

# Try a side gig (or eight!)

More women are leaving the traditional workforce for multiple part-time jobs, including writer

Jen Matlack, who juggles, yes, eight of them. If you're okay with chaos, the new way of working pays off in flexibility, cash, and unexpected exhilaration.

**T**here are days when I feel I ought to join a support group: "Hi, my name is Jen. I'm 44 years old and... I have eight jobs." But it's not like I'd ever have time to attend the meetings.

For the past six years, I've been a virtual assistant to a food blogger and a postpartum doula to new moms. I provide public relations services to companies and run two Etsy stores where I sell vintage decor and my art. I'm also a sales and marketing rep for a few all-natural skin-care companies, and I do product demonstrations at Whole Foods Markets for a kids' vitamin line. And then there's what I'm doing right now, scribing this piece: I'm a freelance writer, too.

At first I thought I was an anomaly. Surely other women, sane women, do not cobble together so many part-time, freelance gigs to make ends meet? But the truth is, they do. Like me, many Americans have moved away from the predictability of the 9-to-5 life. The number



The author in a rare moment of downtime at her home office.

of people employed as independent workers has risen 10 percent since 2011, and women make up the majority of them, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It's a new way of working, and we're making it work.

## There's money in this

Juggling jobs may sound like a crazy circus act, but it's surprisingly rewarding. And I do mean financially. I spoke to dozens of women about their multiple gigs, and they all said they are earning close to, if not more than, what they did at a full-time job. And at a time when so many people are one pink slip away from major debt, I know I've got seven alternative paychecks to fall back on. Six years ago, I found myself desperate when my sole source of income dried up. For more than a decade I'd worked as a freelance writer, a job that epitomizes the phrase "feast or famine." I'd go from a crammed calendar of back-to-back deadlines to long stretches of

## Side jobs that make all kinds of sense

time without any work. I got used to the rhythm, but then the recession hit in 2008 and work disappeared completely, while bills for the mortgage, the car insurance, the oil, you name it, kept flooding in. I needed other ways, *more* ways, to make a living.

Ajeenah Riggs, a 37-year-old single mom of four in New York City, had a similar rude awakening—actually, a couple of them. “I was laid off twice, and it threw me each time,” she says. “I decided that putting all my eggs in one basket wasn’t a good idea. I made a list of what I was good at and completed an eight-week entrepreneur program that taught me I could be different things to different people.” Today Ajeenah’s titles include virtual assistant, consultant to nonprofit organizations, co-owner of a hair salon, and business manager for an apparel company. “With more than one stream of income, I can always provide for my family,” she says.

### You are more than a job

The mental-health benefits of multi-jobbing can’t be calculated as easily, but they’re important. “I earned a high-paying salary at a start-up, but I was subjected to a lot of stress about things that were far beyond my control, like the interests of investors and my CEO,” says Jessyca Frederick, 37, who works as a freelance landscape designer, in addition to four other jobs, in La Quinta, CA. “Not only do I now earn more, but I don’t have to negotiate with anyone about how to grow my business.” Mary McCoy, a single mom from Dallas who switches among grant writing, researching, and social work, says that although her take-home pay may be slightly less, she feels more fulfilled than ever: “My career goals have always centered around living a comfortable life, and that’s what I have provided for myself.”

I’ve discovered other intangibles too. Every day I wake up looking forward to what’s on my plate, no two days are ever alike, and each of my positions speaks to a part of who I am. Despite

**Looking to pad your bank account with extra bucks? Here are 4 ways to do it without leaving your 40-hour workweek.**

#### VIRTUAL ASSISTANT

As a VA you can work from home in fields such as accounting, bookkeeping, research, or customer service. “In most cases it doesn’t matter what time the work gets done, so long as it’s done,” says career coach and professional speaker Traci Bild. (\$16 to \$40 per hour)

#### PERSONAL CHEF

Think you’d rival the contestants on *Chopped*? Use your talents to turn out ready-made meals for busy families. Prep and cooking can be done whenever you can carve out time, says Bild. (\$10 to \$20 per meal, per person)

#### PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER

“There are lots of folks who need help demystifying their clutter,” says executive coach Roy Cohen. It’s essential to be tech-savvy: Much of the paper we hoard can be easily transferred to digital storage. (Up to \$200 per hour)

#### TUTOR

Are you a history buff? Math whiz? Spend just a couple of hours or an entire Saturday at your local library tutoring students in your chosen subject. Lucrative and rewarding. (\$40 per hour or more) —J.M.

the bizarre hours, being a postpartum doula never tires me out—it feeds the nurturer in me. I rarely say no to a job, including recently when I got a call from a frazzled new mom who needed me to care for her newborn overnight so she could get some sleep. I managed to hold and soothe the baby from 3 a.m. to 7 a.m. while working on my laptop. Yes, nuts, but it didn’t feel like a drag. I was happy because the online research challenged me, but that baby—and the thought of his mom finally getting some rest—gave my morning meaning. Jamie Stec, a married mom of two from Mount Clemens, MI, feels similarly. “I chose this direction because it fulfills so many aspects of my personality,” says the 36-year-old. One of Jamie’s five jobs is bartending on Saturday nights, which lets her socialize while her husband gets one-on-one time with their kids. “I feel as if I’m a hostess at my own party. I mingle, I introduce people... I flex my networking muscles. Sometimes I forget exactly how charming I can be,” she says, “until I put in a shift behind the bar.”

While it might seem counterintuitive, many women I spoke with agreed that having multiple balls in the air actually makes their schedules easier to manage. That’s because we don’t have to be so rigid. More times than not, I can fit my eight jobs around the things that are most important—namely, anything to do with my daughter, a second-grader. Laura Williams, a married 32-year-old who teaches at a university, runs an online fitness community, and has two other jobs in Georgetown, TX, says her greatest joy is being the “master of my own time. I can work but still travel, meet friends for coffee, and fit in my exercise when it’s convenient.”

### Could you do it?

Not everyone is suited to this life, but I think I always have been. I’ll admit that I now have a phobia of working a 9-to-5 job, which I did for a total of 15 years. I often felt stifled and confined, as much

life

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in spaces with polished hardwood floors and sunny windows as in ones with sickly fluorescent lights that made everyone look like they were decomposing. I couldn't shake the gloomy feeling that I had been sent to some sort of bizarre prison that pays you to show up for eight hours a day. Ekho Powell, a married 35-year-old, can relate: "For me, predictable work creates predictable results," says the six-job entrepreneur in Lakeland, FL. "The last thing I want to be is predictable. When I divide my time among my ventures equally, I maximize my results." A 2013 Stanford University study backs her up, finding that people who work from home are 13 percent more productive.

But you have to have many interests and a love of new things. "It takes an entrepreneurial spirit," says Caroline Adams Miller, a professional coach in Bethesda, MD.

What else? Realism about the drawbacks of a many-jobs career. For starters, I don't get a paycheck every Friday. That could make anyone panicky, but how stressed would it make *you*? Likewise, I don't get health insurance, a 401(k), or sick or vacation pay. "If I don't work, I don't get paid," says Mary McCoy. Then there's the flip side of dry spells: Sometimes I have a rush of so much work that I can barely catch my breath. I've lost count of the times I've collapsed in sobs, overwhelmed. It happens, and you have to be the kind of worker who picks herself up and gets moving, energized by the pressure. Friends, family, even acquaintances won't always grasp what on earth it is you're doing. Says Laura Williams: "A few have asked, 'So when are you going to start applying for jobs again?' To which I say, 'I'm not.' And I receive a blank stare in return."

As for actual job-market skills, it helps to be super-organized, says Roy Cohen, a career counselor and executive coach in New York City. And free of any discomfort with self-promotion—people need to know what you can do before they'll hire you to do it. After all my years of freelancing, I had a list of contacts at various magazines. When I launched my Etsy shop, I reached out to editors to introduce my work. Touting my new endeavor took chutzpah, but it started the orders flowing.

I won't say I've got all this down pat. I'm easily distracted. Sometimes I find myself scrubbing my daughter's hermit-crab tank when I should be packing items I sold online. I continually work on keeping a positive mind-set in order to bounce back when a new opportunity doesn't materialize. I'm the one who has to make things happen, but I find that challenge liberating. All women need options for how to fold work into our lives. In my case, I have eight of them. ®

### SIDE GIGS THAT ARE A LITTLE CRAZY

Definitely not for the shy.

Koriel Jock, 31:  
By day, she's a **fund-raiser** for a nonprofit immigration law firm...

...but by night, she **designs** underwear. Her line is called La Vie en Orange.

Dana Luker, 27:  
By day, she's a **certified public accountant** at a firm in Atlanta...

...but by night, she **cheerleads**—seriously!—for the Atlanta Falcons football team.

Christie Nadratowski, 29:  
By day, she is an **academic advisor** for a university...

...but by night, she's a **trampoline instructor** at a trapeze school.

Jill Caren, 44:  
By day, she owns a **boutique Web development** firm...

...but by night, she has her own **pet photography** studio.

—Melody Warnick