

FLEX APPEAL

TIRED OF SEEING OVERBURDENED MOMS HEAD FOR THE EXIT, COMPANIES ARE FINDING NEW WAYS TO BE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS



November 12, 2007-- WHEN she was a junior professor of economics at Barnard College, Sylvia Ann Hewlett found herself

in a problematic pregnancy just as her tenure review was about to begin, so she went to her dean for counsel. With no maternity leave policy in place, he told her she wasn't entitled to a leave of absence, and that taking

time off "would have dire consequences." Hewlett still remembers his words.

That was 1979. The Equal Rights Amendment was all the rage. That generation had come of age listening to Helen Reddy sing "I am woman, hear me roar" and watching women's libbers burn their bras on television. What was Hewlett supposed to do, give up 10 years of what she calls "hard, grinding work" just 18 months shy of possible tenure and lifelong job security?

Flash-forward to the present, and consider the case of Nausheena Rahim. A senior associate at the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, Rahim was "gung-ho" and on a career fast-track until her daughter, Imaan, was born. Rahim had intended to take a six-month maternity leave (including nine weeks at full salary), but when the time came to return to work, she realized she didn't want to spend 40 hours a week away from her daughter. So, like Hewlett, she went to her boss.

Instead of a warning, she came back with a plan - a reduced schedule that had her working on smaller assignments, for smaller clients, for 15 hours a week, many of which could be spent at home.

At first Rahim was happy with the arrangement, but as time passed she realized that even that schedule put her at risk of missing her daughter's milestones. First steps, first words - Rahim didn't want to miss any of it. So she returned both to her PwC mentor and to her "connectivity partner" to discuss whether she should stick with the job or leave.

Before she made a choice, PwC made her an offer: She could enroll in its new Full Circle Program, which allows participants to take a leave of up to five years while remaining connected with colleagues and keeping their credentials up to date. With benefits that include training, reimbursement for licensing and credentialing, invitations to firm functions, access to work/life benefits and so on, it made stepping back much easier.

"I'll stay connected, so when I'm ready to start back, I'll be able hit the ground running," Rahim says.

Just as the brick wall Hewlett hit was a sign of the times, so is Rahim's tale. With 76 million baby-boomers retiring and an increasingly female workforce, employers are trying to make themselves more attractive to women. And that means a host of options for working moms that Hewlett's generation never dreamed of, including everything from leave programs and part-time schedules to on-site child-care and parent mentoring groups.

"We want to make it extremely clear to women that we want you here and that we will work with you to meet your needs," says Billie Williamson, Ernst & Young's U.S. director of flexible and gender equity strategy.

According to data compiled by Working Mother Media, full-paid maternity leaves are on the rise (from 3 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2006), telecommuting is more common (it's grown fifteenfold in the past 10 years), motherhood is keeping fewer women from advancing (more than 50 percent of senior executive women are mothers), and lactation is a hot workplace topic.

"Familial commitments no longer need to be hidden," says Carol Evans, CEO of the group, which compiles the annual list of 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers. "In fact, the best companies are eager to talk about what they're doing to help their employees meet them."

That includes not only big-picture programs, but also assistance with things like breast-feeding. Just ask Rebecca Carey, a senior manager in Ernst & Young's international tax practice, who wanted to go to a 12-day training program far from home but was concerned about getting breast milk to her baby.

Not a problem, said E&Y's lactation consultant. Carey was handed a kit that included bottles, icepacks, mini coolers and boxes.

"All I had to do was get the shipping labels addressed to my home," she says.

E&Y not only offers consultations; it also provides free hospital-grade breast pumps. Last year, 600 employees picked them up. Morgan Stanley offers in-house Lamaze classes and parenting kits; last year, it gave away 700. And many firms now offer backup child care in case schools are closed or the regular child-care setup falls through.

And support doesn't end when the baby becomes a teen. Lauren States, a vice president at IBM, is taking advantage of her firm's "Beating the Admissions Game" seminars to help her daughter get through the college admissions process. Novartis Pharmaceuticals hosts a summer camp fair and seminars such as "To Help or Not to Help: Being a Tutor for Your Student."

Retaining walls

Why all this generosity? It springs from growing concern about the number of young mothers who've been leaving the workforce in recent years, daunted by the difficulties of "having it all."

Corporations are beginning to recognize that when a talented woman leaves, they lose not only a body and a brain but also a wealth of accumulated knowledge. It costs \$80,000 to recruit and train a replacement when an executive leaves, estimates Jennifer Allyn, PwC's director of gender retention and advancement. Finding ways to accommodate women who might otherwise leave "inspires loyalty and makes tremendous economic sense," she says.

"We used to think that to be fair, you had to treat everyone the same, but then we realized that to retain people, we had to treat different people differently."

That's made flexing a hot topic, and it has nothing to do with a barbell. Instead, it gives employees an ability to choose when, where and how they work.

While working 8-to-4 instead of 9-to-5 is nothing new, compressed schedules (working three or four days per week), seasonal schedules (imagine having summers off) and sabbaticals are. So are schedules that line up with school hours, staggered schedules, and voluntary downshifts that involve saying to your boss, "I'm ambitious about my career, just not at the moment, so can I be assigned a less demanding project?"

While in the past those who flexed were often viewed as spoiled or suspect, the rules have now changed, says Hewlett - who was eventually turned down for tenure, but is now a Columbia professor and the author of "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," a recent book examining the reasons successful women leave the workforce to raise families.

"Up until recently, employers looked at hard-working, ambitious women who wanted to take a time out for mothering as if they'd lost their marbles, or at very least their edge," she says. "But the mentality is changing. A woman does not become stale or de-skilled if she takes a break for two or three years."

At Ernst & Young, all these accommodations have paid off where retention is concerned. Five years ago, women were quitting even before they got married or pregnant, says Williamson. Today, the firm retains more women than men.

That doesn't mean concerns of being "mommy-tracked" have gone away. When Marilyn Booker, a managing director at Morgan Stanley, got pregnant with her second child just three months after having her first, she was anxious about broaching the topic. Despite a supportive boss, she waited six months before breaking the news.

"I just didn't want to take the chance that people would think I wasn't serious about my career," she says.

But there's plenty of evidence that companies mean it when they say that downshifting doesn't mean giving up your chances of moving up.

Carrie Quinn, who was a senior manager at PwC when she got pregnant, proposed a reduced schedule working from client sites three days a week and two half-days from home. Not only was her proposal accepted, but she was later promoted to partner. Similarly, 10 of the new partners at E&Y this year are flextime workers.

Opting in

Of course, not everyone works for employers with family-friendly programs in place. So to help professional women find them, a whole host of staffing companies has emerged.

They include MomCorps, which finds high-level contract and part-time work for CPAs and attorneys; On-Ramps, which offers flexible work options to a variety of highly skilled workers; and YourOnRamp.com, which not only offers placement, but also hosts an online community for women who are on-ramping, off-ramping or just balancing work and life.

When Donna Starzecki, an HR executive and single parent of two teenagers, decided she needed to get an MBA to stay competitive, and couldn't get a sabbatical from her company, she turned to HROptIn, a

company that pairs freelance HR professionals with assignments that allow uncommon flexibility. She now goes to school full-time and works for General Electric on a project basis - and says the quality of her projects hasn't suffered.

That's what it's all about, says Monique Dearth, president of HROptIn. "Taking a temporary off-ramp from a senior-level position doesn't mean you have to lose traction or be relegated to a back room."

If you've been away from the workplace for three years or more and feel like you need to update your skills and get up to speed on how the workplace has changed, colleges are introducing programs designed to prepare you. Locally, in January Baruch will begin offering "Opting Back In: A Program for Professionals Re-Entering the Workforce," which will cover topics such as improving career focus, setting goals and updating job-search skills.

Finally, a word of caution: Much of what has been mentioned here is new and not yet perfectly practiced in even the most progressive of companies.

"If my company is one of those 'best companies for women,'" a Manhattan executive named Jen complains, "then why am I chained to my desk nine hours a day? Why am I on call on weekends? And why do my kids have to take cabs to soccer practice because I can't get home to take them myself?"

The times, they are a-changin' - just not at the same speed for everyone.

Return Policies

Left the workforce and ready to return? For moms relaunching their careers, confidence is often a bigger issue than competence. Here's how to flip the switch of perception:

* Don't be cowed by the gap in your resume. "You haven't taken dropped out of the workforce, you've taken a leave," says Carol Evans of Working Mother Media.

* Burping and diapering aren't big resume skills, but you may well have done other things worth mentioning. "Today's women are amazingly civic-minded," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett. If you've volunteered at churches, schools or even the gardening club, find a way to package that experience for your CV.

* Come to interviews ready to address a big concern of employers: Are you truly ready to return to the world of work? "A simple yes isn't a sufficient answer," says Harry Weiner of

OnRamps.com. You want to show you've thought through issues like child care and discussed the matter with your family.

"This shows a thoughtful, analytical commitment to the decision of returning to work," he says.