

CAREER & WORKPLACE

# STRUGGLING FOR BALANCE

Valley women executives were forced to make sacrifices to juggle work and home life amid the pandemic

Teresa Strunk is vice president for Strunk Insurance Group and during the pandemic she had to step away from her job so she could pivot and be a stay-at-home mom with her daughters, Maggie, 5, and Rachel, 2.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

By Sara Edwards – Contributing writer  
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As the Covid-19 pandemic closed businesses in March 2020, Valley insurance executive [Teresa Strunk](#) suddenly found herself juggling working from home. Thrown into the mix were her two young daughters vying for her attention.

Typically, Strunk worked part time with her husband, Casey, at their eponymous insurance company, putting her daughters, ages 2 and 5, in day care four days a week. But balancing working from home, taking care of her children with the day care closed coupled with her volunteer commitments was just too much. It forced Strunk to temporarily step away from her role as vice president of Strunk Insurance Group Inc.

“I was feeling like I lost a part of myself,” she said. “I’ve worked a lot longer than I’ve been a mom, so I really respect and admire stay-at-home moms, however I don’t think I was programmed to be one.”

Strunk was happy that the pandemic gave her time to bond last year with her children and as a family, they were able to strengthen their relationship and cherish the moments they had with each other. As business slowly started to return to a new normal, Strunk went back to her role in the company in February, but it just hasn’t quite felt the same.

“I was lucky if I could get one or two hours of work done a day once the kids were at home,” Strunk said. “I’m in a unique opportunity that I could pivot my role for our family to be with the kids, but it still really hit me hard.”

### **Unbalanced workloads**

The shift to working from home because of the pandemic dramatically affected working families, especially mothers.

Many women voluntarily left their paid 9-to-5 jobs during the pandemic to take care of household chores and make sure their children were taken care of while doing virtual school.

However, according to a Verizon's Women's Initiative study, 68% of respondents said they left their jobs because they had feelings of burnout while 34% said they left to take care of their children.

What's more, an astounding 2.3 million women left the labor force between February 2020 and January 2021, according to the National Women's Law Center. This left women's labor force participation rate at its lowest point since 1988.

### **Finding balance**

As many women in Arizona and around the country couldn't – and didn't – want to leave their jobs during the pandemic, they had to find a way to balance home and work life, when the lines were easily blurred.

When [Lauren Stine](#), a partner at the law firm Quarles & Brady LLP, started working from home with her family back in March of last year, she and her husband knew that they needed to be especially communicative with each other as both their children were doing virtual learning and both of their schedules were all over the place.



Lauren Stine, Quarles & Bradley  
MARKOW-KENT PHOTOGRAPHY

“It was really important for me to make sure we were taking care of the kids’ needs, so I had to be more flexible,” Stine said.

But even with open communication and an attempt at keeping the kids occupied during work meetings and Zoom calls, Stine said that it didn't stop her dog from barking at the front door or the kids calling out to her to come help with their homework.



“If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that not everything is going to go according to plan and we really have to all cut ourselves a little slack,” she said.

### Going it alone

But not all mothers have a partner at home to help keep the balance.

While trying to keep her young boys, a toddler and 9-year-old, entertained at the beginning of the pandemic, single mother [Myriah Mhoon](#) also had to figure out how to safely continue operating New Life Center. Serving as CEO of New Life Center is a big job as it is one of the largest domestic violence shelters in the country.

“We were working 24/7 on making new protocols for literally every single corner of our agency,” Mhoon said. “Some women, including myself, every single day we have to conquer these really hard challenges whether we’re in a pandemic, or whether we’re just balancing motherhood and running a business.”



Myriah Mhoon, CEO Of New Life Center, her mother help her in raising her two sons, Jonathan, 2, and Sammy, 10, during the pandemic. New Life Center is a place that could not operate virtually, and staff had to always be on site in some form or fashion to keep business open.

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Mhoon’s workday starts at 5 a.m. with a morning email from the center detailing how many people are staying in the shelter that day. As she’s responding to emails, she’s getting her children ready for school. Throughout the day, Mhoon is hopping in and out of Zoom calls, sometimes going into the center to check on things, while also making sure her boys (when they were learning from home) were doing their schoolwork and properly supervised.

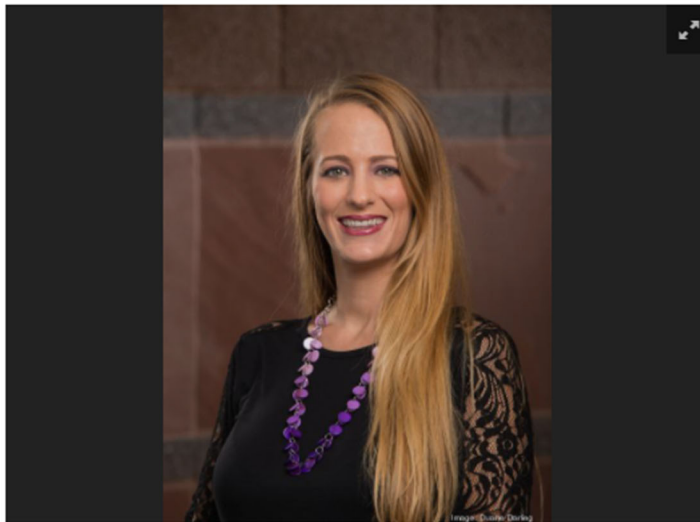
Because the New Life Center is a crisis center that’s open 24/7, Mhoon also was having to decide how to keep her staff protected while making sure the conditions of the shelter stay safe for the people staying there. She said during the pandemic she would go into the office two to three days a week and work from home the rest of the time.

“I’m able to function under stress that way for a small amount of time, but the fact that there was no calculated end in sight, was the most stressful thing for me and for my family,” Mhoon said. “That to me is still just a very unbalancing way of living.”

## Workloads intensified

At the start of the pandemic, [Tiffany Di Giacinto](#) and her family thought that working from home would be something they'd only have to do for about a week. But when her kids didn't go back to school after spring break, Di Giacinto and her partner found themselves scrambling to set up their workspaces and a school area for their four kids to do online learning. They also hired a nanny to come and help the children during the workday so that Di Giacinto could work.

"I probably have a shorter fuse than I used to before the pandemic and I probably get a little more frazzled easier than I used to," said Di Giacinto, senior director of marketing and communications at Delta Dental of Arizona. "We have six people in our house, plus the nanny and her baby, so we're talking about eight people in a 1,300-square-foot open floor plan house with no privacy or set place to conduct business or formal learning."



Tiffany Di Giacinto  
DUANE DARLING

At one point, the nanny had to step away for maternity leave, which left Di Giacinto and her partner to handle the education of their four children, ages 2 through 9. She said through the struggles and working from home, her job as at Delta Dental expanded as well. The number of company meetings, now done on Zoom, increased during the pandemic.

"I was appointed to serve on a cross-functioning team dedicated to pandemic planning and response and it just added another responsibility to my workload," she said. "While other people's workloads came to a screeching halt, we were still open and my workload in a way expanded."

## Flexibility

Through the pandemic, many businesses learned and adapted and provided more flexibility for employees in the virtual workspace.

Mhoon said as leaders and women in business, it's essential to step up and be accommodating and trusting as possible.

“I think the pandemic and working at home gave us the opportunity to say that you really need to trust your staff as long as the right outcomes are still being produced,” she said. “As moms we have these moments where we need to be disrupted from work and we need to put 100% into our kids.”

Strunk said her insurance firm has also tried to be more accommodating with their employees, seeking to be more understanding and flexible with everyone’s situations.

“We have some people who don’t have any kids and we have some folks who have three younger kids,” she said. “I think it’s just been a learning opportunity for us to do what’s best for our staff and it’s really worked out. We’ve still been able to be productive and cheer them on while they’re also facing their own struggles.”

**Work-life balance advice from women executives:**

“When you’re a leader for your kids and employees, everyone needs to see and feel that energy to know that everything will be OK. You do have to take some time for yourself. I go mountain biking on the weekend because it’s when I can get out and not worry about other people’s needs.”

[Felicia Munion](#), co-founder and CEO of Arizona Facial Plastics



Felicia Munion

JEAN LANINGA

“Have that flexibility for moms, it’s super important to incorporate. Women are so important in the working industry and we need that support. Keep up your skills and how they can be transferrable to other job opportunities will be extremely helpful. Don’t ever put yourself in just one category. Your skills and work ethic are going to drive you so don’t think you’re just stuck.





Jackie Yoder, Chief Operating Officer of Wilde Wealth Management Group  
WILDE WEALTH MANAGEMENT GROUP

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“The pandemic was a lesson for me because I’m so used to having control and this was out of my control. It’s so important to creatively have time for personal reflection, even if it’s in a closet. Time by yourself in solitude is very hard as a mom any time of the year but in the pandemic it feels like you can’t get away. Take breaths and get to a place where you can find joy and then you can feel energized to get back to your work and your family.

[Amy McGrath](#), COO at ASU Preparatory Academy

**Is life getting back to normal now?**

All of my kids are finally back in school full time, which is great – but has presented its own challenges. I don’t have a dedicated babysitter for pickups like I would in a normal year, so I have been drawing on more community resources than I had in the past. It is working out OK – no one has been forgotten at school yet. We are all learning to flex a little more this year, which is a good thing.”

– Munion

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“My kids are back in school, full time, and as of late there have been no cases of kids getting Covid. They love being back and are so happy and it obviously makes things easier on me to navigate. I would say overall this is the most normal it has felt in over a year and as exhausting as it is running around again, it is also such a blessing.”

– Yoder

“We’re gladly easing back into our normal rhythm. I’m back to working my normal hybrid schedule, while the kids are back to in-person learning full time. We are all looking forward to summer, and it’s especially exciting for me because for the first time I’ll be an ASU Prep Digital parent, as my kids are enrolled in summer math momentum programming.”

– McGrath