

JOB MATTERS

So you're the office problem solver, tea-maker and biscuit buyer?
Well it could be killing your career says Rosjke Hasseldine

Mum's the word



Thirty years ago women hoped that the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts would give them equal rights, pay and treatment. But as too many PAs know they didn't deliver the changes they promised. This is particularly true when you are seen by your colleagues as the 'mum' of the office. Not only does it affect how your colleagues and boss perceive you but it may reduce your equality and rights.

Playing the 'mum' role needs to carry a health warning. Many 'office mums' talk of increased stress, low self-esteem, reduced career progression and general invisibility when they nurture their colleagues beyond that of their actual job. Everyone knows who is regarded as the 'mum' at work. Could that person be you? If you perform the unseen thankless tasks that make everyone's life easier and are the one colleagues go to for support, while buying the birthday cards and rarely saying no to requests then the answer could be yes.

Get what you want

So how does all this listening, noticing and nurturing affect you, the 'office mum'?

There are plenty of PAs who buy into being everyone's nurturer, not surprising when women are taught to believe that being nice will get them noticed and rewarded. But the truth is that being nice doesn't get you what you want. It only gets others what they want. Nor does it help you get promoted. This is because while you are focusing on other people's needs your own needs and skills are forgotten and ignored.

The problem is that this not only causes burnout, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem but it makes it harder for you to speak up for what you want. That's why you need to adopt a new normal that makes self-care and self-promotion a normal part of your behaviour at work.

When no means no

The first step in not being the 'office mum' is to stop saying yes every time someone needs your help. Instead buy yourself time and say, "I have to think about that. I'll get back to you in 24 hours." Ask yourself if you have the time to spare and if it fits your goals and needs. And if you still have the urge to say yes, ask yourself why. Do you have the disease to please?

It's also important to start each day with a list of things that you need to do for yourself. Give yourself the time you need to complete those tasks before agreeing to help anyone else. Also start each day with a list of things that you need to do to feel taken care of.

Then remember to focus each day on making

who gets angry or when you say no to their requests. Throw away the concept of selfish. It's an over-used word to make you focus on others rather than yourself.

Finally stop seeing yourself as the 'office mum'. Instead start seeing yourself as an equal colleague with needs of your own. Build a supportive network of colleagues, focus on your goals, stay in control of your own life and learn more about what you want from your career. Just think. If you start treating yourself as well as you've treated your colleagues this could be the moment when your career really takes off.

Jackie's story

Jackie was exhausted, burnt-out and resentful of her colleagues. She had been unsuccessful at gaining a promotion when other less capable colleagues received theirs. This left her feeling slighted and invisible and she had become unhappy with her job and herself. Not getting the promotion was the final straw.

It became clear that Jackie was the 'office mum'. She described how she made herself available to help colleagues. She bought the birthday cards and at Christmas gave everyone a present. She thought that this would help her get ahead and that being available was how she would get noticed.

Though Jackie had self-selected herself as 'office mum' her colleagues had put pressure on her to be the all-available one of the office. Colleagues told her that the office didn't feel the same when she wasn't there. Also, when she did ask people to wait for her to finish her work many would go off in a huff.

Jackie had no defences against the expectations from her colleagues. She thought that her worth was reflected in how much she was needed. She had also lost her focus on her own needs and had allowed herself to be placed on less important projects. But it had never occurred to Jackie that she could say no or take control of what was happening to her.

So Jackie examined how her thinking affected her behaviour and feelings and how the roles she played aided or hindered her. Her depression lifted, her self-worth improved and successfully applied for a job in another company. The job was at the level of the promotion she'd previously missed.

(Jackie's name has been changed to protect her identity)

Rosjke Hasseldine facilitates women's groups to help women regain their voices. To joining a group or facilitate a group at your work place telephone 0115 9814535, email

So have you become the office mum? Take our test and find out

1 The company's accountant asked you to pick up their lunch but you don't have the time. Do you:

- a. Forget about it. If he's that hungry he'll get his own lunch
- b. Spend the day feeling guilty and making him consolation coffee
- c. Not worry but make a mental note to do it next time he asks

2 It's Sunday night and your thoughts turn towards the week ahead. Are you:

- a. Excited. You can't wait to get stuck into your latest project
- b. Dreading it. You're still catching up after doing the PR girl's photocopying
- c. Bored. You could do the job blindfolded but can't seem to get promotion

3 It's time for your much needed summer holiday. So the day before you leave:

- a. You sneak off work early to top up your pre-holiday tan
- b. You work until 8pm, arranging the tea-making rota to cover your absence
- c. You leave on time but wonder whether your assistant will buy that birthday card

4 You have a husband, two kids, a dog and an elderly neighbour. You are run off your feet. Do you:

- a. Make it clear that Saturday is all yours and can only be interrupted in dire emergencies
- b. Wonder when you'll next be able to sit in the bath for ten minutes
- c. Grab an hour alone but know you'll make up for it later

5 It's appraisal time and your boss asks you to review your year. Do you:

- a. Tell him that you love the challenges he's throwing at you
- b. Struggle to remember it but discuss the biscuit budget while you're there
- c. Explain that it's fine but ask why the projects have tapered off

6 Your friends start a heated debate about 'a woman's place'. Do you:

- a. Laugh loudly before proclaiming women the rulers of the world
- b. Explain that it's natural for women to look after the kids and the home
- c. Sit on the fence because you can't decide. Can't women do both?

7 You ask your boss for the pay rise that would solve your financial worries. Do you:

- a. Research pay scales, confidently state your case and walk out with a hefty increase
- b. Convince yourself that he'll say no before he asks you to come back in six months
- c. Nervously explain your request and get a small increase on your earnings

8 You are asked questions about your career goals for a survey. Do you:

- a. Rattle off the ambitious plan that you've stuck to the cover of your desk diary
- b. Hesitate for a moment. You can't remember what your goals are
- c. Explain where you'd like to be, if only you can persuade the boss to train you



HOW DID YOU DO?

If you are mostly As

You are the least likely PA to become an office mum. In fact you are the sort of go-getter who can achieve any career dream. You know what you want, how to get it and are not scared of speaking your mind. But beware! Don't develop tunnel vision when it comes to your career. Keep an open mind about all the opportunities that come your way.

If you are mostly Bs

Yes, you are the office mum. The problem is that you don't enjoy it. The chances are that you are exhausted, stressed and neglected too. Ask yourself if this is what you really want. If not learn to use the word no. Create me-time and block out negative opinions about why you are doing it. This will give you the space for what you really want.

If you are mostly Cs

'Office mum' isn't on your CV but carry on like this and it will be. Your interest in your career is sliding, work offers few challenges and that rut is getting deeper. Speak to your boss about your workload and suggest ways to improve it. Ask yourself what you want and how you can achieve it, securing the training and support that you need.