Professional Women's Challenges in the New Normal

INSIDE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO
College of Business Administration

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WOMEN LEAD CHANGE

Professional women's challenges in the new normal

Women Lead Change is committed to supporting our colleagues at work and home. Released in March 2021, we published a research report on Challenges for Professional Women in the COVID-19 Pandemic. This research helped organizations better understand women's current challenges and how they could better support. This new report is the second phase of this research as the world of work continues to evolve.

ABOUT THE STUDY

In collaboration with Zhenyu Yuan, Assistant Professor in the Department of Managerial Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago, we launched a second phase of research aimed at understanding the challenges that women are currently facing as companies adapt to the new normal. It is our hope that these results can help organizations, policy makers, and communities identify effective ways to support women.

Data continues to be the driver of our mission at Women Lead Change in order to advance women leaders and to work to come out of the Women's Recession. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and limited to adult women working in the U.S. Results in this report are based on de-identified survey responses analyzed at the sample level. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board *(Protocol # 2021-1075: Challenges for professional women in the new normal).*

Key insights included the changing nature of work in the new normal, the challenges of balancing work and family, and the organizational practices that can help.

- Although employees see remote work as beneficial, it can also create feelings of isolation, blurred boundaries, and coordination problems.

- Hybrid work may be here to stay.

- Flexibility and workplace support are factors that can increase employee retention and alleviate employee stress.
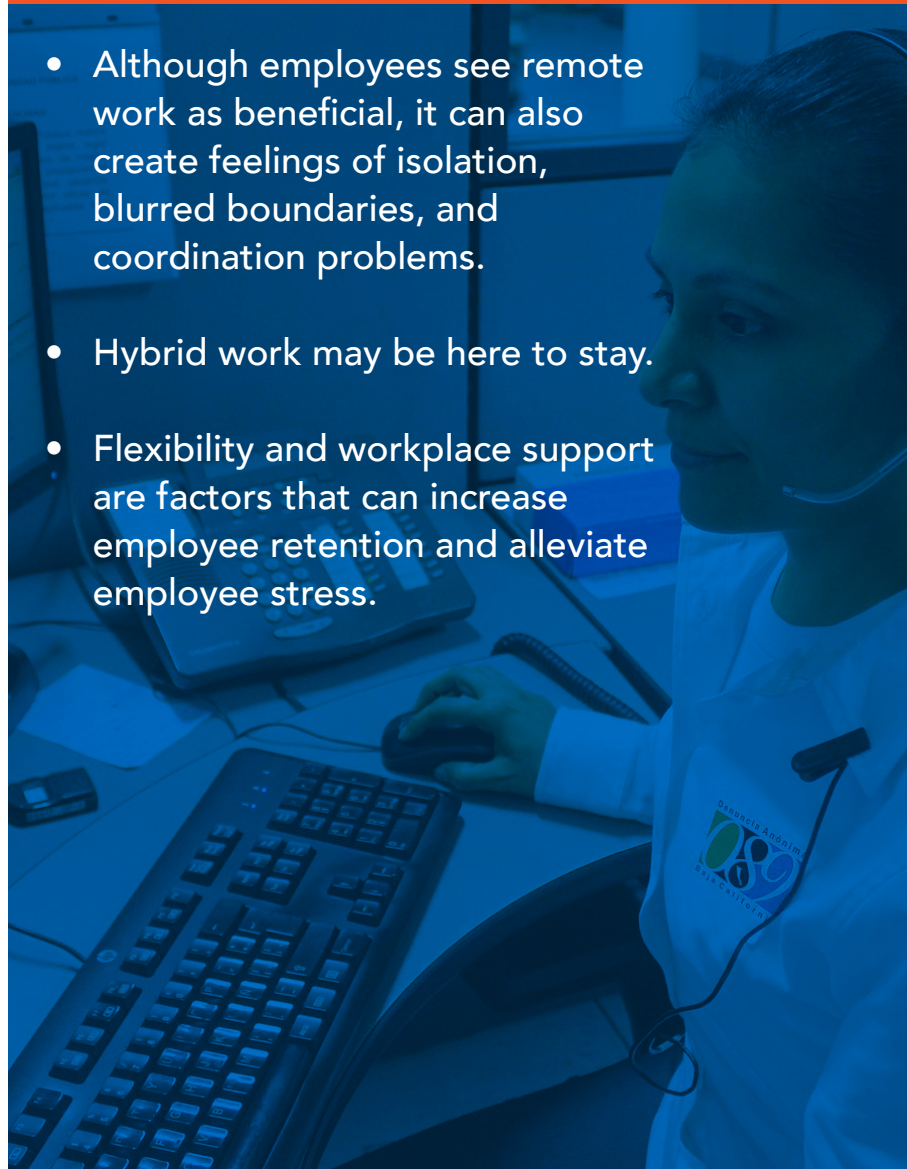
Participant Demographics

Of the
252
participants:
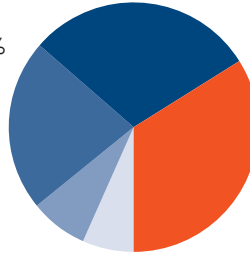
64%
are between the ages of 30 and 49

94.8%
are white

41.9%
have two children

37.8%
have no dependent children

29.5%
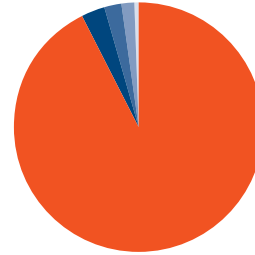are individual contributor employees with no direct reports

AGE

- 29 or younger: 7.3%
- **30–39: 30.0%**
- **40–49: 34.0%**
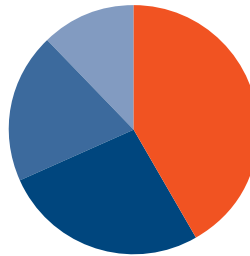- 50–59: 22.3%
- 60 or older: 6.5%

RACE

- Asian: 3.2%
- African American: 1.6%
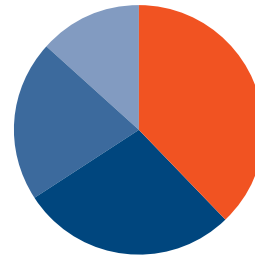- **White: 94.8%**
- Multiracial: 0.4%
- Hispanic: 2.4%

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

- 0: 19.4%
- 1: 12.1%
- **2: 41.9%**
- 3 or more: 26.6%

NUMBER OF DEPENDENT CHILDREN

- **0: 37.8%**
- 1: 20.9%
- 2: 28.1%
- 3 or more: 13.2%

POSITION

- **Individual contributor: 29.5%**
- First manager: 25.1%
- Middle manager: 26.7%
- Executive/senior manager: 18.7%

INDUSTRY

Industry	%
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate/Public Policy	37.2%
Science/Engineering/Architecture	15.2%
Other	11.6%
Manufacturing/Construction	11.2%
Education/Training/Library	8.4%
Non-profit	5.6%
Healthcare	4.0%
Community/Social Services	2.4%
Retail	1.6%
Computers/Information Systems	1.6%
Arts/Design/Entertainment/Sports	0.8%
Transportation	0.4%
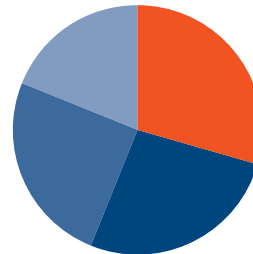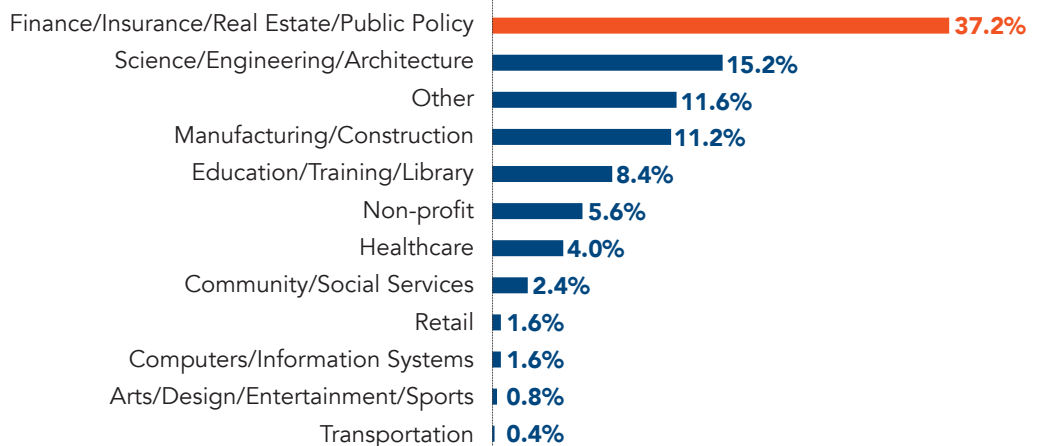
1. Well-being and mental health

In the previous project, we assessed depressive symptoms using the 8-item Patient Health Questionnaire depression scale (PHQ-8; Kroenke et al., 2009) to examine professional women's mental health. We administered this scale again to understand whether women's mental health has improved since when we conducted 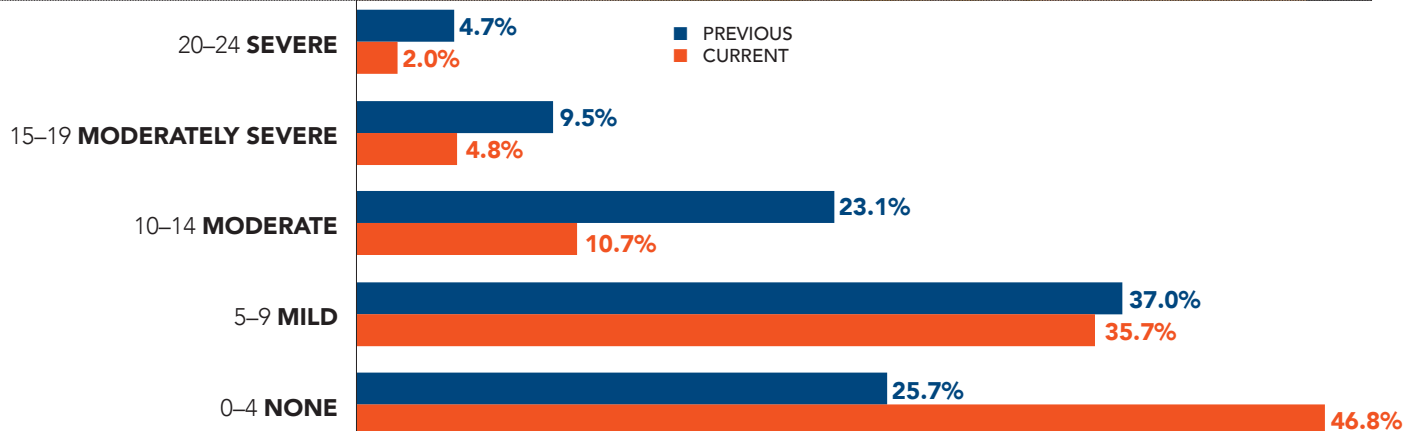the previous survey. We note the current sample (252) is smaller than the previous one (507). Therefore, results may be less representative than the previous ones. That said, the general pattern indicates a positive change in women's mental health.

... the general pattern indicates a positive change in women's mental health

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

PREVIOUS
CURRENT

	PREVIOUS	CURRENT
20–24 **SEVERE**	4.7%	2.0%
15–19 **MODERATELY SEVERE**	9.5%	4.8%
10–14 **MODERATE**	23.1%	10.7%
5–9 **MILD**	37.0%	35.7%
0–4 **NONE**	25.7%	46.8%

2. Work has changed in the new normal

Women's work has changed in many significant ways as companies adapt to the new normal.
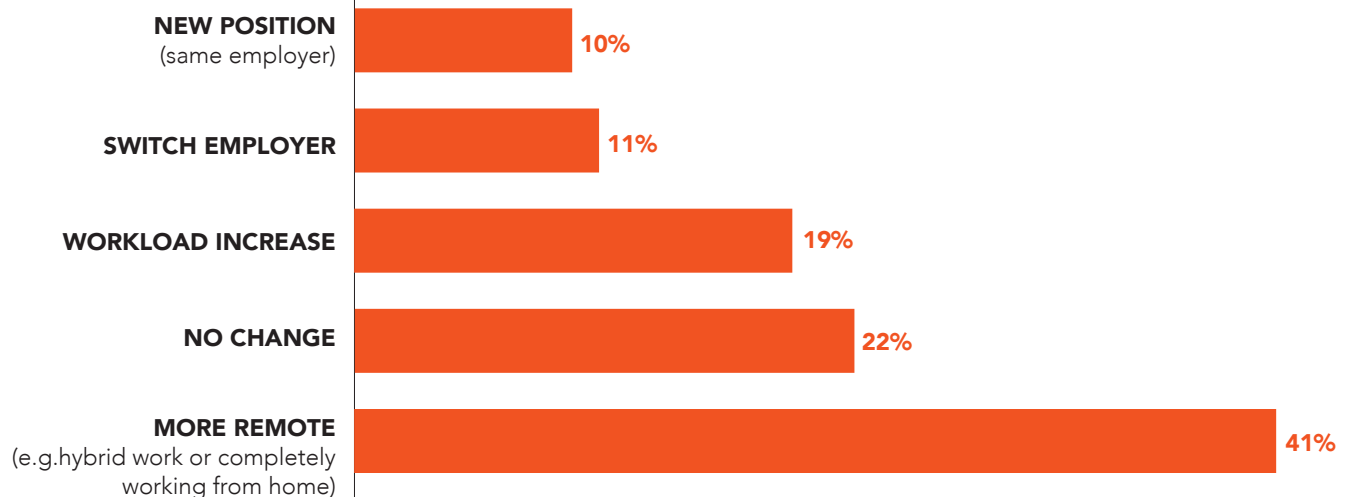
CHANGES AT WORK

Among the survey participants, 95.2% were employed full-time pre-pandemic; 97.2% of them are employed full-time currently. Overall, the majority of the surveyed participants did not have any changes in employment status (87.7%).

That said, a detailed examination of participants' open-ended responses revealed many significant changes in the nature of their work that warrant attention.

- The most substantial change (41%) is the more remote nature of work as many were either working a few days or completely from home. This suggests that hybrid work may be here to stay.
- Along with the transition to remote work, many participants (19%) noted their workload also increased.
- Moreover, about 20% of the sample either switched employers (11%) or started a new position within the same company (e.g., promotion; 10%).
- Only 22% of the participants did not experience any change at work.

Although many participants welcomed the more remote nature of their work (e.g., more flexibility: "to accommodate my lifestyle and needs as a working mother"; less travel and commute: "I am full-time at home saving 5 hours of travel a week"), they also noted some downsides associated with remote work. For example, they found it more difficult to maintain the boundary between work and home life ("the company lost sight of typical work boundaries. Our work hours became all hours of the day"). Furthermore, remote work contributed to feelings of isolation and coordination problems due to the lack of in-person connection with colleagues ("I used to be able to catch someone at their desk for a quick question... That now takes a lot more effort and meetings.").

Category	%
NEW POSITION (same employer)	10%
SWITCH EMPLOYER	11%
WORKLOAD INCREASE	19%
NO CHANGE	22%
MORE REMOTE (e.g.hybrid work or completely working from home)	41%

3. Hybrid work may be part of the new normal

In our survey, we asked participants to report how many days a week that they were working from home versus in the office. Data supports the hybrid nature of work, as only 29.1% of the sample did not work from home. Given the aforementioned benefits and challenges associated with remote work, this indicates companies will need to adapt to this new reality by providing effective support for remote work.
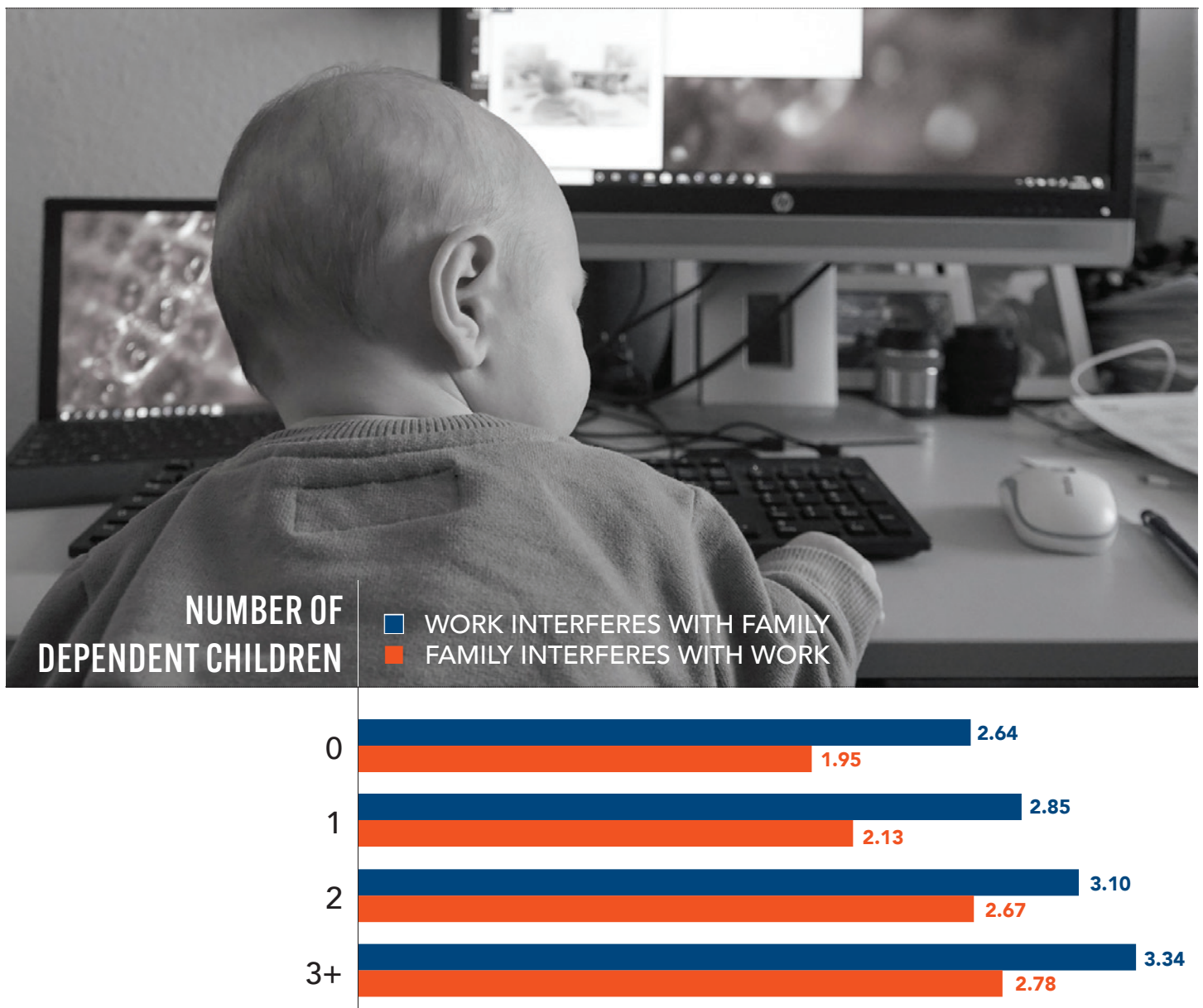
NUMBER OF DAYS WORKING FROM HOME EVERY WEEK

5 DAYS: 27.5%
0 DAYS: 29.1%
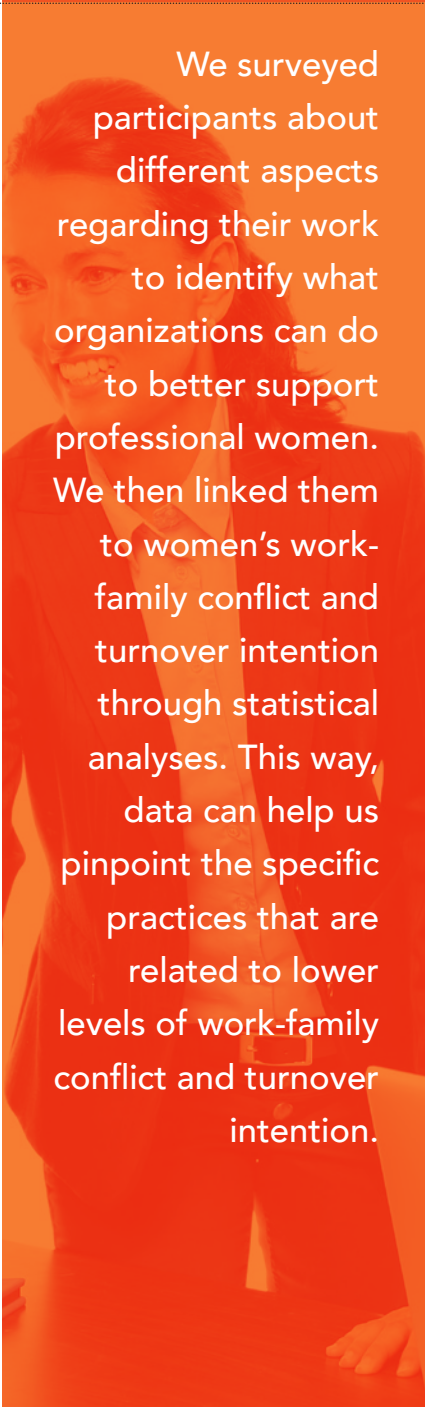4 DAYS: 6.1%
3 DAYS: 8.9%
1 DAY: 10.9%
2 DAYS: 17.4%
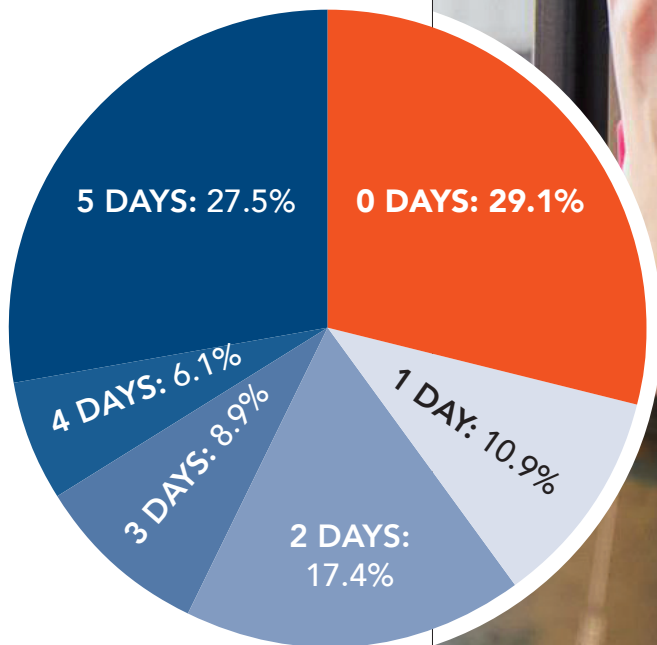
4. Work-family conflict continues to be a salient concern for employees

This can happen in two ways. Work-interfering-with-family happens when work demands interfere with employees' family life. For example, working extra hours on an important project may make it difficult for someone to pick up the child on time. Family-interfering-with-work happens when family duties get in the way of one's work. For example, if an employee has to stay up late to take care of a sick child, they may have trouble focusing on work the next day due to the lack of sleep.

Our data indicates that the number of dependent children is an important factor. Women who had more dependent children consistently reported higher levels of both work-interfering-with-family and family-interfering-with-work. Additionally, work-interfering-with-family was consistently higher than family-interfering-with-work across all groups. This suggests work duties may have a bigger role in women's work-family conflict.

NUMBER OF DEPENDENT CHILDREN

■ WORK INTERFERES WITH FAMILY
■ FAMILY INTERFERES WITH WORK

Number of Dependent Children	Work Interferes with Family	Family Interferes with Work
0	2.64	1.95
1	2.85	2.13
2	3.10	2.67
3+	3.34	2.78

5. How can organizations help?

We surveyed participants about different aspects regarding their work to identify what organizations can do to better support professional women. We then linked them to women's work-family conflict and turnover intention through statistical analyses. This way, data can help us pinpoint the specific practices that are related to lower levels of work-family conflict and turnover intention.

TO HELP REDUCE WORK–FAMILY CONFLICT, giving employees flexibility and control over their work schedule is the key. This happens when:

- Employees have a work schedule suited to their personal situation.
- Employees have some flexibility over when they can start and end their workday.
- Employees can decide how they want to schedule their work.

TO HELP RETAIN TALENT AND REDUCE TURNOVER INTENTION, companies and managers need to work together to better support professional women. Specifically,

- Organizations need to provide effective support for women's career development. This can include:
  - Programs, policies, and opportunities that help employees to develop their specialized functional and managerial skills.
- Having a manager who is supportive of employees' work-family balance can also help reduce turnover intention. To do so:
  - Managers should make sure employees feel comfortable talking to them about work-family issues.
  - Managers should be willing to work with employees to find a way to solve their work-family conflict.
  - Managers should organize work in a way that helps reduce employees' work-family conflict.
- The hybrid nature of work may reduce the visibility of women's work contributions, which can further hurt their career outcomes. In turn, women who feel their managers do not appreciate their work are more likely to leave for another company. Accordingly,
  - Managers should make sure they are aware of the actual workload of their employees.
  - Managers should have a clear idea of how hard their employees are working.

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