



Today's Front Page

Stay, Mommy, stay!

Business is scrambling to keep working mothers on the job

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Just how far will companies go to keep parents torn between the competing demands of home and work? How about paying for child care while Mom and Dad go shopping downtown? Or running in-house workshops on managing the daily juggle?

Weary of watching their highly skilled professionals, particularly women, leave the workforce in frustration, the corporate world is turning to incentives aimed at appeasing time-strapped parents.

When a new 24/7 childcare centre opens in the heart of Toronto's financial district next week, its main clientele will not be the shift workers from hospitals or emergency services who might be expected to use such a service, but will more likely be accountants, lawyers, bankers and other professionals desperate for a break or stuck for babysitting help to cover last-minute work demands.

One of the country's largest corporate consulting firms, Deloitte, recently launched workshops for its working mothers that require the group of 50 women, from mid-level accountants to high-ranking partners, to meet several times over a six-month period to swap stories about their daily challenges and to get tips on how to make it work.

keyword: Moms

The "Briefcase Moms" program, developed by B.C.-based executive coach Lisa Martin, uses a combination of larger, symposium-style sessions and small-group teleconference sessions to fight "the mommy drain," the exodus of professional women leaving the workforce because they are tired of juggling too many demands and ending up dissatisfied with their performance in both worlds.

"The corporate world is beginning to ask the really tough questions," Ms. Martin says. "How do we retain our working mothers? How do we recruit working mothers? How do we make sure we don't lose them -- that they are there in body and spirit?"

Health Canada estimates that work-life conflict -- the inevitable stress that comes when work and family demands collide -- costs Canadian businesses \$4.5- to \$10-billion a year in direct costs to cover absent workers and indirect costs to train replacements for those who leave.

The conflict hits women hardest, and it is beginning to show up in statistics like those from Canadian researchers that suggest professional women are opting to have fewer children or none at all if they pursue their careers, and American findings that women's participation in the labour force has stalled.

Between 1965 and 1995, the amount of time mothers spent in paid labour soared from nine hours to 26 hours a week, while time spent on housework plummeted; in the next decade, however, U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that while the amount of time spent on housework remained the same, time spent on work outside the home dropped by almost four hours a week.

Part of what's behind the crunch is the delay in childbirth, which means women are becoming mothers at mid-career, so that work demands are at a peak at the same time as home demands have never been higher.

Debbie Collins knows all about the struggle for balance.

She stepped off the management track in the insurance industry a year ago because she could no longer stand the breakneck pace of trying to run a household with two young children and two parents working in demanding jobs.

"The whole juggle just got to be too much," says Ms. Collins, who lives in Burlington, a Toronto-area suburb. "We both worked in Toronto, and all the stuff with commuting, dropping off the kids and picking them up, and then getting all our work done ... We just didn't feel like we were there enough for them."

Her company's inability to accommodate her need for flexibility made her feel as if she was short-changing her work as a unit manager, while always shuttling her family around to meet the exacting commuting schedules made her feel as if she was short-changing her children.

"We knew that something needed to happen," she says.

In the end, what surprised her most was how easily she adapted to the lower-level, part-time job she took that allowed her to work closer to home.

"I loved working. I'd done that whole commuting thing for 10 years and I always felt the need to move up higher. I was surprised that I was willing to give it up."

She says she knows a lot of women in her situation who passed up a move to management because they knew the extra workload and responsibilities would tip the balance for their own families.

Victoria Sopik, whose Kids & Company specializes in emergency backup child care, says her business was founded because offering this last-minute haven has been a corporate boon in keeping employees.

She says the industry regards these kinds of initiatives as "productivity insurance." In the short term, they reduce sick days often used to tend to children; in the longer term, they can boost morale and make it easier for people to continue working.

"What if I need to go to the office and plow through a pile of paperwork on my desk and I need someone to watch my child? Say I'm a busy, hard-working accountant and I want to go shopping ... If it means I'm happier at work and less distracted, it's worth it to the company," she explains.

Her company has 250 corporate clients nationwide, all of whom draw into a pool of emergency child-care centres.

When they were investigating this latest initiative of a 24/7 centre in a Toronto office building, she asked some of the biggest clients whether they'd be willing to pay the backup child-care costs for employees who might be going shopping or out to dinner downtown on a Saturday afternoon, rather than going to work.

They were unanimous in saying yes.

"We know parents today are so focused on this work/life guilt, and so anything that can be done to alleviate that is going to help," she says.

Sean McConkey, the Deloitte company director who oversees the on-site mothers' program, is matter-of-fact in explaining why his company funds the initiative: "Bottom line -- it's a matter of retaining talented people ... If we lose people, we lose their knowledge, their capability, and the cost of replacing them is huge. We can't afford it."

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