

Back To Work Moms Re-entering the Work Force

By Stephanie Armour

Savvy employers now realize that one step towards addressing today's labor shortages is to reach out to the largely untapped labor pool of mothers returning to work.

Several factors are behind the welcoming attitude. Mothers who leave the labor force today tend to be older and have more career experience and proven skills than in the past, making them desirable job candidates. And employer attitudes have changed. Flexible work schedules, telecommuting and other family-friendly programs that were once unheard of can now be found at many major companies.

While family-friendly benefits have waned in recent years, today's employers are still more accepting of work-family needs and non-traditional career paths than employers were a generation ago.

Progressive Programs.

In June 2004, Deloitte & Touche launched a program that allows qualifying employees to leave the company for up to five years to focus on personal goals such as family. During that time, the participants, who are considered alumni, stay connected to the firm and use company resources to keep their skills current. It is expected that they intend to return to employment with Deloitte.

Participants are paired with a mentor, and they also receive subsidized training and semiannual check-ins to evaluate the program and their plans to return to work. Participants can also request temporary, paid internal assignments with the company.

The program is designed to help employees move in and out of the workforce because of personal reasons. The program is also open to male employees and those who have personal goals other than raising children. The pilot program was launched with 15 employees, including senior managers.

One main goal of the program is to hold on to sequencing moms.

"They're talented people, (and) we want to have them back," says Shaun Budnik, a partner and national director for the retention and advancement of women. "We had seen the trend that women were leaving and then starting to come back to the workforce."

Companies are adopting such pioneering programs in part because there's been a seismic shift in women's attitudes toward motherhood and work.

For the first time in decades, more new mothers are leaving the labor force. The labor force participation rate of mothers ages 15-44 with infant children under 1 year old dropped to 55% in 2002 from a record 59% in 1998, part of the first slide since the Census Bureau began tracking the figure in 1976. Many are higher-income women in dual-career households.

Plans to return to work

But an increasing number of today's younger mothers also say they expect to return. About 84% of Generation X stay-at-home moms are considering returning to work, according to Boston-based marketing strategy and research firm Reach Advisors. That compares with 57% of baby boomers who have the same intentions.

"We are seeing a generational difference," says Kristin Maschka, director of Mothers & More, a networking, education and support group for mothers with chapters nationwide. "These women are older. They have 10 to 15 years of work under their belt. They want to go back. Women today are more confident. They don't have to wear the mantle of the trailblazer anymore."

They're women like Mary Motiff. She left the workforce for about five years to care for her children, Bridget, 5, and Charlie, 2. She'd previously worked in student and visitor information services at a university. She has a degree in zoology and environmental studies. Now, with her children older, she's gearing up to re-enter the workforce.

"I knew I'd want to go back. I miss work. I really do," says Motiff, 37, of Green Bay, Wis. "I have no idea what finding a job will be like, but I'm not really too nervous. There are a lot of things I can do."

But there are hurdles. Many women leave jobs because they can't find part-time or other flexible work arrangements. Those returning to work often still want those family-friendly options, which remain hard to secure. (Seventy percent of stay-at-home moms would like to return on a part-time basis, according to the CPRi survey.) Those who do get part-time arrangements also find they're less likely to get benefits or be covered by family leave programs.

Employers often worry that sequencing moms lack current technology skills or relevant work experience.

Says Maschka of Mothers & More: "It's hard to get back in. You get branded as a mother. To employers, you can either be nurturing or competent. You can't be both."

Employment experts say returning to the workforce can be especially hard on women who've left for a longer time, such as 10 years or more, and haven't kept job skills fresh. Many employers want recent work activities.

More acceptance at work

But others say there is a tangible shift toward companies accepting returning professionals, as evidenced by new placement and networking organizations that have cropped up solely devoted to placing mothers back in the workforce.

So far, employers are biting.

"A lot of these women have MBAs. They've been senior vice presidents," says Kathryn Sollman, co-founder of WomenAtWork Network, which helps professional women who've taken time off return to the workplace. "Employers get their profiles and salivate. There is a whole 'woe is me' attitude out there (among some mothers), but it's simply not true. Employers are extremely receptive."

Many women who temporarily opt out of the labor force continue to do some volunteer or part-time work to remain appealing to potential employers.

"This is a market we're seeking to recruit," says Sean Bisceglia, CEO of CPRi, the interim marketing firm that conducted the survey on sequencing mothers. It is reaching out to local mothers groups and national women's organizations. "It's a labor force that's highly motivated, highly trained."

While some are recruiting these women, other employers say programs that help their own employees leave and return are valuable retention tools. The programs are open to men and

other employees who may be focusing on other goals besides family, but employers say the benefit is popular with working mothers.

Mary Elizabeth Johnson was able to take more than a year off from her job, teaching third grade, to spend with her daughter, Alexa, now almost 2, and Miles, 6 months. Through her district's leave-of-absence program, she was able to take from June 2003 to July 2004 without having to reapply for her job.

"I could take a year off and go back," says Johnson, 30, of Parker, Colo. "When you have kids, you don't think ahead of time how they'll change your life, your heart. I found out a lot about me, what kind of parent I wanted to be, because I was home."

IBM offers an option

IBM offers a program that allows employees to take up to three years off. Typically, working mothers who use the program take a year or more off, and then they use the remainder of their leave to re-enter work on a part-time basis. After the three years are up, they have the option of returning either full or part time.

IBM surveyed employees who had taken the leave and found 59% would have left the company if the program hadn't been available.

"We didn't want a situation where women had to opt out," says Maria Ferris, manager of work-life and women's initiatives at IBM. "We've invested in them, trained them. We want to retain them."

They're employees such as Annie Cheung, 51, an IBM vice president who has taken several leaves of absence. Most recently, in 1999, she took a year and a half to spend more time with her sons, Michael, 19, and Matthew, 14. She says the time off hasn't slowed her career advancement. Instead, she's been promoted.

"Has it affected my career? Absolutely not," says Cheung, who works in White Plains, N.Y.

"I mentor a number of women. Many are concerned about their careers and if they can manage work and life. The first thing you must decide is: You must follow your heart."

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