

Balancing act

Forward-thinking firms are making it easier to juggle work and family successfully.

With the economy on the mend and unemployment figures dropping, American companies are becoming increasingly accommodating parents to who request unorthodox working arrangements. Everything from lactation rooms and corporate daycare to flex-time, on-site sleeping quarters and using pre-tax dollars to pay for childcare is becoming the norm.

A possible labor shortage by 2010, the fact that most American children have two working parents, and the unwillingness of Gen X and Gen Y fathers to routinely miss their children's soccer games and bath times have turned benefits once deemed generosity into necessities. It's not only good press, it's smart business. Executives realize that if they ignore the situation, competitors will poach their talent and offer the perks themselves. The fundamental change has young moms and dads putting family first... or at least in a dead heat with their careers.

"We are moving back into an era where companies are putting employee retention at the top of their agenda," says John Challenger, CEO of Chicago-based outplacement firm, Challenger, Gray and Christmas. "They are listening more and trying to become more responsive."

Arrangements include telecommuting, flex-time and a compressed work week, during which employees work their

specified hours, but over fewer days. Other options include part-time work, job sharing and phased returns from leaves such as childbirth. Challenger says many companies even provide some sort of sleeping quarters, whether it is just a cot for a few winks or residential housing nearby. According to Kathie Lingle, director of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress, work-life programs account for 2% to 5% of a human resources budget, and while most improvements seem aimed at white-collar parents, some benefits are being extended to the rank and file.

Carol Evans, CEO of Working Mother Media, which owns *Working Mother* magazine, says the work-life conversation began 20 years ago but has come to the forefront because jobs today consume so much more time than in the past. A Department of Labor report found that, from 1989 through 1999, families experienced a 14% decrease in time spent with their children—that's 22 hours per week. Companies realize that "give" on their part allows employees to handle things at home and still focus totally on work. While acceptance is not universal, many managers don't begrudge the 9-5 flexibility, because employees work while commuting and long after their spouses and children have gone to sleep.

"They are becoming a lot more realistic in terms of what is possible for a working family," explains Donna Klein, the





The employment situation for workers could improve by the end of the decade. At that time, the projected number of jobs will increase just as baby boomers start to retire and the population begins to slow, according to figures from the Department of Labor. The situation, however, does not factor in the impact of foreign outsourcing or technological innovations.

Formerly bastions of commando-like work hours, law firms have begun to offer adoption leave and paternity leave, says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, a networking, consulting and support group dedicated to work-life balance. She says policies that had existed on an ad hoc basis started being formalized around 2000 because firms realized they were necessary to attract and retain talent.

"Men are struggling more than ever," she explains. "Women still face work-life balance issues more than men, but technology has made it much more challenging for men than ever before. As a result, they are paying more attention to work-life balance because it is not specific to women with young children."

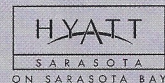
In this technological, knowledge-driven 24/7 economy, employers realize many jobs can be done anywhere and at any time.

"Still, a lot of companies don't get it and don't understand what the return on investment is. It leads to an engaged and productive employee, and what more could any company ask for?" Evans says. "No one does it for humanitarian reasons. They do it to make their workforce stronger and better." ✈



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