



## Conversations with the Experts

### Working Mothers: This Is How They Do It



Carol Evans

**Bio:** Carol Evans founded Working Mother Media by acquiring, with MCG Capital, *Working Mother* magazine, The National Association for Female Executives and the Work-Life Congress in August 2001. She serves as chief executive officer and president. Evans' involvement with the magazine goes back to 1978, when she was part of the launch team that created *Working Mother* magazine for The McCall Publishing Company.

Prior to founding Working Mother Media, Evans served for five years as chief operating officer of The Chief Executive Group, where she published *Chief Executive* magazine and hosted 600 major CEOs annually at events across the United States and abroad.

From 1989 to 1996, Evans served as President of Arthur Levitt Jr.'s publishing company, Stagebill Inc., where she published 30 program magazines serving 110 arts organizations nationwide, including Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall.

During her first tenure at *Working Mother* magazine, 1978 to 1989, Evans grew advertising revenue from \$100,000 to over \$14 million and circulation from 100,000 to 700,000 monthly. In 1985 she developed the well known "Working Mother 100 Best Companies" and the "Working Mother of the Year Award."

Since founding Working Mother Media, Evans has announced several new initiatives including the Best Companies for Women of Color, the NAFE Top 30 Companies for Executive Women, the Working Mother Best Small Companies and Entrepreneur Moms and our new Balance Seekers Town Hall series based on her book.

A graduate of SUNY-Empire State, Evans serves as president of the board of directors of Advertising Women of New York (AWNY), a trustee of the March of Dimes, a director of Magazine Publishers of America and Young Playwrights. Evans has won numerous awards, including the Highest Leaf Award from the Women's Venture Fund, the Work-Life Legacy Award from the Families and Work Institute and the YWCA Women Achiever's Hall of Fame award. She was named "21 Most Intriguing People" by *MIN* magazine in 2003. Evans speaks nationally on the subject of work-life balance, the advancement of women, barriers facing women of color and leadership.

Carol Evans' first book, *THIS Is How We Do It: The Working Mothers' Manifesto*, was published in April 2006 by Hudson Street Press, a division of Penguin.

She lives in Chappaqua, NY, with her husband Bob Coulombe and their two children, Robert (19) and Julia Rose (16).

### An Interview with Carol Evans

By Judi Casey and Karen Corday

**Casey:** What made you decide to write a book about working mothers and their efforts to balance their work and family lives?

**Evans:** The first impetus, of course, was constantly being in touch with millions of working mothers on a daily basis throughout the country in the magazine. But, the real reason I wrote the book was because I got mad, and one day I woke up and decided to do something about it. Working mothers were continually getting bashed in the press. I was always being called for interviews in which I was expected to defend the very idea of being a working mother; I'd be asked to be on a show about working mothers, and then the topic would be

“Should mothers work?” I could not believe that twenty six years after the original publication of *Working Mother* and twenty years into the Best 100 Companies for Working Mothers list that people were still talking about whether mothers should be working!

**Casey:** As if most mothers even have an option!

**Evans:** Yes, financially, most mothers need that income to pay for things like their mortgage and the lifestyle they want to live. But it's not just financial. Many mothers also derive tremendous satisfaction from their work and feel that having a career makes them a strong role model for their kids. We should have a lot of choices in life, and the fact that people are questioning working as one of the choices is insane. So, I got angry and I decided to write a book that said “Wake up, America! Working mothers are doing it, whether you think they should be doing it, whether you think it's hard or easy, 26 million of them are doing it.” Most of them are doing it very well and are great moms and great employees, too.

**Casey:** Can you talk about your concept of “building a home team” that supports mothers working outside of the home?

**Evans:** That came from my own experience. I based a lot of the book on working mothers that I met through our web site, the magazine and our conferences, but a lot of it came from my own nineteen years of experience as a working mother! In my own life, my child care situation changed all the time, and there was no such thing as resolving that issue. As things changed—my job, my level of travel, my responsibilities, my husband's job, my children's personalities, their ages and school situations—I realized that there was not a one time solution, but rather the building of a team. I'm not normally one for sports analogies, but the “team” could be a business team or a sports team, whatever you prefer. A team is constantly changing and growing; different players are important at different times and there are different skill sets that each player brings to the team. These are very important concepts for working mothers. When they put together the group that's going to take care of their children while they are at work, if they can think of the support network as a team, it takes off some of the pressure. There's not one person who's responsible for everything. A team is a fluid support system; you never expect the team at your office to stay exactly the same forever. The same goes for the home team. You also never expect one person to be the entire team; you expect the whole group to be the team! It's very comforting to think of the home team as just that—a group that's going to support you and your family to balance work and home. So, maybe your mother-in-law is part of your home team because she comes over every Friday and takes the kids out for ice cream. Maybe you have a child care center that is the primary home team from 7:00 in the morning to 5:00 at night, and within that center there's a changing group of players there as well. Maybe there's a neighbor who can help you in a pinch if your kid needs to be picked up at school—there's another member of the home team. The more you can set it up and say “May I count on you in an emergency?” the more the neighbor will think of him or herself as part of your home team.

**Casey:** Can you talk about some interesting findings from the What Moms Want survey?

**Evans:** Well, first of all, they want to be really great moms, and we see that all the time in everything we do. They want to be great moms and great employees. One of the findings that really surprised and thrilled me was the level of ambition among working mothers. Sixty two percent of the respondents said that they felt “very ambitious” about their careers. We had five hundred respondents, so that's a big group of women, and that's a strong number for any generalized group. Seventy five percent of them said their bosses were supportive of their family needs. That was not the number I would have guessed from just talking with people; I thought it would be lower. There's been a lot of talk lately in the popular press about the “bad boss.” People complain about their bosses a lot, but when we asked a straightforward question about supportiveness, seventy five percent answered positively. Another thrilling piece of information is that mothers are very happy with their child care—nearly 81 percent, to be exact. Forty-five percent use a child care center, 17 percent have a family member doing the caretaking, and 12 percent use a baby-sitter or nanny. Relatives are playing a big role on the home team; for the mothers who rely on family members for child care, 44 percent were using a family member who was not the father.

**Casey:** Could you talk about the concept of fusion—blending one's home and work lives together at certain points. How does this help mothers and their organizations?

**Evans:** Fusion is the idea that at the end of the day you shouldn't have to go into a phone booth and turn into a different person. Over the years, many people have felt as if they needed to do this. My recommendation to achieve fusion is a specific one: go home at the end of the day and talk about work in a positive manner in front of your children and then go to the office and speak with your boss and your co-workers in a positive way about your home life. This way, each side gradually gets to know the other—your co-workers know your family, your family knows about your job. In your own mind, you're blending the two together in a way that's much

more realistic—there's no separation between the two worlds, it's all in there together. Then, say your daughter has a three week long illness and you need to take care of her. Because you've been talking about her positively with your co-workers, they've built up a positive feeling about her. At home, if you start to have some pressure at work, your family understands what's going on; it's not out of context. Fusion allows for a better balance all around; you're not lurching, you're smoothly flowing from one to the other. This benefits both the mother and the workplace because work is a holistic part of her life. One can then translate this concept to companies and how they think about their employees. Companies are moving towards a more holistic perspective about their employees. Fusion prevents companies from becoming the adversary; it makes them part of the whole.

**Casey:** Do you think mothers are open to this concept of fusion?

**Evans:** Yes. I think moms are starting to be receptive to this because we have had several generations of working mothers. Today's younger working mothers have moms who worked, so fusion doesn't seem weird to them. I think this is the wave of the future; it's a very Gen X concept. If companies could see that Gen X-ers support fusion, it would help them to understand the thinking of this generation. They don't want to separate their lives out so much; fusion comes very naturally to them.

**Casey:** We continue to have research that documents the business benefits of flexible work arrangements and other benefits that make it easier to balance work and family. Why do you think there is still resistance and barriers that interfere with employees utilizing policies and organizations adopting them? Why don't people get it?

**Evans:** The basic answer is that companies are under enormous pressure to deliver growth and profit. Being a corporate entity is not easy; companies get dependent on overworking their employees. As the pressure mounts, the temptation to overwork employees is very high at a corporate and entrepreneurial level. There has always been a mentality of hard work in this country; it's what we were built on, and it's hard to shift our thinking and realize that hard work and work-life balance can go together. They are the opposite sides of a very thin coin—when they are working together, companies benefit. This is a very difficult concept for people to understand. However, many companies do know this—they see the research and see how it translates to their organizations. They know employees who have some work-life balance as their guiding principle are more productive.

**Casey:** You certainly see that with your Best 100 Companies!

**Evans:** Yes, not only do the Best 100 companies see it, but they advocate for it as well. They have made their corporate culture into a culture of balance—they don't fight this, they lead it. However, there are millions of companies in this country who are not operating from this mindset. We have a few leaders that have incorporated this thinking into their culture, and we have many more companies that are just now trying to shift to or understand this, and some that are simply talking about the concept but not embracing it. They may pay lip service to being family-friendly as a retention and recruitment tool, but they aren't really buying it. Don't forget, every company is made up of human beings, and each human being needs to get their work done. If people don't believe that work-life culture helps to get the work done, it can fall apart at the management level.

**Casey:** Have you seen any particular strategy or intervention that is especially successful at getting people to make that leap from understanding to weaving it into corporate culture?

**Evans:** Yes, I think that management training and reward systems are the most effective. You need to train your managers on work-life balance issues very carefully and reward them for fostering work-life balance and promoting it within their team.

**Casey:** Any other suggestions for workplace practitioners who want to create more supportive work environments?

**Evans:** In the book, I tell working mothers that a great way to get the benefits they want is to use the yardstick method to compare their companies' benefits and policies to those of other companies. Practitioners should do this too, and this is one of the reasons for the Working Mother 100 Best. They should take the 100 Best Companies' data and examine it—we have a product in which anyone can compare their company's information privately up against the aggregate data of winners and see how they're doing. My suggestion is that every company should compare what they are doing for programs and usage, see where they're falling behind, pick a few areas that would be especially beneficial to their employees and build in those areas. They will be amazed at how quickly they can infuse their company with some really experiential learning about the benefits of work-life balance. When I talk about usage, I mean measuring how many employees use the

available programs. If you're not measuring this, you're not really on board with the work-life movement.

**Casey:** Yes, companies can have policies and programs, but that doesn't mean there's a culture in place in which people feel free to use them.

**Evans:** Exactly. Measuring your employees' usage is the quickest way to see whether you have marketed your programs properly and if you've gotten rid of the stigma of using such benefits. I find that companies with a small number of women have to fight harder to get rid of that stigma.

**Casey:** Do you think an approach that favors all employees—dads, moms, other caretakers—would move things along?

**Evans:** Yes, and we find the 100 Best Companies are doing just that. They're making big strides in benefits that are gender-blind—offering maternity AND paternity leave, for instance. Elder care is another issue that affects everyone. The most common users of these programs are working mothers, but they're by no means the only ones. At my company, we've even had people take time off to care for ailing pets. This is a serious issue to them; it's important to grant respect to those whom workers consider to be their family members.

**Casey:** Could you identify any gaps in the research that would benefit working mothers?

**Evans:** Academics should examine part-time professional work, as opposed to just flexible hours. So many women would like to work professionally on a three or four day schedule. If someone could study the possibility of working a three day work week as a manager or executive, that would be really welcome. More research is also needed on flexible career tracks, in which employees can say, for example, "Don't promote me for two years, but then I'll be ready to move forward." Can businesses accommodate this effectively? Finally, I'd like to see a study on the work-life needs of highly ambitious mothers and how they are different from other working mothers.

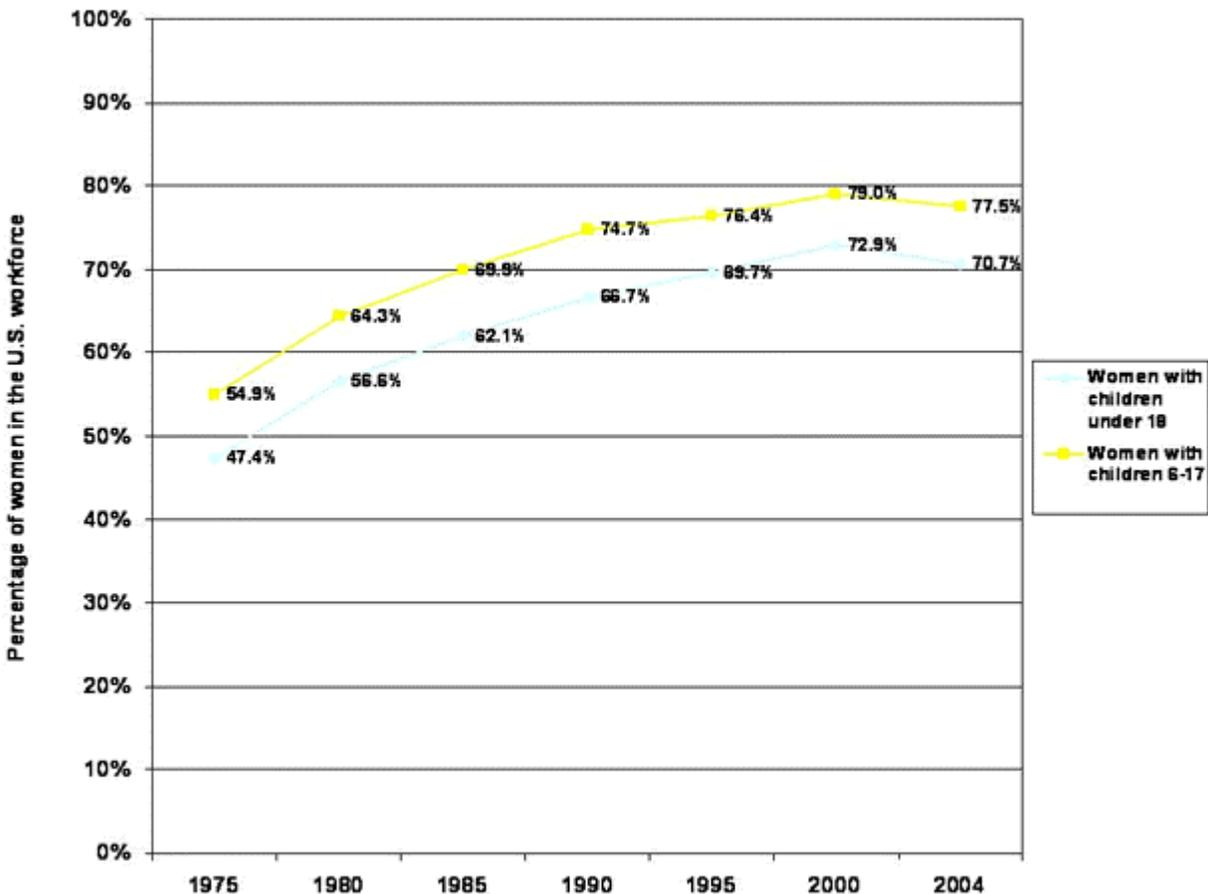
**Casey:** What's the takeaway for public policy makers?

**Evans:** I hope no one bows to the pressure that some companies are giving to get rid of the FMLA. I know it's messy and complicated, but the FMLA is the bare minimum of what should be available! Intermittent leave is so important for people who have sick children or ill parents or are sick themselves.

**Casey:** Anything else you'd like to add?

**Evans:** I think the community of work-life professionals is the backbone of this movement. Professionals who understand the issues as well as corporate needs are so necessary and are the magical group that are moving the country forward by making it realistic for mothers to work. Working mothers make the difference between our country being a truly strong entity and falling behind in the competitive race with other countries. I applaud the work-life community for making this work!

### Employment Status of Women by Presence and Age of Youngest Child, 1975-2004



**Source:** U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2005). *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. Retrieved October 20, 2006 from the BLS web site: <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2005.htm>.

#### Additional Resources Related to Working Mothers

**Blue Suit Mom:** "BlueSuitMom.com is the premier resource of work and family balance information for executive working mothers and their employers. You'll find advice on parenting, career advancement, the balancing act, meal planning and family health and fitness, delivered in a format that nurtures respect for professional mothers."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.bluesuitmom.com/>.

 **Global Perspectives – Mother@Work:** This British webzine, founded by Denise Tyler, a news reporter/mother, offers articles on work-life balance, child care, business and education. They also offer an Employers of Choice page that lists family-friendly companies in the U.K.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.motheratwork.co.uk/default.asp>.

**Mothers Movement Online:** "The Mothers Movement Online was founded in April 2003 as an open source for information about social, cultural, economic and political issues that affect the wellbeing of mothers. Our purpose is to serve as a clearinghouse for reporting and resources that support social change. Our intention is to promote economic and social justice for mothers and others who do the caring work of our society."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.mothersmovement.org>.

**Women Employed:** "Women Employed is a leading national advocate for women's economic advancement. We analyze workplace issues, educate policy makers, and build support to improve opportunities and incomes."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.womenemployed.org>.

***Working Mother: 100 Best Companies, 2006:*** For 21 years, *Working Mother* magazine has compiled a list of the 100 family-friendliest companies in the United States. "In selecting this year's winners, we gave special weight to leave policies, because it's critical for a mother to be able to stay home as long as possible with her newborn without suffering professionally."

- To access the website, click here: <http://vebranch.rgisolutions.com/web?service=vpage/77>.

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