

The Philadelphia Inquirer

January 4, 2005

Career time-out

For stressed career women, taking a sabbatical is unthinkable. But a new book argues that it can be a good move - personally and professionally.

By Sara Eckel

Mary Lou Quinlan likes to tell one story in particular when she talks about just how much her job used to rule her life. It's the one about the time she was strapped to a gurney in the back of an ambulance after being injured in a traffic accident, and screaming at her husband as they sped off to the hospital. But she wasn't just crying out in pain.

Quinlan, then the chief executive officer of an advertising agency in New York, had been on her way to work that morning 10 years ago when the cab she was riding in was broadsided by another car. And now she was furious because her husband hadn't properly explained to an important client - a toilet-paper company executive - why she was going to have to miss a meeting.

"I had two broken ribs, and all I could think of was that the client would be upset," she says.

Battered and bruised, Quinlan went back to work the very next day and continued on as before - logging 60-hour weeks at the office and additional hours at home.

"I never really hit the off switch. I just kept working, even though I was exhausted," says Quinlan, 51, the author of *Time Off for Good Behavior: How Hardworking Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives*, due out next week from Broadway Books.

Part memoir, part career guide for other burned-out "Type-A good girls" who never say no to their jobs, the book grew out of Quinlan's own realization four years later that her career had taken over her life.

"It was my hardest year in advertising," recalls Quinlan, who grew up in Philadelphia's Olney section and became one of a handful of women to rise to the top of a major advertising agency. "Work had become a series of constant new business pitches and my company kept coming in second. And it was killing me. My job was to lead to success, and I couldn't control it."

Then a friend suggested that she take a leave of absence. "It had never occurred to me that this was an option," Quinlan says. "You either worked, or planned a vacation that felt like work."

So she decided to take some time off. Real time off. Five whole weeks to do whatever she wanted. "It was transforming," Quinlan recalls. She spent the time taking salsa lessons, ice skating, spending time with friends. And she took stock.

"I took a piece of paper and drew a line down the middle and wrote down what I love to do and what I don't. And when I looked honestly at what I love - public speaking, writing, and women's consulting - I realized that I'd have to leave my job because none of those things were in the job description of the CEO of an ad agency," Quinlan said.

She quit the job it had taken her two decades to get to and started her own marketing company, Just Ask A Woman. "It wasn't until I was out of the day-to-day grind that I could see my life clearly."

Quinlan's story may sound extreme, but she's certainly not the only woman who has let her work life get out of hand. Patti Clark, a Bucks County career coach, says that many of the women executives and business owners she works with are always on the clock, whether they are at the office or not. "These women don't go to lunch. They don't even go to the bathroom," she says.

The problem is particularly acute for working parents. According to a Families and Work Institute study, two-income couples with children worked 10 more hours per week in 2002 than their 1977 counterparts. Of the college-educated employees surveyed by the organization, 80 percent said they would like to decrease the number of hours that they work.

At the same time, Americans don't even take the time off they've got coming to them. A 2003 survey by Expedia.com found that employees annually give up \$21 billion in unused vacation days.

"Americans are working harder and longer than any other people in the industrialized world," says Shelia Wellington, professor of management at New York University's Stern School of Business and former president of Catalyst, a research organization that focuses on women. "And the technology revolution has become a two-headed monster, as cell phones and e-mail continue to erode personal time."

It's not just the wrung-out workers who are paying the price. Job stress costs an estimated \$300 billion a year to U.S. businesses, according to a study by the American Stress Institute.

Many companies, such as GlaxoSmithKline, Cinergy and Merck, are paying attention, offering a variety of work/life accommodations such as flextime and job sharing to their employees, a boon to working mothers in particular; women are still the primary caregivers in their households, which makes finding time for themselves more difficult than it is for men.

Some companies, like Nike and Ralston Purina, are going even further, offering paid sabbaticals to eligible employees, while others, such as IBM, offer extended

unpaid leaves, with the promise that employees' jobs will be there for them when they return. The reason is simple: retaining good employees, even if you have to let them go for a while, is more cost-effective in the long run than high turnover rates.

The number of companies doing this, however, is still small: A survey of 450 companies conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management showed that 18 percent offered unpaid sabbaticals, and only 4 percent offered paid time off.

But many women - especially those in their late 30s and early 40s - are still reluctant to use such programs, says Quinlan, whose book is aimed at helping them change their overworking ways. "Women don't ask," she says. "They say it's about money. But when you listen, you realize it's about ego and control."

Type-A good girls, she says, are uncomfortable with the idea of taking a break. "The biggest barrier these women face is the inability to give themselves permission to take a rest." And that goes for women of means as well as those at the lower end of the income scale, Quinlan says.

Most women can find some way to carve out a bit of time to take stock, Quinlan says. "You get 52 little sabbaticals a year - it's called the weekend. Just add one day to that, and you have three whole days to focus on your agenda," she says.

Proper planning can also bridge the gap. Jane Chapman, a seventh-grade teacher in Levittown, saved for four years so that she could spend an unfettered year with her daughter, Katie. "It was the best thing I ever did," says Chapman, 47. "I wanted to be there when she started school, because that's the beginning of your life, especially in my family, where education is so valued."



Jane Chapman and her daughter, Katie, 10, make banana bread. Chapman, a teacher, made plans to take a year off when Katie started school.

But not to the exclusion of everything else. The teacher on a break encouraged her 4-year-old to play hooky now and then. "If it was a sunny day, we might go to the beach or park. I wanted her to understand that pre-school is important, but she's not taking the SATs," Chapman says.

Cynthia Froggatt, a driven architectural consultant, was well into her 40s before she gained this perspective. A close friend died of AIDS, and she was asked to deliver the eulogy at the memorial service.

The service fell on a day that her office had two major deadlines. "I played it out in my mind: I'd work all day, hustle into a cab, blurt out something at the service, and then go back to the office and work all night," says Froggatt, 44, who grew up in Olney and now lives in New York City.

Instead, Froggatt told her boss that she had a family emergency and took the week off. She helped plan the memorial and also had a little breathing space for herself - time to reflect on her own life. She wound up extending that week to three months.

"I realized that I wanted to honor my friend by being a better friend to the ones who were still alive," says Froggatt, who now can be relied on in a pinch to pick up a friend's child after school, or to take time off when a close friend is ill and needs some care.

When it was time to return to their jobs, both Chapman and Froggatt made a wonderful discovery: They love to work. "It was great to be home, but I realized that I really like what I do, and I don't resent it anymore," Chapman says.

Froggatt, who switched from being a full-time employee to an independent contractor, also fell back in love with her career. "I thought I hated work. I used to say I was going to join the Peace Corps and do something meaningful. But it turns out I loved the work, I just didn't like the way I was doing it."

And that, says Quinlan, is exactly why women should learn how to take time out - before they burn out.

"Women come up with all of the reasons they can't do it. But those who have done it say that even a little break opened their eyes and changed their lives."