Five Strategies of Successful Part-Time Work

by Vivien Corwin, Thomas B. Lawrence, and Peter J. Frost

Most professionals start working part-time to create solutions in their lives. They have young children, want to get MBAs, need to care for aging parents. All too often, though, part-time work creates as many problems as it solves. In the best-case scenario, many part-timers end up working more hours than they intended. In the worst case, they see their importance to their organizations slowly but surely fade away. Now, though, after two generations have wrestled with such arrangements, some part-time professionals have found strategies that are succeeding.

Notice that we say the part-time professionals themselves have found these solutions. For even though most executives would agree, at this point, that part-time work can benefit an organization, it's still up to the part-timers to do most of the heavy lifting. That's true for two reasons. The first is simple: overload. Making a part-time arrangement work takes time, energy, and creativity. Most executives, stressed already with too many day-to-day challenges to list here, see the design and maintenance of part-time work arrangements as just one more hassle. Second, most organizations give executives little in the way of guidelines or policies to help them

About 10% of all professionals now work part-time. Such arrangements have their challenges but, as a small cadre of creative pioneers proves, not insurmountable ones.
manage part-time work. So managers have little incentive to get involved. Part-time professionals, then, are on their own in relatively uncharted territory. And, inevitably, mapmaking falls to the explorers themselves.

For the past two years, we have investigated part-time work as part of a wide-ranging research project examining issues surrounding work-life balance in

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the United States and Canada. We interviewed 30 part-time professionals in eight organizations, large and small, as well as 27 of their colleagues and managers. Our sample included engineers, financial analysts, information technology specialists, and consultants, among others. About 80% of the part-timers we spoke to were female, largely because so much of part-time work is driven by child care issues, which most often affect women.

Our research revealed strong commonalities in the approaches of successful part-time professionals. Specifically they

- make their work-life priorities, schedules, and (if possible) plans for the future transparent to the organization;
- broadcast the business cases for their arrangements and the nondisruptive— even positive—impact on results;
- establish routines to protect their time at work and rituals to protect their time at home;
- cultivate champions in senior management who not only protect them from skeptics but actively advocate for their arrangements up and down the ranks;
- gently but firmly remind their colleagues that, despite their part-time status, they’re still in the game and cannot be ignored.

At first read, some of these strategies may sound familiar—they are, you may be thinking, the same tactics successful full-time professionals use to balance the demands of work and personal life. But look again. The means may be similar, but the end is different. Part-timers use these strategies to generate a protective environment. They’re seeking to reduce resentment from full-time colleagues, which can result in marginalization. They’re trying to decrease the ambiguity that may confuse their managers, colleagues, families—and sometimes even themselves. And they’re aiming to make the organization more comfortable with the concept of part-time work. In the following pages, we’ll take a look at these strategies in action. But first, a few words on what our research revealed about the general state of part-time professionals in business today.

The Part-Timer’s Lot

Although nearly 10% of the professional labor force now works part-time, our research found that most part-time jobs are still based on informal agreements. Created on the fly by the part-timers and their bosses, these arrangements are continually adjusted to match the changing demands of work (such as a major client presentation) and home (a child’s bout with the flu, say). When organizations do have formal policies about such benefits for part-timers as vacation time and sick pay, they usually serve as rough guidelines only. We found that even in the same company different part-time professionals could work under different terms concerning hours, pay, and benefits. In one department of an organization we studied, for instance, mothers returning from maternity leave were routinely granted part-time positions. In a unit two floors up, such an arrangement was unheard of. “Not even on the docket for discussion,” was how one manager put it.

What’s more, our research revealed, many part-time professionals feel that neither their colleagues nor the organization respects them. Many part-timers told us they took a lot of jibes about their assumed lack of commitment to work and about their “privileges,” such as leaving early. And while most part-timers typically dismissed the razzing as a minor annoyance, they said some discrimination felt very real. Some, for example, were housed in their organization’s “low-rent” district where, unlike other professionals, they shared office space with other part-timers. And most lost their eligibility to share in the year-end bonus pool. As one part-time financial analyst put it: “You’d really have to stand on your head, I think, to beat someone for a bonus who is full-time. ‘You’re part-time,’ they say, ‘so how could you possibly achieve beyond expectations?’ But if I exceed expectations in the days that I’m here, then I should be just as eligible for a bonus as any full-timer.”

Most part-timers told us they accepted the consequences of their status as part of the deal. But they also said that sometimes their confidence was eroded, and they questioned whether the arrangement was worth the effort. “Whenever someone questions my position, it sparks a thousand questions in my mind,” said a director of client accounts at a worldwide public relations firm. “Am I adding as much value as everybody else? Am I learning the high-tech stuff quickly enough when I am away so often?” Such feelings of inadequacy, some part-timers revealed, can bleed into their personal lives. As the same woman added, “When I’m at work and it seems so hard to pull off a part-time job, I wonder, ‘Is my daughter happy when I’m not at home?’”

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Perceived discrimination, we found, makes many part-timers feel defensive about their status, which can put them on the offensive. One executive we interviewed didn’t even tell her clients that she worked part-time. “I was worried they’d think I wasn’t committed or wouldn’t get the work done. So if a meeting came up on a Thursday or Friday, I’d be there or I’d send someone for me. I was always accessible by phone and e-mail.” Another part-timer told us she had become so defensive about her status that she took steps at work that ultimately undermined the very flexibility she sought from her part-time arrangement. If special training was offered on her day off, for instance, she’d still attend, or if a child was ill on the day of a big meeting, she’d still send him to school. When a big project was due, she’d work nights and weekends. “It’s worth it,” she told us, “so the organization knows I am as committed to them as they are to me.” (Incidentally, this woman was not part of the group of part-time professionals from which we drew our conclusions about successful strategies.)

These stories are extreme cases. But nearly all of our respondents admitted that work regularly crept into the private areas of their lives. Study participants typically encouraged emergency calls at home, attended important meetings during their scheduled time off, and used technology to stay in touch with work. True, these practices were usually described as exceptions, but they happened often enough to suggest that the boundary between work and home is difficult to protect.

Fortunately, the picture for part-time professionals is not entirely grim—far from it. Let’s take a look at the strategies that part-timers have devised to make their unique status a success. Many bosses will shy away from knowing anything about an employee’s private life in a well-intentioned effort to respect her privacy. But not knowing the part-timer’s “life story,” so to speak, has its consequences. A number of managers and coworkers in our study, for instance, were remarkably reluctant to contact part-timers at home. Ironically, this usually added to the part-time professionals’ workloads: once back in the office, they had to correct festering problems that could easily have been resolved through a quick call.

The most successful part-timers in our study avoided such land mines by clearly explaining to bosses and colleagues why they were working part-time, what kinds of intrusions on their home time were acceptable, and even how long they planned to stay part-time. In short, they were explicit about their priorities. One successful part-time professional, for instance, announced in writing to a wide swath of her coworkers that she was working part-time so that she could be with her young daughter in the afternoons but that she still considered her work central to her life and looked forward to returning to working full-time in 18 months. Another woman made her priorities explicit, saying she was working 20 hours a week because she had entered an eight- to ten-year time in her life when her family came first, period. These two approaches to part-time work imply two very different relationships between the part-timer and the organization. Both can succeed, however, because they are perfectly clear.

Our research showed that the more explicit employees can be about their priorities, the greater the chances are that they can sit down with their managers and shape mutually satisfying working arrangements. When part-timers clearly articulate their needs, employers can work out what degree of commitment to expect, not just at the beginning but throughout the arrangement. Consider a systems analyst for a major oil company. When he first approached his managers, he was blunt about his personal priorities: “I told them I wanted to participate more in the rearing of my children and I wanted to start my MBA. I explained that I wanted to work part-time—and, for me, that was nonnegotiable.” This tough stance gave both the analyst and his management a clear understanding of what he needed as they worked together to design a feasible solution. They ended up forging an unusually favorable part-time deal for two years. The analyst would work two days a week, and the organization agreed that he would not be required to stretch his work commitments without ample notice. The analyst's project manager agreed to take up some of the slack when he, the analyst, was out of the office. The manager was prepared to step in, she explained, because the analyst had a stellar track record, and she

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was confident that he was making the project's success a priority.

Like the systems analyst, all the successful part-timers in our study were individuals who had formerly done outstanding full-time work. Indeed, part-time work is not a viable route for anyone who hasn't already demonstrated superiority in a traditional setting. Successful part-timers know the company ropes. They've learned the organization's rules, they've mastered those rules, and now they're ready to change them. Of course, not every part-time professional can—or wants to—set down such unequivocal terms. But making their new priorities transparent to the organization will help professionals outperform in their part-time positions just as they did when they were full-time.

**Strategy 2:**

Successful part-time professionals broadcast the business cases for their arrangements and the nondisruptive—even positive—impact on results.

Simply put, the main reason most bosses and colleagues object to part-time work is that they suspect it will disrupt the business. They're afraid work won’t get done on time or that other people, already at full capacity, will need to pick up the part-timer’s unwanted assignments. These worries are legitimate. That's why the successful part-timers in our study did not ignore or gloss over them. They addressed them head on.

First, many part-timers help their organizations to see that the arrangement makes more sense than a complete departure. This always needs to be handled with subtlety, for obvious reasons. No one likes to hear, “Consider yourself lucky you’ve got me at all!” But there is really no reason for being so direct. Bosses know that part-timers have successful track records—as well as insider knowledge, existing relationships, and technical expertise. They need only a slight nudge to remind them what would happen if a part-timer were to move to the competition.

Second, successful part-timers publicize the business cases for their arrangements by demonstrating that the work is still getting done, well and on time. One fundamental way they do this is by building strong alliances with their colleagues. In fact, the successful part-timers in our study involved their coworkers as much as possible in the initial transition from full-time status. One customer service engineer, for example, discussed the shift to part-time with all the members of her team before she raised the idea formally: “Politically, it would have been impossible for my boss to turn me down.”

Nevertheless, a part-time arrangement will in fact change the way work gets done. In consulting businesses, for instance, with their high premium on service, the part-timer will not always be available to the client. Extra work will inevitably spill over to coworkers, causing friction among even the best-oiled groups. Therefore, successful part-timers go to great lengths to reassure colleagues that they are not simply entitled to special privileges. At times, this means reminding people that although they work less, part-timers also earn less.

At all times, it is important for part-timers to frame the extra responsibilities that fall on coworkers and subordinates as opportunities. Thus, the successful part-timer is careful to delegate work around her colleagues’ development needs by, for instance, having a compatriot who needs to work on facilitation skills lead a meeting the part-timer is not going to. In this way, she can help coworkers benefit from the extra work they’re given.

Finally, creating a business case for a reduced schedule often requires part-timers to redesign their work so that they, in effect, end up doing the same amount of work but more efficiently. Those part-timers we studied who were able to achieve this heightened productivity were almost always highly motivated, committed self-starters. Consider a customer service manager for a phone company. She took the job on a half-time basis. Her predecessor had held the same job full-time. The work content didn’t diminish at all. In fact, it increased. But the service manager now gets the job done in half the time.

This is often the case. All the successful part-timers in our study had rich anecdotal evidence of their ability to squeeze more work into less time. And the managers interviewed in our study agreed. Said a manager of two engineers who worked part-time: “We probably get as much productivity out of our part-time professionals as we do from some of the employees who are here five days a week.”

**Strategy 3:**

Successful part-time professionals establish routines to protect their time at work and rituals to protect their time at home.

Our study showed that successful part-timers approach the pace and flow of their work in a wide variety of ways. One financial analyst at an electric utility, for instance, spread out her days in the office, working Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The benefit, she claimed, was that she stayed in touch with the work situation, and her mind was less likely to drop out of work mode. But another professional in our study—an account executive at a major oil company—stayed focused by doing just the reverse. She worked Monday through Wednesday every week.

No matter what their schedules, successful part-time professionals establish routines that are transparent to their colleagues and bosses and help them separate work and home in their own minds. From the company’s perspective, we found, the nature of the routine selected is much less important than its sheer regularity. Similarly, the successful part-timers in our study demarcated home and work with personalized rituals, which again served to clarify where they were and when.
But successful part-timers don’t stop at organizing their own work. They pay attention to how the work is flowing when they’re not around, as well. One systems analyst, for example, described how colleagues would let work slide until Thursday because they knew she wouldn’t be coming into the office until then. This led her to establish monitoring routines in which she hounded people virtually on her days off. Every day or so, she left voice-mail and e-mail messages ensuring that the flow of work continued smoothly. Communication routines let her know when she needed to put her foot down. They also let her colleagues know that she was never very far away.

Routines, of course, are easier praised than actually practiced. Business is always in flux; emergencies happen. Meetings come up unexpectedly, often throwing the airtight schedule of the part-timer into disarray. That’s why in establishing their routines part-timers need to set some judicious rules about their participation in meetings.

Now it might seem logical for part-timers to attend all the meetings they can when they’re in the office; after all, missing meetings on days off is already something of a political statement. It implies, “I don’t care about this organization’s pecking order. I come and go as I please.” Few part-timers deliberately want to make such a statement. But our research suggests that a surprising number of successful part-timers professionals miss meetings even on days when they are in the office, as part of their standard routine. One systems analyst we interviewed was emphatic about the need to protect her work time: “I tend to avoid meetings like the plague because they’re a waste of time.” In fact, successful part-timers draw on their insider knowledge of organizational routines to make tough judgment calls about which meetings they can safely ignore and which they need to attend.

Now for rituals, which are important, we found, because they fortify the boundaries between work and home that part-timers need to sustain their delicate arrangements. So one part-timer described how every week, come what may, he coaches his daughter’s basketball team and attends all the games. Another part-timer who doesn’t work on Fridays deliberately leaves her laptop at work on Thursday nights. Still another professional fills up her home time with piano lessons and sewing classes. “I’m not a schedule person,” she said, “but I’ve consciously scheduled my time.”

Unlike routines, rituals often have a symbolic component in that they force part-time professionals to invest not only time but also emotion into something. We heard from a number of part-timers who regularly participated in a range of community groups, from gardening clubs to dance troupes to Bible study groups. These activities demand a commitment from part-timers to people and places that are unrelated to work—and often unrelated to children.

Counsel for Managers

Many managers are not enthusiastic about supporting part-time professionals. Indeed, part-time work may not suit your company. Even in the best of situations, the transition from full-time to part-time is difficult, and managers need to carefully evaluate potential part-timers. As a manager in a telecommunications company put it, “It’s a hard road for me and for the employee. I wouldn’t do this for just anyone.” In fact, our research shows that the odds of success go way up if managers look for people who have already demonstrated success in a full-time position. In addition, this individual should fiercely want a part-time position and have a palpable reason for making it work.

Adding part-time professionals to the staff definitely complicates a manager’s life. Suddenly you are called on to determine what constitutes a “fair” schedule and workload. Don’t count on guidelines—there aren’t any. And it doesn’t end there. How are you going to evaluate your part-timer when it comes to bonuses? Is it possible to assess performance for the entire staff in a uniform way, or will the part-timer require more sensitive arrangements? In addition to these concerns, managers also have to work closely with all the people the part-timer interacts with. Sure, it’s up to the part-timer to build networks with colleagues and clients, but managers constantly need to take the temperature of the experiment, especially in the early stages. How is the arrangement going for the client? For coworkers? What’s life like for the part-timer? The answers to these questions may not be as straightforward as they might seem. As one oil company manager discovered: “I found out quite by chance that our part-timer was demoralized by her workload. The arrangement almost collapsed, and we came close to losing a good employee.”

Once you decide to take on a part-timer, moreover, you need to recognize up front that there are limits to the arrangement. Our research suggests, for example, that part-timers are not best placed in situations that demand a lot of face-to-face time—that is, when the politics of a project are precarious or when project members require a lot of hand-holding and cajoling. There are other restrictions. Sometimes you just don’t want a part-timer in charge of a new or complex project,” the manager of one company put it bluntly.

Every part-time arrangement is unique. Having one bad—or good—experience doesn’t guarantee that you’ll have another like it. Every arrangement needs to be set up and managed on its own merits. Who is the particular employee? What is the specific task that needs to be done? In each case, the managerial challenge is to figure out what makes for a good part-timer—and what makes for good part-time work.
and home. These rituals that part-time professionals erect in their lives are among the most effective because they genuinely break connections with the known world and forge new ties.

Strategy 4:

Successful part-time professionals cultivate champions in senior management who not only protect them from skeptics but actively advocate for their arrangements up and down the ranks.

The idiosyncratic nature of part-time work makes each part-time professional an organizational innovator, with all the risks that innovation implies. And, as with any risky investment, the part-time position often requires a sponsor, someone who can influence the way the company views the shift to part-time work. Consider the experience of an IT specialist working at a gas pipeline company. She was stressed out, losing weight, and finding it impossible to do her job while raising three children. Although her coworkers were compassionate, they couldn't see how a part-time arrangement could work out without harming them. Without some senior-level support, the IT specialist wasn't going to get anywhere. But she fought hard for a change in status. She talked to a wide range of potential champions until finally she found a sympathetic ear. Although he didn't have an immediate solution, he was able to find another person looking to go part-time. Eventually, he arranged a job they could share.

All the successful part-timers in our study had champions in senior management who helped them overcome obstacles that would otherwise have caused them to fail. That was particularly true for women coming back from maternity leave who assumed (mistakenly) that there would automatically be workable part-time jobs waiting for them when they got back. Champions also play important roles after the work arrangements have been settled. Often, they run interference with clients, managers, and colleagues who may believe that part-timers aren't holding up their end of the bargain. Champions often have to intervene with clients to protect part-timers from excessive customer demands. But champions also make sure that managers are aware of part-timers' contributions and potential so that companies consider these professionals for promotions, bonuses, and choice assignments.

Finally, champions keep part-timers in the loop. They make sure that the part-timer knows what's going on behind the scenes. One champion, for instance, warned his part-time systems analyst that he hadn't been visible enough in the past couple months: "I think you need to go and talk to your team," the champion said. "A few people are reportedly unhappy that you've been so aloof lately." Over time, a good champion accepts some responsibility for making the part-time position work, becoming the part-timer's mentor and protector.

There's no single profile of the ideal champion, but our study found them all to be highly networked change agents—individuals accustomed to using their charisma to influence people at every level of the company. They also tended to be sympathetic to the plight of part-timers because their own spouses or partners were also trying to navigate the challenges of part-time work. Their support of part-time work was, in other words, often quite personal.

Every successful part-timer in our study had some trick for staying visible in the organization despite the many hours spent away from work.

Strategy 5:

Successful part-time professionals gently but firmly remind their colleagues that, despite their part-time status, they're still in the game and cannot be ignored.

In addition to needing a powerful champion, the part-timer must also build a strong network of allies in the organization to avoid becoming marginalized. Unfortunately, because of their intensified work schedules, part-time professionals often focus on work to the exclusion of making small talk in the corridors. As one consultant in a public relations firm put it: "I want to stay out of politics and all the stuff that floats around. I want to focus on my job. The rest bogs me down."

Our research suggests that such behavior ultimately hurts a professional who already spends so much time away from the office. Office gossip, in particular, helps the part-timer stay tied in. In fact, staying connected turned out to be so important in our study that we've taken to defining a successful part-time professional as someone who can squander time productively at work. Consider Yvonne, the part-time financial analyst at the electric utility. She said that maintaining her social networks was one of the biggest factors in her success. "Some people say I only come in for lunch," she said. "And I do have a lunch date almost every day that I come in. But that's how I get the informal information I need to make the part-time position work."

In addition to tuning in to gossip in these informal conversations, part-timers constantly need to emphasize what they have in common with their full-time colleagues. By saying, "I'm not so different from you," part-timers can reassure coworkers that they're not getting a special deal. Take the case of a senior auditor at the gas pipeline company, who successfully defused a coworker's envy over her attendance at a training meeting. "He came up to me and said, 'What are you doing here?
Do you get paid to be trained? "Yes," I gently replied. "Every employee does."

The real challenge for part-timers is making their presence felt when they are so often out of the office. Interestingly, every successful part-timer in our study had some trick for staying visible in the organization despite the many hours spent away from work. Some part-timers, for example, sent voice-mails on days when they weren't in the office. Some managed their own projects—and championed others' besides—to show they were very involved. One part-timer devised an elaborate series of meetings, planned and announced long in advance. "Just in case anyone has any doubts," she said defiantly, "I'm around and intend to be for a long time."

Successful part-timers show that they cannot be ignored.

Begun more than 20 years ago, part-time professional work is an experiment that has met with mixed results. In most cases, the arrangement is an attempt to give a woman more time to raise her family. But it is not necessarily a panacea for striking a balance between work and life. Many part-timers are forced to work longer hours than they contracted for, and many suffer under the second-class status of part-time work.

At the same time, part-time work makes organizations uncomfortable. It raises obvious questions about who will pick up the slack. And it raises more fundamental questions about the very nature of professional work itself. What exactly is a professional being paid for? Time or output? When limits are placed on time and pay, how should that fairly be reflected in the work?

Successful part-timers face such difficulties head on. The five strategies we've distilled from the experience of the successful part-timers work together to overcome these challenges. They not only help the part-timer deal with the organization but also make the organization itself more receptive to the possibilities of part-time work.

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