

Mom-friendly workplace a win-win

Workers are happier and employer gets a competitive edge



Victoria Miles, with Emily, 7, and Daphne, 18 months, is one of the many working moms who benefit from a family-friendly employer.
Photograph by : Wayne Leidenfrost, The Province

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Every day is Mother's Day for women who have family-friendly employers.

With companies beginning to feel the effects of the aging -- and shrinking -- workforce, the ones with policies that recognize working moms may have an edge on the competition.

"Women are nearly 48 per cent of the labour force, and the majority are of child-bearing age," says Marjorie Griffin Cohen, a political science and women's studies professor at Simon Fraser University. "We're a considerable force. Canada couldn't run the economy without women -- there wouldn't be enough labour."

Today, about 75 per cent of mothers with children younger than 16 work outside the home, 64 per cent with kids under three years old.

Although few employers offer on-site child care, several local companies have garnered attention for mom-friendly policies.

Vancouver-based Ecotrust Canada was recently recognized in Today's Parent magazine for providing working conditions that help families balance work and home.

"There's a lot of trust in our workplace, and it goes both ways," says operations manager Marie-Claire Seebohm. "We have adjustable, flexible work schedules and some people come in late or work part-time, and we have some working from home occasionally. And you can use your own sick days when your kids are sick."

Seebohm says the organization, which promotes a conservation-based economy, would like to offer daycare facilities but it can't meet the city's zoning requirement for a park nearby. But employees can bring children to the office in an emergency, and the washroom is fitted with a change table.

Engineering, planning and landscape architect firm, Urban Systems Ltd. is so flexible it has no policies, says Ann Wallin, the company's people-development leader (there are no formal titles here). It has been recognized by Today's Parent magazine as well as noted as one of Canada's top employers.

"Policies and Urban Systems don't go hand in hand -- and that's probably why we're family friendly," said Wallin, who works in the company's Kamloops office.

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"We work with people to custom-fit their situation. We try to stay away from the word 'flexibility' -- we rather call it customized."

At Vancouver video-game developer Radical Entertainment, employees don't get sick days -- they get "defrag" days that can be taken as sick time or to keep a child home from school or for any other problem that could be solved with a day out of the office.

"We acknowledge that people have lives," says Leah Rubin, vice-president of human resources. "With defrag days, there's more flexibility -- you don't have to lie to take the dog to the vet."

Employees can come in late, leave early then come back to finish the day's work. The company also offers a concierge service so busy workers can pay a small fee to get the drycleaning picked up or take the car in for servicing.

"Flexibility is absolutely key for me," says Kirsten Forbes, a producer at Radical and mother of a nine-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. "As long as I get my work done and it's the quality it should be, I can do what I need to."

Vancouver resident Sarah Fowles and her Toronto-based business partner, James Sadler, launched www.yummymummycareers.com last fall, a classified ad site for moms looking for jobs.

"We've had an amazing response so far," says Fowles, who adds that 65 employers have posted jobs on the site. "If employers are posting with us, they know they're attracting mothers. And women know they discuss their families, and maybe ask for flexible schedules."

Fowles says flexibility seems to be the biggest issue for working moms.

Vancity, which has placed ads on Fowles' website, is actively recruiting moms, particularly for the call centre and teller positions.

"Moms are a hot commodity these days for many employers looking to create a stable workforce," says Natalie Valeriote, Vancity's human-resources manager responsible for recruiting. "We like them because they're flexible, often willing to work part time and weekends and because they are enthusiastic and good with people."

The company also offers workshops for moms to prepare them to come back to work, and every employee has one "care day" a month that can be used to take care of appointments or sick kids.

Victoria Miles, communications manager for Citizens Bank of Canada, a subsidiary of Vancity, says her company supported her during a difficult pregnancy and welcomed her back part time when her baby was 14 months old.

"They didn't have to accommodate me, but they did," says Miles, 39, who has two daughters, ages seven and 18 months. "I've worked for companies that pay more lip service than make a real effort -- the programs are on the list, but no one would dare ask for them."

"Women are a big part of the workforce and women give when their families are young -- Citizens Bank and Vancity find a way to make room for people."

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