

Has technology made life easier for working moms?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Want to know what mainstream America's ideal moms looked like 50 years ago? Tune into television shows of that era such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Donna Reed Show* and you'll find the ladies of those households swirling around immaculate kitchens in floral aprons, with perfectly coiffed hair and tasteful makeup. When not

busy making a pot roast for the nightly formal family dinner, they might be found pruning their tea roses (in pearls), doing needlepoint or reading a homemaking magazine.

Fast-forward 50 years and these middle-class women would more likely be found juggling full-time jobs in today's "knowledge economy," racing between work and their kids' activities, and eating meals on-the-go -- all while tweeting, texting, messaging and blogging, both for business and pleasure.

But is all the technology helping today's [working mothers](#) achieve the elusive goal of work-family balance?

"In my research I have interviewed more than 200 women in several different countries who are working in the knowledge economy," said Eileen Trauth, professor of [Information Sciences](#) and Technology at Penn State.

Her conclusion? There shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all approach to women's work-life balance.

"We should have the flexibility to enable family units to enact a variety of ways to achieve a good balance," Trauth said. "This might mean more and better policies for parental leave for both parents, retraining options for those who left the paid labor force for several years and want to return, part-time work that keeps people on a career track, and work-at-home options. Certainly, technology enables some of these options."

Just a decade or two ago, online degree programs, tablet computers that fit in purses and video conferencing via your smart phone didn't exist. In today's world, they've made it possible for a working mother to attend a meeting when she's home with a sick child, take night classes in her PJs, and answer emails during soccer games.

But is technology causing working moms to be tethered to work 24/7? It's a double-edged sword, said Rachel Coker, mom of two young daughters and a full-time director at Binghamton University.

"On some days, I'm on my cell phone navigating an issue at work while frosting cupcakes for a school event. In that sense, technology has made it possible to be present both at home and at work when that's truly necessary," Coker said. However, she continued, "I wouldn't say technology has created any free time in my life. If anything, it has filled what might have been free time -- the 10 minutes when I'm waiting at the doctor's office, for instance -- with work. I check email, return phone calls and schedule appointments instead of daydreaming or reading a magazine."

Debra Hawhee, a professor at Penn State and mom to a toddler, said "In the first few months of my baby's life, it was very helpful to be able to read and send emails as I could without having to devote an hour or so sitting at a desk and doing that work. My job is flexible, which means that I can do it when I want. This may seem tethering, but it also means that I can do a bunch of writing or research in the evenings after the baby goes to bed, which allows me to put everything down and be with my kid for a few hours during a weekday."

Technology affords us flexibility, agreed Trauth, but also can bring increased stress and pressure.

"Because we can be contacted anytime, anywhere, and because work can be accomplished anytime, anywhere, there is a trend toward assuming that people will and should be available to work all the time," Trauth said. "In theory, the knowledge economy and technology open up more opportunities for women. Unfortunately, in many families women have the burden of having two full-time jobs -- the day job and the unpaid job at home. Cultural norms about gender roles sometimes preclude men

from being expected to do as much domestic work as women. So I think work-life balance has not been achieved in settings in which a father doesn't do as much at home as the mother when she also works outside the home."

"The bottom line," Trauth said, "is that we humans control how the Internet impacts the lives of everyone, including mothers. So if we are not happy with how the Internet affects our lives and families, we shouldn't blame the [technology](#) but rather the work culture and management policies."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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