of that class: If she didn’t have that time to herself, it was much harder for her to focus.

**What other steps can women take to maximize their time?**

Keep a time log for one week. If you want to spend your time more effectively, you have to know how you’re spending it. One thing many working moms discover when they

keep a time log is that they’re spending a lot of time with their kids. That gives them permission to take more time for themselves or to work a few more focused hours.

**How can we be more mindful of time spent away from the office?**

Women said they are often too tired to plan fun things once they get to their weekends. I suggested to one woman that she start planning her weekends on Wednesday nights. She would take five minutes to book a restaurant or see what exhibit was at her local museum. She started having better weekends.

**Is it worthwhile for women to spend their time mentoring younger coworkers?**

Mentoring isn’t a charitable act; it’s a two-way street. None of us are so successful that we can’t be helped by other people. And mentoring can be done efficiently by inviting someone to participate in something you’re already doing. If you’re a runner, invite that person to

go running with you so that the time with that person fits into *your* schedule.

**How can women avoid experiencing burn-out in their careers?**

Do real work first. We have this tendency to consign the work we want to do, the work that drew us to our jobs, to scraps of time left at the end of the day. Instead, look at your calendar for the coming week and say, Where can I carve out time to focus on a project I’m excited about? Most people come in at 9. Try coming in at 8 two mornings a week; hopefully, you can get to 10 before anyone knocks on your door. That’s four hours that you’ve focused on work that drew you to your job.

**What’s the best advice you’ve gotten?**

Rather than say, “I don’t have time,” say, “This isn’t a priority” instead. That language is more accurate. I have time to train for a marathon. I just don’t want to. Acknowledging that reminds me that time is a choice. If I don’t like the way I’m spending it, I need to figure out a way to change that. ©

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