Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how mid-career professional mothers perceive themselves in relation to their work and family roles, how they experience these roles, how they merge their work, family and individual self, and what meaning they make of this integration.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 participants aged between 37 and 55 with at least one dependent child under the age of 18, in dual-earning/career households.

Findings – The study reports that a complex relationship of work-related dynamics and personal factors shaped the meaning for these women amid competing priorities of work, family and individual lives. Organisation and co-ordination of multiple activities with support from various sources was fundamental to finding balance. A deep sense of motherhood was evident in that their children were their number one priority but career was of high importance as they sought stimulation, challenges, achievement and enrichment in their work. Now, in mid-career transition, the respondents seek more self-care time in an effort to find new meaning in the work, family and self equation.

Research limitations/implications – The study raises important issues for the management of professional working mothers and the implications of the study for individuals and organisations are set out.

Originality/value – This paper makes contributions to work-life integration and career theory. It provides one of the first empirical studies on work-life integration in Ireland using the construct of meaningful work and secondly builds on the kaleidoscope career model theory.

Keywords Women, Parents, Job satisfaction, Life planning, Careers, Ireland

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Female participation in the global workforce has grown dramatically over the past number of decades, with the trend specifically reported for countries such as the USA (Auster, 2001), Europe (Paoli and Merllieé, 2001), and Ireland (Coughlan, 2002; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Central Statistics Office, 2006). This increased female labour force participation, particularly for women in childbearing years, has been accompanied by increasing challenges in managing time, roles and responsibilities (Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Marcinkus and Hamilton, 2006; O’Connor, 1998). The challenge for working mothers is how to facilitate the sharing of roles in a more fair and equitable way to relieve them of the double burden of employment and domestic duties (Fine-Davis et al., 2004). Additionally, the challenge for organisations is to find a way to support working
mothers with flexible working options and equality policies, thereby recognising their valuable contribution to the workforce (O'Connell and Russell, 2005). These policies include a variety of statutory entitlements such as maternity leave, carer’s leave, parental leave and force majeure leave, and other non-statutory forms of working arrangements such as flexitime, job-sharing, e-working and term-time working.

Pressures have grown over the years on working mothers as they try to find meaning in work, at home and in their personal life in the face of competing priorities and career roles. The majority of career-minded mothers have confronted, at some point, the choice between a challenging job, a promising career and the demands of home life (Dex, 1999). Indeed, Marcinkus and Hamilton (2006) report a growing trend in the past few years for mothers to “opt out” of the labour force during child care years in the USA. The increase in work intensification and long hours, coupled with increasing demands on time due to child rearing, has resulted in stress and labour turnover (Mackey Jones and McKenna, 2002). Previous research shows that favourable working environments which promote work-life balance arrangements have potential benefits for both employers and employees (Auster, 2001; Drew et al., 2003; O’Connell and Russell, 2005). If employees obtain support in the workplace enabling them to integrate and balance time and effort across the spheres of work, family and self, they can find self-fulfilment and satisfaction in their whole lives which can have positive outcomes for themselves and ultimately their employers (Auster, 2001 Drew et al., 2003).

This study examines the experiences of work-life integration/balance for mid-career professional working mothers. It explores how professional working mothers perceive themselves in relation to the roles of work, family and self. The study will also explore how professional working mothers combine parenting with enduring and relatively uninterrupted full-time work. Finally, they study investigates how these women find meaning and self-fulfilment across the three domains of work, family and self. Certain social and legislative changes in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s provide a relevant backdrop to this study. For example, up until 1973, a “marriage bar” existed in the public sector which prevented women from working once they got married. This was removed in 1973 and women were allowed to continue to work after marriage. The introduction of extensive equality legislation over the past three decades and financial support for maternity leave represent significant positive developments for women who choose to combine motherhood with building professional careers. It is timely, therefore, to explore how these women are managing their personal and professional lives given the social and legislatives changes they have experienced during their careers to-date.

The focus is on women because women not only continue to be the primary child carer givers but they also experience these phenomena differently to men (Drew et al., 2003; Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Drew and Murtagh, 2005). Professional working mothers are defined as mothers who have remained in employment through the period of rearing their family while also developing and investing in their career. The literature on work-life integration/balance is a useful basis to explore how balance and meaningfulness can be achieved across the various work and life domains. In this paper, the terms balance and integration are used interchangeably. However, we are aware that recent researchers have sought a distinction between the two concepts (see for example Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999; Halpern and Murphy, 2005).
Work-life integration

Work-life integration or balance is defined as a process for reconciliation of work, family and individual self demands and time. According to Joshi et al. (2002), work-life balance is based on the belief that while work is important to all of us and to society, achievement and enjoyment in everyday life is essential to human and societal well-being. This belief is central to the discussion on meaningful work and work-life balance, which has gained currency in the literature over the past decade (Chalofsky, 2003; Dolet, 2003; Gayle, 1997; Svendsen 1997; Ostendorf, 1998; Fleetwood, 2007; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 2002; Campbell Clark, 2000, 2002; Hochschild, 1997; Kirrane and Monks, 2004; McCarthy, 2004). Historically, the fields of work and family have been researched separately in sociology and industrial-organizational psychology because men assumed the role of “breadwinner” and women the role of “homemaker” and were seen as independent systems (Campbell Clark, 2000). In the early part of the century, it was considered unfortunate that a woman had to work; now one is surprised if she does not (Hochschild, 1997). This increased participation of women in the labour force has changed the traditional roles of men and women within the two-parent family resulting in the phenomenon of the dual-career couples (Kirrane and Monks, 2004).

Insights from scarcity theory inform us that personal resources such as time, energy and attention are finite. Therefore, balancing the demands for commitment of resources to one role (e.g. career) results in the devotion of lesser resources to the other role (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Wayne et al., 2004). There are generally two schools of thought regarding the integration of work and personal life domains: one that considers the relationship between domains to be conflict-oriented and the other which suggests that the integration between and across domains can be facilitative with positive spill-over in operation. Conflict occurs when the demand from one of these domains (home, work, personal, family etc.) interferes with the other and causes imbalance (Frone et al., 1992, 1997). When important activities or responsibilities require attention at the same time, conflict can worsen (Frone et al., 1997). Persistent conflict can lead to burn-out and related issues such as emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of personal accomplishment and decreased psychological wellbeing (Perrewes et al., 1999). Furthermore, burn-out can result in reduced work performance and a lower level of job satisfaction experienced by the individual (Mackey Jones and McKenna, 2002) and a loss of meaningfulness (Chalofsky, 2003). In today’s hectic society, home and work are two colliding forces (Greenhaus and Powell, 2003) that often lead to an imbalance, where women, being the primary carers, find it difficult to merge their professional and personal lives to achieve fulfilment and satisfaction (Auster, 2001; Chalofsky, 2003). The dual-career couple phenomenon has added to the pressure of managing multiple demands and can lead to conflict from work to personal life and from personal life to work (Kirrane and Monks, 2004).

On the other hand, some commentators propose that meaningfulness can be achieved when one can find a sense of balance through the integration of work, home and self through positive spill-over (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). For example, work may positively spillover to home when one can develop a sense of accomplishment by developing a career or maintaining contact with friends and peers (Mackey Jones and McKenna 2002). When spillover from work to home is positive, it can be associated with better physical and mental health (Grzywacz, 2000). Therefore, reducing the conflict is essential to experiencing positive
spillover (Mackey Jones and McKenna, 2002). According to Campbell Clark (2002, p. 25),
conflict can be managed by communicating across the border from home-work and
vice versa, “allowing individuals to integrate and separate and ultimately find balance”
across the two domains.

The ability of professional mothers to integrate work and family is not well
understood (Marckinus et al., 2007). The literature indicates that there are many
individual-level factors that influence the ability to juggle multiple demands across life
domains. An important factor to explore is the meaning individuals ascribe to the
various roles of work, family and self, which is dependent on what is important to
them, their own values and beliefs and the choices they make as to how much time they
spend in each domain. These factors determine how they manage the demands from
the different domains as well as how they integrate these domains successfully to
achieve meaning at a personal and professional level. Chalofsky (2003) theorized the
concept of “meaningful work” which presents a theoretical framework to understand
the integration of personal and professional life and is the focus of this paper. The
following section discusses the theoretical concepts of meaning, meaning in work and
meaningful work.

The concept of meaningful work and meaning in work
Research on meaningful work has increased in recent years (Chalofsky, 2003; Dolet,
2003; Gayle, 1997; Svendsen 1997; Ostendorf, 1998) and the growing interest in the
academic field parallels with the interest and concern in the world of work (Handy,
1993). Meaning according to Chalofsky, (2003, p. 73) is found to be more deeply
intrinsic than values, and suggests that “it amounts to three levels of satisfaction:
extrinsic, intrinsic and something even deeper”. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 23), in his
attempt to define meaning, proposes that “any definition of the term would
undoubtedly be circular” indicating a three-sphere approach including: purpose; the
intentions one holds; and clarifying the term in context. Thomas (2000), highlighting
the role of meaningfulness, identifies the four critical intrinsic reward motivators as: a
sense of meaning and purpose; a sense of choice; a sense of competence; and a sense of
progress.

According to Chalofsky (2003) meaning and work together present an even greater
challenge to define and purports that meaning at work implies that there is a
relationship between the individual and the organisation/workplace in terms of
commitment, loyalty and dedication. He further advocates that meaning in work, also
termed meaningful work, “is the way we express the meaning and purpose of our lives
through our work activities although work is just one area of an individual’s life”
(Chalofsky, 2003, p. 73). In essence, he contends that meaningful work is that which
gives real substance to what we do, which brings a sense of fulfilment to our lives and
contributes significantly to one’s purpose in life. Chalofsky (2003) identifies three
themes which determine meaningful work: a sense of self, the work itself, and the sense
of balance which overlap and intertwine and are reflected in the term “integrated
wholeness” (Svendsen, 1997) or meaningful work (Chalofsky, 2003).

The sense of self includes bringing “one’s whole self (mind, body, emotion and
spirit)” to the workplace, recognising and developing one’s potential (Chalofsky, 2003,
p. 78). It also includes knowing one’s purpose in life and how work fits into that
purpose and having a positive belief system about achieving one’s purpose (Chalofsky,
Furthermore, before being able to bring their whole self to work, one must first be aware of their own values, beliefs and purpose in life and the sense of whole self which is fundamental to finding meaning in work (Chalofsky, 2003). The work itself (paid and unpaid) includes the act of doing, the challenge, the creativity, the learning and the ongoing development. Furthermore, it gives one the opportunity to achieve one’s purpose through their work, together with autonomy and empowerment (Chalofsky, 2003). A sense of balance is about the choices we make in terms of the time we spend at work and life domains. It includes balance of one’s work, personal and spiritual life and the amount of time allocated to oneself and to others (Chalofsky, 2003).

These three themes, a sense of self, the work itself and a sense of balance are interconnected and mutually supporting of one another giving an individual “an inclusive state of being” (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 73). Meaningful work, therefore, is influenced by an inclusiveness of all the aspects of our lives beyond that of paid employment which can lead to an integrated wholeness (Svendsen, 1997) for the individual. However, to attain a state of meaningful work, it is critical that no one sphere is so dominant that it adversely impacts the value gained from the other sphere(s) (Chalofsky, 2003). In summary, meaningful work is not just about the paid work we do; it is about the manner in which we live our lives, incorporating our values and principles and doing so with honesty (Chalofsky, 2003). The literature on women and careers and in particular mid-careers is a useful basis to explore how women find meaning as they integrate their work and life domains.

**Mid-career women and meaningful work**

Given the significant increase in female participation two and three decades ago as documented above, organisations now employ a significant number of women who have reached midlife and mid-career. Marcinkus et al. (2007, p. 87) argue that, for these women at midlife, “work-family balance is a key issue as they deal with the potentially conflicting demands of their careers, children and child care, elder care, and other personal issues”. Indeed Auster (2001, p. 1) goes on to suggest that women deal with “serious work/life tradeoffs as they climb the career ladder, where efforts to juggle the needs of children and organisational performance expectations collide”. However, less is known about the factors that determine the choices these women make and the perceptions they have about their work and family roles.

Mid-career is defined as a transition period of intra-career role adjustment and mid-career satisfaction is defined as the degree of satisfaction with one’s career at its midpoint (Schneer and Reitman, 1995). Mid-career is a time when values and interests are deeply explored (Hall, 1986) and when one seeks to integrate them into a whole system that can result in meaningfulness and satisfaction (Chalofsky, 2003). Previous research on mid-career satisfaction of professional mothers suggests that family structure and parenting responsibilities are critical in managing personal and work life. Kirchmeyer (1992) and Schneer and Reitman (1993) found that married women with children with an employed spouse were very satisfied with their careers. Chusmir (1982) reports that women with children lower their expectations of being promoted because of their family responsibilities. Women, in their caring for their children as well as handling their careers, are forced to consider what gives their lives real meaning and to rethink the fundamental source of their identity, their values and
purpose (Knight, 1994). There is a powerful sense of satisfaction and achievement
gained from being able to operate successfully in two very different domains (Knight,
1994; Campbell Clark, 2002).

According to Auster (2001), a key organisational-level factor affecting career
satisfaction for professional women at mid-career is flexibility or flexible working
options. Flexi-options allow for work-life balance to be formally structured into careers
(Auster, 2001). However, the “extent to which employees actually avail of these
arrangements is very low” (O’Connell and Russell, 2005, p. 64). It is suggested that
while many organisations have policies for flexi-options, there is a stigma attached to
using them (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Hochschild, 1997; Auster, 2001). Drew and
Murtagh (2005), in an Irish study, and Hochschild (1997, p. 79), in a US study, found
that women who opted for flexi-options were seen as lacking in commitment by their
managers and were not considered “serious players” in terms of their career. The
women themselves felt that if they opted for such arrangements, their careers would be
seriously jeopardised (Drew and Murtagh, 2005), or “stripped of their benefits or job
security” (Hochschild, 1997, p. 79). Some women opt for a “career tree” rather than the
“career ladder” (Ciabattari, 1986, p. 84) which allows for breaks from career as well as
changing jobs compared to following a largely linear career path. O’Connor (2001)
argues that some women want to reach the senior management positions and equal
opportunity should prevail for them. However, other women may not aspire to reach
the highest ranks because their fulfilment needs are different (O’Connor, 2001).

Recent research on careers contends that a more intricate relationship exists
whereby the paradigm is shifting for both men and women as to how they create,
develop and utilise their careers (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero,
2007) or how career success is defined by the individual (Heslin, 2005). Furthermore,
the research suggests that the departure of women from the workforce, or the “opting
out” of women, (primarily working mothers who choose not to aspire to advance to a
higher level in their careers) is not simply due to non-work or lack of advancement
reasons (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, p. 106). A combination of factors such as
generational difference, changing work values, work-family balance issues and
discrimination against women in the workforce are suggested as possible reasons for
such the opt-out phenomenon (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero,
2006, 2007). Following extensive research into male and female careers, it was found
that women are adopting a “self-crafted” career to suit their needs and life criteria,
which the researchers term as “kaleidoscope careers” (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005,
p. 109; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007).

The concept of the kaleidoscopic career suggests that career success can be
determined more broadly than the traditional concept of linear career development
(Heslin, 2005). The kaleidoscope career model emphasises the importance of
authenticity, balance and challenge for women in their professional lives (Mainiero
and Sullivan, 2005). Authenticity refers to the need to be genuine and true to oneself,
knowing one strengths and limitations and discovering “one’s true voice”. A need for
balance underlines “an upward-driven set of career accomplishments” (Sullivan and
Mainiero, 2007, p. 49). Third, there is a need for challenge where work is stimulating
with opportunity for growth and development. The focus on each of these dimensions
changes over time. In early career life stage, achievement and challenge are
predominant. In mid-career, balance and family demands dominate and, finally, in the
late career stage, authenticity moves to the forefront (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). It is argued that the careers of women, in contrast to men, are more “relational” in that women make decisions about their career options after they have considered the impact of their decision on others, e.g. their family (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Finally, they assert that women at mid-life are considering other career and personal options, such as becoming self-employed, changing jobs and returning to education, (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007).

Thus, the literature indicates that mid-career professional women find satisfaction and meaning in life when a combination of individual, career, job and organisational characteristics exist (Auster, 2001). When women experience opportunities for growth and advancement, if desired, and flexibility to support them with family responsibilities, a state of work-life integration can be reached and more meaningful work experienced (Auster, 2001). However, little attention has been paid in the theory and research as to how satisfied or contented these women are at this mid-point in their career (Auster, 2001), or how they find meaningfulness as they strive to integrate and balance across the domains (Chalofsky, 2003). The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the following questions: how do professional working mothers perceive themselves in relation to their roles concerning work and family; how do they experience these roles; how do they merge their work, family and individual selves; and what meaning do they make this integration? The following sections sets out the research methods employed in the current study to address these research questions.

Method
Qualitative in-depth interviews were undertaken with 18 professional working mid-career mothers. Participant selection criteria was devised from the literature and taking the objectives of the study into consideration. The following were the criteria determining suitability for participation in the current study:

- professional mid-career mothers who combined parenting with enduring and relatively uninterrupted full-time work throughout their adult lives;
- aged between 37 and 55 – the time most commonly agreed age to represent mid-career;
- with children, and at least one child under the age of 18, in a dual-career household.

The sample of participants was sourced through a combination of convenience and snow-ball sampling. Professional women who met the above criteria known to the researchers were asked to participate in the study and subsequently, the participants were asked for contact details for other women they knew who would suit the current study. The sample size is relatively small yet we believe it is adequate to address the questions posed in the current study due to the extensive in-depth interview data gathered during interviews lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. These interviews provided a situation where the participant’s descriptions could be explored, illuminated and gently probed to allow rich, contextual, detailed and meaningful data to emerge. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researchers. Table I presents sample questions in each section which were used to explore the research questions.
Content analysis was the approach used to analyse the data (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p. 195). The qualitative responses were categorised and concepts examined. Through the systematic analysis of the transcripts, the main themes were identified and categorised. The initial content analysis involved counting the word or phrase frequency. This analysis revealed several words that have in effect the same meaning and Figure 1 presents the content analysis framework that was derived. This framework sets out the four thematic areas which embody the four research questions. Furthermore, the construct of meaningful work is mapped, illustrating the integration and separation across the spheres of work (paid and unpaid), incorporating values, beliefs and purpose (a sense of self) and making choices about the amount of time spent in each sphere (a sense of balance). The final column in the table represents the percentage of participants who referred to the theme during the interviews.

Findings

Demographic information

The participants in this study totaled 18 women aged between 37 and 55, who combined parenting with continuing and relatively uninterrupted full-time work throughout their adult lives, which matches the criteria set out above. All participants are of Irish nationality except for one who is American but has lived and worked in
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sphere</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Construct of meaningful work</th>
<th>Respondents reference to theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-Perception in relation to work and family roles</td>
<td>Children are a working mother’s number one priority.</td>
<td>When there was a clear conflict between work and children, participants made choices and children became the priority.</td>
<td>Sense of self (assess values beliefs and purpose)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work and career is very important.</td>
<td>Career is important to the participants. They seek stimulation, challenges, achievement and enrichment.</td>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility is two-way.</td>
<td>When flexibility is experienced at work it supports commitment and increased productivity in the workplace in addition to integrating work and family life.</td>
<td>Work itself (paid and unpaid)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing attitudinal, social and legislative context.</td>
<td>The changing attitudes and culture in the workplace and the social and legislative changes have improved the situation for working mothers.</td>
<td>Sense of Balance (choices about time spent in each sphere)</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsible for one’s own career.</td>
<td>Working mothers took responsibility for their own career at all stages and more particularly now as mature members of the workforce and at mid-career they assert that it is up to them to create their own future direction.</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisation is essential for the working mother.</td>
<td>Organising and co-ordinating the multiple activities at home and in the workplace are essential to keep it all together.</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working mothers require support from various sources.</td>
<td>A network of support from childcare, husband, workplace and family fundamental to merge work and family life.</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Ireland for over 15 years. All participants in the study identified their marital status as married in a dual career relationship.

Four of the participants had two children, 12 had three and two had one child. All children were aged between nine and 17 years of age. The majority of the women had completed third-level education with two having completed Leaving Certificate and over their years of employment added additional courses and exams which were specifically related to their employment. Their work experience ranged from 11 to 29 years and the sectors of employment included telecommunications, education, banking, nursing, and self-employment with representation from both the private and public sectors. The job positions were generally at middle to senior management including director, chief operating officer, relationship manager, and recruitment manager.

Career profile
The participants from the telecommunications sector began their career in this sector and remained there. The participants from the education sector pursued other careers, in hotel management and as a self-employed press photographer. The participants in the banking sector entered their employment in banking after completing their leaving certificate and have remained there. The nursing sector participants pursued their careers in nursing and have remained in that sector. Two of the self-employed participants, who initially worked in hotel and catering, opted to become self-employed and work from home after having children. Finally, the remaining self-employed participants have been employed in their own business for the past 16 years, with some having previously worked in management positions in other companies.

Figure 1 presents the framework used to content analyse the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. Following Figure 1, each of the spheres and themes which emerged from the analysis are presented in greater detail below.
Self-perception in relation to professional (work) and personal (family) roles

The findings indicate that when the work and family spheres collided, the participants perceived their children to be their number one priority. Participants in the study reported that when there was a clear conflict between their children and work, the priority was with the child. All the mothers showed their deep sense of motherhood when they spoke about their children and the following comments are indicative of the key attitudes expressed by the interviewees:

I will always say, and my manager will quote me, I am first a mother. Being a mother is not something you can describe easily. You enter into it unwittingly – you don’t realize that when you started having your babies that this is a lifetime of love, commitment and giving without question. You give of yourself and your time but you get so much back.

My priority was to have kids and be a mother. It never conflicted, that was first and I would organise my career to suit.

The self-employed participants indicated that the reason they are self-employed is because they want to have greater flexibility to organize their working life to fit in with rearing their children. They can determine their own work schedule for collecting the children from school or if they are ill. The following quotes support this view:

I am lucky that I am self employed. If a child is sick I don't go to work. I stay at home and operate the company by remote control using email and mobile phone.

While all the participants expressed this deep sense of motherhood and expressed that their family and children were their number one priority, they also perceived their work and career as highly significant. The driving force for all of these women to remain at work was their need for intellectual stimulation and creativity. They described themselves as being high energy people, high achievers, and highly motivated with a need to be challenged. All of the participants felt they would find it very difficult to be at home full-time and would never have considered giving up their work. In essence, work is a fundamental part of the equation in finding meaning in their lives. The following quotes support this view:

I love my work. My work is stimulating, so I know I would miss it. If I didn’t like my job, I would leave.

I am a happier person because I am working. I could not possibly imagine not working outside the home as I need a lot of intellectual stimulation. I can be very creative [at work] and being creative is very important to me.

Participants were asked to plot how they perceived themselves in relation to the professional (work) and personal (family/self) roles in terms of the importance they assigned to each and all reported that they see themselves as being highly career focused as well as being highly family focused.

Work related factors

All the participants felt that flexibility must be two-way: supportive to the employee but also supportive to the employer. When flexibility is experienced at work by working mothers, it supports commitment and increased productivity and also supports mothers to merge work and personal life. Some respondents referred to the importance of being able to balance personal demands with work and stated that it
would be difficult to work for an employer that did not understand that. One respondent refers to the importance of this two-way flexibility as follows:

Flexibility is my main thing – when I am flexible, I can put in a late night, no problem so that I can get time off somewhere else, like today, I had to get home to feed my son who was doing his Junior Certificate – I did that for 1.5 hrs in a 1 hour lunch time and then I worked a bit later.

Moreover, it was reported throughout the study that when working mothers experience greater flexibility at work they will return a greater sense of commitment to the organization. One interviewee reduced her working week to four days for the past three years; however her work load has not reduced pro-rata. Yet, she is happy to work like this because the flexibility she experiences gives her greater balance and meaning in her life.

A respondent from the education sector states that she leaves work an hour earlier each evening to pick up her son from school. In return, she pays back this time to her employer by working late one evening stating:

I’m happy to stay Thursday night till 8/9 pm when I have to leave early on other evenings. I feel I owe that time to the college.

Our results suggest that the greater the flexibility, the more committed respondents will be. Participants believe that even greater flexibility for working mothers is possible and in particular in the nursing sector who blame the rigidity of managers for not enabling this flexibility, given the 24/7 nature of the working hours. The follow quote supports this view:

The rigidity of managers is to blame. They wonder how they can organize the hours and refer to the challenges and difficulties. There is a roster and it is difficult to change.

The experiences at work for all these mothers have been impacted by the attitudinal, social and statutory changes which have occurred over the past three decades which have impacted positively on their lives. One of the respondents from the telecommunications sector, reported the attitudinal changes that she has experienced in her early years of employment, in a flexible organisation, considered to be at the forefront for equality. She worked at a senior level in a male dominated environment where the culture was different then and describes her experience as follows:

I was the first female to become Senior manager, Director, and now Vice President. I would say that I was ten years in the company and hardly anyone knew I had kids because I never mentioned it. You didn’t even want to pretend that there was another part to your life that was quite important outside work. But that was part of the work environment of the time – it is very different now.

Over half the participants suggest that women have had to work harder to gain similar recognition in their careers compared with similar male colleagues. They felt they were not recognized as being fully committed and were always trying to prove themselves, a view supported by the following quote:

I am not sure if we [women] still have to prove ourselves, but certainly we had to in the past. I know for me to get where I got, I had to work twice as hard [as male colleagues] to prove myself and to be taken seriously.
The increase in dual-career couples has impacted on the changing attitudes in organizations as men now share some of the roles with the following quote representative of this view:

Now if I look at my peer group level, most of the men’s partners would actually be working as well. That does make the working environment much easier. I hear the men giving out for example saying I have to do the crèche today etc. I am now allowed [to talk about my family].

At mid-career, the participants expressed that they have worked many years but see themselves as having another 15-20 years ahead. However, they have always perceived it as their own responsibility to take care of their career direction in the past and now into the future. Many of the participants advanced their careers to a high level while they reared their children. There were some offers of promotion that they rejected because of the need to change location or country and were not prepared to do because of the cost to their family.

Many times I didn't go for jobs because it would require a move to the US or Europe. To me family security and happiness would have to come first. I would have passed up quite a few promotions.

The working mothers, having perceived themselves as being responsible for their own career in the past, are now taking even more control of their future career direction in mid-career transition. They are assessing their values and making choices about how much of themselves they want to invest in the various spheres of their lives in the future. Many of the interviewees alluded to being at a “crossroads” in terms of planning their next career move. One of the respondents from the Banking sector has considered going for promotion in the past. On the most recent occasion, she declined going for this position but says that part of her will always regret that she did not apply, because she would have enjoyed the challenge but felt that the costs to her family and herself far outweighed the benefits and expresses her view as follows:

I wrote down the pros and cons of going for the promotion. The cons included reduced quality of life, pressure of work, stress of work, hours of work...negative impact on the family and in particular my daughter who is still only 10 years old. I would also have to change from a 4 day to 5 day week and the 4 day week is precious to me.

Another respondent has decidedly focused on her personal life domains over work in terms of her career ambitions stating:

I have loads of goals in work but I have absolutely no interest in anything more senior than I have at present. Anything that would interfere with my life I would not go for it.

*Merger of work and family life*

Clearly it is evident from the research that the respondents place a high importance on their roles as mothers as well as their careers. It is their sense of meaning and fulfillment about motherhood that motivates them to successfully merge their family and work. However, they report that it is not possible to do so without an incredible amount of organization, coordination and dedication. Some of the comments referring to planning and organization include:

We use an old fashioned calendar and we write down who is finished early, has a day-off, who is away etc. so that we know where everybody is and what is coming up. Informally on a
Sunday night, we would talk about what everybody has on for the coming week.

I am organized – uniforms and [school] bags sorted and lunches in the fridge – so it’s just a matter of tick the boxes and out the door.

Others refer to the challenges and difficulties in merging home and work responsibilities:

I do find the organisation of kids, school, books, lunches can be difficult, some days more difficult than others. I would be an organised person … you have to be. I find that days I am organized, it is great.

A network of support such as childcare, husband/partner, workplace and extended family is reported as essential for working mothers to achieve work and family balance. The participants indicated clearly that good childcare was fundamental to them staying at work and pursuing their careers. Of the participants, 70 per cent would have used childcare where the carer worked from their own home. The other participants used family, a live-in au pair and/or a nanny. The importance of the childcare provider while the mother is at work is reinforced with the following representative comments:

I never thought about my kids from once I went to work until I was coming home. That might sound terrible but I had confidence in my babysitter.

If I don’t have a good nanny I cannot go away on business. It is difficult to plan ahead to go to do my work.

Support from partners/spouses was another key element to the mothers’ success in merging their family and work domains. All of the women indicated that their husbands were very supportive and shared the roles of domestic duties and childcare with them, but some more than others. The supportive partner is referred to in the following comment:

We share the roles – my husband will come home in the evening and he will cook, clean, wash and get lunches if I am not there. If we are both there, we will share it. If I am not there, he will do it on his own with support from the children.

Other women indicated that there was support from their husbands, with cooking, taking the children to sports activities etc. It was interesting to find that only three of the participants in the study had outside support for domestic duties, cleaning, washing, ironing, only one having a dedicated housekeeper and the other two utilizing the au pair and nanny. However, despite support, it was evident that the interviewees took primary responsibility for the management of home and family, despite working full-time:

I am definitely the vice president of logistics of the household; President in fact. I manage everything.

I would take it upon myself to organize anything to do with the children, shopping and maintenance, it falls on me. I try to get my husband into certain habits but because of his work patterns it is not always possible.

The experiences at work for the interviewees was that formal flexibility (described as flexi-options, job-sharing, reduced hours etc.) and informal flexibility (described as
time off for family emergencies) were essential to enable them to integrate across the domains. Those respondents who could avail of formal flexi-options spoke of their value:

It is fantastic now you can do flexi-time, reduced hours, job share and you can get it. You can almost pick what you want – it has improved tremendously.

However, flexi-options can only be managed and offered by taking various issues into consideration and, therefore, are not always available to everyone. The following comment is representative of respondents’ views on the limiting challenges of availing of flexi-options:

I see a major improvement in formal flexibility over the past thirty years. But before you can avail of these options, many things must be taken into account such as location, number of staff, expertise within the branch etc. What works in one branch may not work in another and may require an employee to move location but it may not suit them to move.

Some respondents reported that flexi-options would have been useful had they been available when their children were younger, but they were not. Now, as their children are getting older, they would think about flexi-options from a different perspective: to give themselves more personal time.

I did not think about part-time or job sharing over the years – it would not have suited my job at my level. But I do think about it now. I don’t have all the pressures of life and I would like to play golf two or three times a week.

It was reported by all participants that informal flexibility (described as time off for family emergencies) was critical in supporting them to manage the demands of various domains. Their experiences in the workplace were that employers were supportive of family emergency time off, provided it was not requested on a regular basis. Furthermore, participants believed that informal flexibility had been earned because of their position, level and trust gained from their employer.

Meaningful integration
The desire to be successful in the work and family spheres gave these working mothers meaning in their lives. They indicated that the pressure over the years to dedicate themselves to work and family resulted in no self-care time which is supported by the following quotes:

Work and family come first and I am definitely last on the list.

Until two years ago, I never ever did anything for myself. I have now taken up golf. When the children were younger I consciously didn’t do things that took me away from the kids. The weekend was family time.

Others emphasize the importance of personal time:

I make time for me. If I wait to find it, it won’t happen. You learn that the hard way.

The participants in the study reported that they were now re-assessing their values, priorities and purpose as they reached mid-career. It is evident from the study that women now see themselves in a new phase of their lives. Their children are growing up and moving away and the balance between work and family is getting easier. Financial
security is much stronger as their mortgages are paid or almost paid. The financial rewards of the job are not the primary motivator. They seek meaning through many different facets, new opportunities in their present work, moving to a new job, taking redundancy or developing their hobbies or interests or their skills for financial reward or becoming self-employed.

The integration across the spheres is changing with balance between work and family getting easier to achieve. While all of the participants in this study agree with this view, they are still finding it difficult to move to this stage. The paradigm is shifting for working mothers in mid-career transition: their needs are changing and they now seek to include themselves and personal time in the equation. The consequence is that meaningful integration will come not only from the two domains of work and family, as in the previous stage of their lives, but rather from more personal and work domain balance. The following quote supports these views:

Work and family came first in the past. Recently, I am having to persuade myself that my children are beyond the stage where they need to be given top priority. It’s now time to focus on me.

Throughout the research, it became clear that many of the participants felt that there was another element to the equation of meaningful work: the community. They expressed the importance of giving something back to the community or to other charitable organizations when assigning time and commitment to the various life domains. Many of the participants were involved in community activities, sports, development committees and would consider it part of the equation that allows meaningful work in their lives:

I think the focus on community is as important as home and work. It has to do with the quality of life - it the same for our community.

In summary, it is evident from the findings of this study that professional working mothers contend with a complex interplay of internal organizational and external structural factors, which shape meaning for them amid their competing priorities of work, family and individual lives. Family balance is achieved by their ability to organize and plan personal and family lives in addition to a network of support and workplace flexibility. They perceive their children to be their number one priority, but their career is a significant priority too. They have a desire for a fulfilling career where they have a sense of achievement. The meaning they have made of that integration has been different over the years. As they reared their families, they primarily integrated the two most important spheres to them: work and family, with little self care-time. In mid-career transition, the paradigm is shifting and they seek to add the third sphere of self balance, as they begin to question their meaning and purpose with questions like “What am I doing?”, “What is important to me?” and “How do I want to live my life?”

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study explored the experiences of mid-career professional working mothers using the construct of meaningful work as a theoretical lens. It sought to understand how professional working mothers perceive themselves in relation to the roles, work, family and self, how they combine parenting and full-time work and what meaning they made of that integration. The lives of the professional working mothers can be described as a
journey which began for many of them almost 30 years ago. The current study suggests that all participants perceived their family to be their number one priority but also considered their career to be a highly significant priority in their lives. The working mothers are motivated to work by their need for intellectual stimulation, creativity and achievement but integrated that with a deep sense of motherhood. They experienced a high-quality work role which gave them stimulation, creativity and a sense of achievement. This mirrors Greenhaus and Powell’s (2006) findings that role accumulation can produce positive outcomes where an individual finds satisfaction in both work and family roles leading to increased levels of happiness, life satisfaction and perceived quality of life. The findings of the current study imply that neither the family nor the work role alone would have given meaningfulness to the interviewees. Rather, it is the ability to integrate these roles that leads to meaningfulness.

The existence of flexibility is reported to be important for working parents to manage work and personal domains in the literature (Auster, 2001; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). The current study reports that participants experienced low levels of flexibility in the earlier years of child-rearing. In response to the increased participation of women into the workforce, organisations are now introducing an array of new programs to help workers to manage the interface of work and family. Whilst these programs, where they exist, have had positive outcomes for working mothers, they focus primarily on the logistics of balancing work and young childcare responsibilities (Gordon and Whelan, 1998). As working mothers approach mid-career and their children are getting older, many report that they would like to use flexi-options to support “self-care” time.

Balancing issues for mothers are firmly associated with their parenting responsibilities. Evidence from the research showed a deep sense of motherhood and dedication from the mothers making children their number one priority. It found that women are the primary carers and take overall responsibility for the management of family, despite having a full-time challenging job. This mirrors previous findings (Greenhaus and Powell, 2003; Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Metz, 2005; Crompton et al., 2005). Additionally, the findings show that the division of domestic duties is still firmly tilted towards the working mother. Working mothers continue to develop individualised solutions such as co-ordinating the multiple activities, arranging a support network to enable them to keep it all together and minimise physical and psychological stress. This supports the findings of Frone et al. (1992, 1997) which states that when the demands from one sphere interferes with the other, an imbalance occurs, resulting in conflict when important activities and responsibilities require attention at the same time, which is more prevalent in a dual-career couple household. When one is successful in merging their work life and family the experiences from one domain it can impact positively on the other (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Participants in the research found work-family enrichment when their work and family experiences complemented each other. They felt proud that they successfully managed across the domains, even though the strategies and solutions were not always perfect. However, the experience of a satisfying high-quality work role, combined with a rewarding family role gave them a quality of life and balance in both domains and work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

Meaningfulness and meaningful work is very much an individual phenomenon. From the current study, three categories of mothers emerged. The first category (c. 20
per cent) climbed the ladder to the top managerial positions. The second category (c. 10 per cent) includes women who did not aspire to reach the highest ranks; they had reached self-actualisation at the level they achieved, which was generally at the level they entered the job. The third group of mothers, the largest group (70 per cent), had their own personal promotional aspirations and opted for and achieved some promotions during their working career. But for a variety of reasons they made choices not to pursue other promotional opportunities, which were available to them. Their responses have generated some interesting new insights as to why they made these choices. They indicated that the level of commitment and long hours that would be required if they pursued these promotions would impact negatively on their family life. Additionally, at the time of interview, one respondent had opted not to pursue an assistant manager position because the job would require her to transfer from a four-day week to a five-day week. It was clear that these mothers, having weighed up the costs and benefits of going to a higher level, felt that the costs were too high.

It could be argued that the mothers who elected not to pursue their career beyond a certain level self-imposed a barrier to progressing their own careers. This reflects similar findings of a recently published study by Cross and Linehan (2006) who found that female managers are actively weighing up the costs and benefits before choosing to go for promotions. However, it is more likely that these findings can be explained by the recent research on the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2006, 2007) and how career success can be measured differently for each individual (Heslin, 2005). Essentially, these working mothers made career decisions dependent on personal family demands and perceptions of self. Some mothers, therefore, continued to advance their careers by progressing in management levels as this was important for them in terms of their personal self-worth whilst others prioritized their family and children and made career decisions in light of these demands.

The mothers continually assessed their values, beliefs and purposes throughout the years and even more so now in mid-career transition. According to Hall (1986), mid-career is a time when one’s values and interests are deeply explored. The paradigm is shifting for the mid-career mothers. Clearly they indicated a need to prepare for the challenges of the next 10-15 years. The most often mentioned was, being a good mother and being there for their children particularly through secondary school and beyond. Second, developing their own competencies, to give themselves greater opportunities in the future (30 per cent were completing post-graduate degrees at the time of the interview). Third, giving time to their aging parents and extended family. Finally, and most importantly, they expressed a real need to include themselves in the equation and ultimately to make choices about how much time they want to spend in each sphere to achieve balance which will give them self-fulfilment and meaningful work in their lives. These findings concur with Knight (1994, p. 147) who states that women in mid-career, in caring for their children as well as handling their careers, “are forced to consider what gives them real meaning and to rethink the fundamental source of their identity”.

In sum, this empirical investigation found that mid-career mothers, to a large extent, have been successful in finding meaningful work. The key underlying factors to this success have been firstly, the utilisation of individualised solutions which enabled mothers to merge their work and family life. Second, the changing organisational and
societal attitudes and the dual career phenomenon have changed the environment, which has had positive outcomes for working mothers. Third, working mothers perceive that both their professional and personal roles are a high priority. While they considered their career a high priority, it did not necessarily mean that they advanced to the highest level. Instead, they found meaning by choosing the level of career which enabled them to integrate and balance across the domains successfully and this was unique and individual for each of them. Now as perspectives are altering in mid-career and working mothers are seeking to include themselves in the equation, there are a number of issues that organisations and individuals alike must consider.

The current demographic trends and social change in Ireland has become pertinent for organisations in the last decade. Few organisations have addressed the mid-life need of any demographic group to any great extent, partly because they have not been pressurised to do so but instead mid-career mothers have sought and found individualised solutions (Gordon and Whelan, 1998). However, the need for change is imminent as these individualised solutions will not be adequate for the future (Gordon and Whelan, 1998).

Flexi-option programs, where they exist, have had positive outcomes for individuals and organisations, however these programs mainly target individuals who have young children or are early in their careers. Organisations must now address the needs of this aging workforce as mid-career mothers are advancing into the later stages of their career. Flexi-option programs should be examined by organisations in an effort to address the needs of women that emerge at midlife, and not be solely related to childcare. Creating policies and practices to better support and sustain the employment of mid-career professional women will enable organisations to capitalize on the unique talents and experiences of women at mid-career (Burke and Davidson, 1994). Organisations, by understanding the experiences of mid-career women, can design programs, policies and practices such as changing the organizational culture and executives attitudes to ensure they can retain these highly talented women.

During the course of the research, the researchers asked the participants now at mid-career what advice they had for working mothers. Their recommendations fell into two categories. Firstly they recommended that working mothers should continue to work towards removing even further the institutional structures that impede working mothers to advance their careers. This can be achieved by determining what policies and practices govern their organisations, both formally and informally. Moreover, they can work with other employees and organisations to address the issues common to them and face them together.

Second, they suggest that all working mothers should work towards achieving work-life balance to enable them to create a meaningful work and life perspective. According to the participants in the study, women take pride in supporting and caring for others. It is, therefore, recommended that working mothers, as they continue to support others, should seek a way to create a better work and home environment for themselves and make self-care time a priority. Furthermore, mothers should assess their values and beliefs along the way and ensure that they influence the various aspects of their lives to fit their individual choices so they can find meaning and satisfaction.

The current study raises questions for further research and theoretical development in the area. In the course of the study, participants commented that younger mothers in
the workplace have a different experience of being a working mother now compared with the participants’ era. A similar study that focuses on the next generation of mid-career mothers to see how they are finding meaningful work is encouraged. Lewis et al. (2007) argue that there is a need to develop a terminology within the work-life balance field that broadens the focus and better captures the more fundamental challenges that are currently obscured by the WLB discourse. They suggest a focus on “socially sustainable work”. It would be interesting to explore how meaningful work, at the individual level of analysis, impacts socially sustainable work. It is important to understand the factors that influence these decisions about meaningful work at the individual level. A study comparing a cohort of women who opted out of their careers and employment during the child rearing years would be interesting given that the current study explores only those women who continued to work and as well as have a family. Finally, a longitudinal study may be beneficial on the present mid-career working mothers, to examine if they were able to cross over as the paradigm in mid-career was shifting and if they received support through policies and practices from a different perspective from their organisations.

The current study is not without its limitations. Qualitative studies are often criticised “for their concern with the particular at the expense of the general” (Whitfield and Strauss, 1998, p. 57). The extent to which the study can be generalised can be limited due to the small sample, however, this can, to a large extent be overcome by the in-depth, rich, contextual information which was received during the interviews. Future studies should replicate the findings using larger and more diverse populations and samples.

References
domestic division of labour: a cross-national analysis in two waves”, Work Employment

Cross, C. and Linehan, M. (2006), “Barriers to advancing female careers in the high-tech sector:

York, NY.


lagsards?”, Women in Management Review, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 262-78.

Drew, E., Murphy, C. and Humphreys, P. (2003), Off the Treadmill: Achieving Work/Life Balance,
Stationery Office, Dublin.


Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance, A Comparative Study in Four European


and family boundaries asymmetrically permeable?”, Journal of Organisational Behaviour,


Gayle, S. (1997), “Workplace purpose and meaning as perceived by information technology
professionals: a phenomenological study”, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The George
Washington University, Washington, DC.

organisations can more effectively understand and respond to the challenges”, Academy of

status and future directions”, in Powell, G.N. (Ed.), Handbook of Gender & Work, Sage


competing role demands”, Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes,


Halpern, D.F. and Murphy, S.E. (Eds) (2005), From Work-family Balance to Work-family Interaction: Changing the Metaphor, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.


Further reading


About the authors
Geraldine Grady (Dip. in HRM, MBS IR and HRM, Dip. in Business & Personal Coaching, MCIPD) is a Researcher at the Centre for Innovation and Structural Change (CISC) at the National University of Ireland, Galway. She works as a consultant to many private and public sector
organisations and lectures at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) in the areas of Human Resource Management, Organisational Behaviour, and Human Resource Development.

Her research interest is work-life balance and she has presented her work at national and international conferences. She is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Irish Coach Institute. Geraldine Grady is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: geraldine.grady@nuigalway.ie

Alma M. McCarthy (Dip. Training and Education, BBS with French, MCIPD, PhD) is a Lecturer in Management at the National University of Ireland, Galway. She lectures in the areas of Human Resource Management, Organisational Behaviour, and Human Resource Development. Her research interests include performance management, employee training and development, work-life balance, and multi-rater (360°) feedback systems. Alma’s publications include a number of articles in journals such as Personnel Review, Advances in Developing Human Resources, the Journal of European Industrial Training, the Journal of Managerial Psychology, the International Journal of Manpower Studies, and the Journal of Vocational Educational Training. She is a Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the American Academy of Management (AoM), the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology (SIOP), and is Vice-Chair of the Irish Academy of Management (IAM).