

is bigger better?

most home-based workers don't think so, sacrificing financial gain for personal values
by betsy brill

that bigger is better has been for the most part an unchallenged bromide in this century — particularly when it comes to building businesses and bank accounts. But there are signs that more and more people are swimming against that tide if not reversing it.

A 1995 survey sponsored by the Merck Family Fund, showed that 28 percent of the respondents had voluntarily changed their lives in a way that meant less income. Most said they were seeking more balanced lives or more time with their children. Since 1992, nearly 600,000 copies of Vicki Robin's and Joe Dominquez's book, *Your Money or Your Life*, have been sold. Around the country, courses are being taught based on the book's premise: We are trading moments of our lives for

best known for his book *Guerrilla Marketing*. When he arrived in San Francisco in 1971 to accept a position at a large advertising agency, he was struck by the area's physical beauty. He wanted to spend his time outside enjoying it, not inside an office.

From his sideline freelance work, he knew he could produce as much at home in a few days as he could all week in an office cluttered with committee meetings, memos and politics. He returned the agency's relocation money and negotiated to come into the office one day a week while delivering five days' worth of

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work. Though the agency is ancient history, Levinson from that day forward has maintained a three-day work week.

Of course, he says, there are temptations. "I could have twice as many clients, twice as much money, but I'd have to give up my four-day weekend." He's a man who's never lost sight of his priorities.

Yet the marketing consultant also is a globe-trotting public speaker and a prolific author. His most recent effort, *America at Work: Guerrilla Marketing with a Secret Weapon*, is posted chapter by chapter to Microsoft's Web site, <http://www.microsoft.com>. Levinson responds to visitors' queries on the Web and is incorporating that material into his book. A hard copy will eventually emerge, but the interactive book will continue to live and change on the Web. His next paper-bound project, appropriately enough, is *The Way of the Guerrilla: Achieving Balance as an Entrepreneur in the 21st Century*. It is due out this month.

mary Thorsby, who was 7 years old when Levinson arrived in the Bay Area, shares a common business philosophy with the advertising and marketing veteran. Home is where productivity is.

"There's no time spent in office

cash and material goods.

Many owners of home-based businesses already have learned that lesson, it turns out.

Take Jay Levinson, the marketing guru perhaps

meetings or worrying over office politics," says Thorsby. "With electronic mail, a fax machine, voice mail and a manageable list of clients and projects, nothing gets lost in the shuffle."

Thorsby, who just returned from five weeks in Europe (she left her Power-



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Book at home), has operated her own business for eight years. She was 24 when she started.

Thorsby writes for and manages several internal publications for major corporations in the Bay Area. Like Levinson, she is an efficiency machine. She manages by occasionally subcontracting, either sending outlined notes to be crafted into a draft by her writing partners or having the partners polish her drafts.

"I'm definitely in control of the amount of work I take on," she notes, "so if I'm not achieving a good professional/personal balance, then I can make the necessary adjustments to get back on track."

Cynthia Froggatt, a New York-based architectural services consultant specializing in work-at-home environments, realized two years ago that she wasn't walking her talk about lifestyle balance. She left her job with a large architecture firm with the aim to regroup — perhaps even join the Peace Corps.

She soon found herself consulting — operating a successful business from her home. Only taking on projects where "the fit is right," Froggatt says she now often trades money for time. She relishes working at her own pace, which includes bike rides at midday and frequent out-of-town pleasure trips. "I'd rather collaborate with other entrepreneurs," she says, instead of hiring a staff.

John Haskell, founder & sole proprietor of Dr. Revenue's Marketing and Sales Clinic, under stands. "I literally get physically sick in the stomach thinking about employees, even temps working in my space," he says. "I will not manage people on site, and I will not increase the overhead."

For Los Angeles-based Haskell, the issue is less one of free time than it is of control and flexibility in operating his business, a marketing consulting and advertising firm. By outsourcing everything and by innovative use of technology — including a World Wide Web site that provides a communications hub for himself, his subcontractors and his

clients — Haskell has time for his wife, good food, fine wine and mentoring other entrepreneurs.

"We can do anything that my 25-person agency could do in 1985," he says. That was the year he closed the doors on that business, which had been billing \$15 million annually, and moved home. (In the midst of a staff expansion, 70 percent of his business had plummeted when another company attempted a hostile takeover of his major client.)

Haskell says he faces plenty of temptations to take on work that would result in more money but that would require a staff and an edifice. "I overcome them by 'talking to myself...in words out loud...and more often in memos written to myself regarding business planning and policies of the firm.'"

david Garfinkel is owner of Overnight Marketing in San Francisco and co-author with Levinson of Guerrilla Direct-Mail Marketing, due out in 1998. He has been approached by four companies in the past year about becoming a "virtual department" in their businesses.

"In each case," he says, "the challenges were exciting and the financial potential was great. I turned down all four because I realized that the hectic nature...and lack of focus on their part would have undone a lot of the work I have done to make my working environment enjoyable and my work meaningful.

"For me," Garfinkel says, "this has not only been an aesthetic or lifestyle choice but also a practical

business decision. What I have learned in having a home business for 11 years is that my effectiveness greatly diminishes when I dive head-first into a project or do work with an organization that is 'out of sync' with the rhythm at which I work best.

"Companies that operate in a 'crisis of the day' mode and do not have a vision or a long-term plan always seem to cause distress when I work for them or collaborate with them."

It is this kind of self-knowledge, this self-talk, that keeps home-based business owners successful in their businesses and in their personal lives, says Azriela Jaffe, whose book, *Honey, I Want to Start My Own Business*, is a guide to balancing family with self-employment. She encourages people to ask themselves the tough questions up front, and to clarify their commitments and expectations of each other.

Jaffe faced her own hard choices when, after the birth of her second daughter last year, her publisher set up a demanding promotional tour. "How could I refuse?" she recalls. "Every author hopes, prays, even begs for a book tour. Few are given the privilege because of the monumental expense."

Jaffe just said no. "What kind of credibility would I have as an author," the Pennsylvania-based writer and consultant told the publisher, "if I was willing to leave my newborn and infant daughters at home for two weeks while I peddled my books around the country?"

david Rigg turned down a \$400,000-a-year contract earlier this year. He and his partner vacationed in France this summer, though. Todd Clary doesn't take business calls before 1 p.m. because he's caring for his infant son. Wendy McClelland's pre-teens took precedence over an opportunity to syndicate her radio program, and Jay Levinson hasn't worked more than three days a week since 1971.

When I stood my ground, my publisher... developed a new marketing campaign that required only local travel to New York and Washington.

"I have never looked back, wondering if I made the right decision...if I would have sold more books," Jaffe says. "It was simply not an option to leave my babies for two weeks. Maybe they would have been OK, but I wouldn't have been."

Wendy McClelland, a single mother of three, is on a belated fast track, with her fast-growing business achieving national attention since July. But her children come first, she says.

McClelland was a stay-at-home mom in a small town near Vancouver, B.C., when her husband of 12 years announced he was in love with someone else. "I knew how to do two things," she says, "talk and type, so... 18 months ago, I began a journey."

She started Wee Three Publishing (named for her children), a desk-top publishing business that blossomed into a thriving consulting business. Last July, she launched her own web site, Biz Resource Site, <http://www.bizresource.com/>, which already has won five awards for content and inclusion on The New York Times best business web sites list. She proposed and now hosts a local radio program called "Family Business." Recently, she says, she was invited to syndicate her radio program but chose not to.

"My business has grown so fast," she says, "that I really wanted to maintain some kind of control over it — and balance in my life. Being a single parent...and raising three pre-teens demands a great deal of my time and energy. My children must be the priority. "It's difficult to say 'no' to opportunities," she admits, "but I have realized that, truly, when one door shuts another opens."

graphic artist Todd Clary and his wife made a similar tough decision when, as he says, "we became pregnant." Rather than handing their child over to paid caretakers, the two each work half-time — she as a scientist, he as a home-based graphic artist and cartoonist. At \$125 an hour and with a client that would like to keep him busy more than

eight hours a day, Clary says the money is a temptation, but the reward of being with his child is far greater. But, he emphasizes, the decision was one the couple had mapped out well in advance of temptation.

teresita Dabrieo learned about boundaries the hard way. It was a divorce in the midst of 10-12-hour days running a business that sent Dabrieo from the big-time, big-city rat race to a quiet sabbatical, and then on to a small town in Iowa and a considerably trimmed down approach to running a new business and a new life. She now helps high-tech entrepreneurs grow their businesses (sharing a few of her own hard-earned lessons), and has since remarried. "My husband and I already know our magic numbers — at which we'll happily plateau while traveling with our hopefully-soon-to-be-adopted children. The thought fills me with peace and joy."

and then there is David Rigg, the fine-art photographer who with his partner turned down a \$400,000 a year contract this year. "Did we need the cash?" he says. "Does the Pope wear a big hat? We struggled (somewhat passionately) with the issue for several days and finally decided accepting the contract would violate the very core of what we intended our business to be — low volume, high quality." (They would have been doing year-book pictures for a large high school.)


"It was the hardest phone call I ever made in my life," he recalls. "I was literally shaking as I dialed the telephone. All said and done, we don't regret the decision one bit. We still managed to vacation in the south of France this summer and don't feel like we sold out."

But, he says, "if we had not had a rock solid plan as the basis for our decision-making process, we surely would have been sucked in by the temptation of the 'big bucks.'"

bill Coomer, a professional magician, has a few final words for other entrepreneurs who are making money-versus-lifestyle decisions.

"I have often passed up opportunities to make money because the cost was too high," he says. "The most important question in the world is: If what you are doing will

not get you what you want, why are you doing it?"

Well, maybe the most important — and toughest — question in the world is this: What, exactly, do you want? 

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RESOURCES

Here is a list of resources to help you decide how large to grow your company:

books

The Way of The Guerrilla: Achieving Success and Balance as an Entrepreneur in the 21st Century. by Jay Levinson. Houghton Mifflin. Real-life stories about people who are doing it now.

WHEN IS ENOUGH ENOUGH? What You Can Do If You Never Feel Satisfied. by Laurie Ashner and Mitch Meyerson. Hazelden. For people who have trouble knowing.

Moving to a Small Town: A Guidebook for Moving from Urban to Rural America. by Wanda Urbanska and Frank Levering. Fireside Books/Simon & Schuster. For when achieving balance means a physical move as well as a mental shift.

Simple Living: One Couple's Guide to a Better Life. by Wanda Urbanska and Frank Levering. Penguin Books. How one couple simplified their lives.

Your Money or Your Life. by Joe Domingues and Vicki Robin. Penguin Books. A practical guidebook for reshaping attitudes toward money, and a step-by-step approach to achieving financial independence through simplicity and saving.

organizations

The Northwest Earth Institute, founded by Dick and Jeanne Roy, conducts workshops on simple living for individuals and for groups. 921 SW Morrison, Ste. 532, Portland, OR 97205; 503-227-2807.

HBWM - Home-Based Working Moms (formerly WAHM - Work At Home Moms) is a national organization for mothers (and fathers) who work at home or would like to. One-year membership and subscription to the monthly newsletter (10x/year) are \$34. P.O. Box 500164, Austin, TX 78750. The organization's web site is at <http://www.hbwm.com>.

Redefining Progress is a public policy think tank that questions our current definitions of economic growth, advocates new accounting systems that measure the true costs of today's "growth," and proposes a new tax system that taxes pollution and consumption of finite resources rather than work and enterprise. One Kearny St., San Francisco, CA 94108. 415-781-1198