Talk about time management. Journalist Laura Vanderkam found a way to write five books in five years while raising four kids under the age of eight. Yet the soft-spoken author of 2012’s *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast* says she’s not one of those über-organized, color-coding perfectionists. “I’m organized, but I’m not organized,” says the 36-year-old Princeton grad. “My office is a wreck. I keep a paper calendar.” So what’s the secret to her success? “I find the key to making myself happy is not to be a perfectionist,” she says. That and maximizing her time, as she did when she delivered her newborn son in just 19 minutes. “My friends joked that I was even efficient at childbirth,” she says. Vanderkam researched her latest book, *I Know How She Does It*, by studying time logs that detailed in 15-to-30-minute increments how 133 working moms who earn six figures spend their days. These women work an average of 44 hours a week (with a range of 25 to 69 hours a week), not including lunch breaks or commuting time. Conversely, moms who work an average of 35 hours a week earn considerably less, about $37,000 a year. All of which suggested to Vanderkam that you can make big bucks without sacrificing that much family
“The women in my study worked more than the average working mom, about nine hours more per week,” she says. “On the other hand, they earned three times as much. Nine hours isn’t nothing, but these results show you don’t have to work until 8 pm every night. Almost half these women worked at night at home after the kids went to bed—but not every night. Or they did some work on the weekends. They managed to keep their work hours at a point where they were eligible for promotions and raises, and they still got to spend time with their kids.”

We talked to Vanderkam about women’s key strategies for a balanced life.

**In your book, you say women “massively limit” their earning potential by not going for “big jobs.” What’s stopping them?**

We assume that top jobs require 80 or 90 hours more per week,” she says. “On the other hand, they earned three times as much.

**How can can we be more mindful of time spent away from the office?**

Women said they are often too tired to plan fun things once they get to their weekends. I suggested to one woman that she start planning her weekends on Wednesday nights. She would take five minutes to book a restaurant or see what exhibit was at her local museum. She started having better weekends.

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**My office is a wreck. I have 50,000 emails in my inbox. I keep a paper calendar. The key to making myself happy is not to be a perfectionist.”**

In a big chunk of time during the first half of her week, she was able to carve out more family time in the second half: She’d do the school drop-off with her kids, she’d talk with the teachers. I’m not saying long hours don’t happen. Sixty hours is a long workweek if you’re actually focusing those 60 hours on work. But it’s not 90 hours. It’s not 100 hours.

**What habits do successful women have that positively affect their week?**

Ninety percent of them made time for regular exercise. Exercise gives you more energy, and that’s key if you want to have a full life. They didn’t watch nearly as much TV: 4.4 hours a week on average, compared with the national average of 34 hours. They also weren’t skimping on sleep. They got about 54 hours a week, which is eight hours five days a week, seven hours two days a week.

**What other steps can women take to maximize their time?**

Keep a time log for one week. If you want to spend your time more effectively, you have to know how you’re spending it. One thing many working moms discover when they keep a time log is that they’re spending a lot of time with their kids. That gives them permission to take more time for themselves or to work a few more focused hours.

**Is it worthwhile for women to spend their time mentoring younger coworkers?**

Mentoring isn’t a charitable act; it’s a two-way street. None of us are so successful that we can’t be helped by other people. And mentoring can be done efficiently by inviting someone to participate in something you’re already doing. If you’re a runner, invite that person to go running with you so that the time with that person fits into your schedule.

**How can women avoid experiencing burnout in their careers?**

Do real work first. We have this tendency to consign the work we want to do, to scraps of time left at the end of the day. Instead, look at your calendar for the coming week and say, Where can I carve out time to focus on a project I’m excited about? Most people come in at 9. Try coming in at 8 two mornings a week; hopefully, you can get to 10 before anyone knocks on your door. That’s four hours that you’ve focused on work that drew you to your job.

**What’s the best advice you’ve gotten?**

Rather than say, “I don’t have time,” say, “This isn’t a priority” instead. That language is more accurate. I have time to train for a marathon. I just don’t want to. Acknowledging that reminds me that time is a choice. If I don’t like the way I’m spending it, I need to figure out a way to change that.

SHARON COTLIAR interviewed Lara Setrakian for the May issue of More. @SharonCotliar