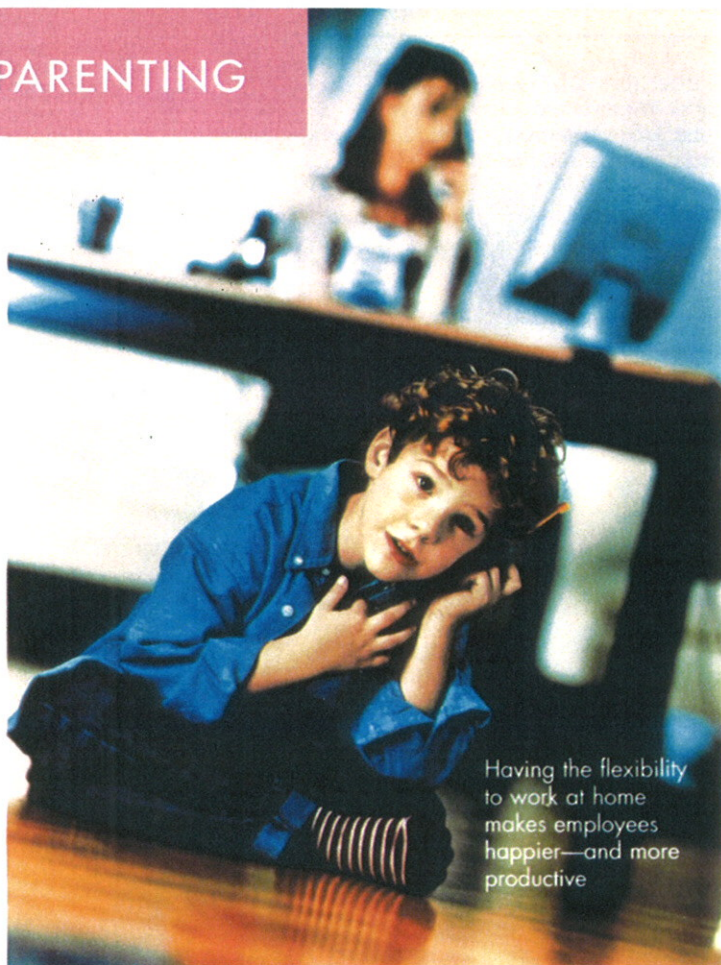


# The best jobs for families

A surprising number of firms are paying more than lip service to harried employees trying to balance work and family. Does your company measure up?

By Sally Abrahms



Having the flexibility to work at home makes employees happier—and more productive

Jane Kipper's conference call was going nowhere. The senior life-insurance accountant from Kansas City, Missouri, was wrangling over accounting issues with industry representatives and regulators—not exactly a breezy topic to begin with—when a gurgling sound came on the line. “That’s the most appropriate comment I’ve heard so far!” quipped one representative, referring to the coos coming from 5-month-old Matthew, nestled on Kipper’s lap in her office. “Everyone chuckled, and it helped to break the stalemate,” says Kipper, whose younger son, Ryan, also spent five months on the job at the 368-person National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC).

Employees aren't requesting family-friendly benefits, they're demanding them

Since NAIC started allowing parents to bring their babies to work in 1998, 13 employees, with children ranging in age from newborn to 6 months old, have participated. The company requires that two colleagues be designated as backup sitters if the infant gets fussy during a client call or if Mom has a meeting. “If I didn’t have this program, I would have stayed on leave longer,” says Kipper. After taking four weeks off, Kipper came to the office two days a week for a month and then went back to full-time after eight weeks. “It was really important for me to have my sons here, since they were both adopted and I felt I needed time to bond with them. I’ve never heard a negative comment from anyone.”

While still anything but the norm, more and more companies

are offering similar family-friendly benefits, as they are termed. Doing so is one way to recruit and retain employees—as the dot-com frenzy subsides and the dream of instant wealth through stock options fades, employees’ work/life perks are becoming increasingly valued. In fact, according to DYG Inc., a social marketing and research firm, women are coming to expect such benefits. Even a weakening economy won’t have much effect, say experts. “I don’t think companies will step away from these benefits now that employees have a set of expectations,” says Michael Beer, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Susan Seitel, president of Work and Family Connection, a clearinghouse of work/life information, agrees: “Polls of job candidates show that flexibility is at the top of their list.” Seitel contends that women especially value flexible *(continued)*

## PARENTING

(continued) arrangements. "They're not just requesting these benefits, they're demanding them," she says. "I think it will continue to be a growing trend for the next decade."

Whether it's the more common job sharing or telecommuting or something more revolutionary, like NAIC's Romper Room setup, many companies are scrambling to help frazzled parents feel less torn between work and home. A study of 456 large and small companies released in 2001 by the human-resources consulting firm of William M. Mercer and Bright Horizons Family Solutions, a national provider of workplace services for employees and families, reveals that two thirds offered permanent part-time options with medical benefits; half gave their workers a compressed workweek (being at the office 40 hours a week but with four 10-hour days, for instance); 45 percent had flextime; 44 percent allowed telecommuting (up 14 percent since 1998); and 40 percent permitted job sharing. Another study released in 1999 by Hewitt Associates, a management consulting firm, of 1,020 companies in a variety of industries found that 74 percent permitted flexible scheduling.

One such company, J.P. Morgan Chase, a banking behemoth and pioneer in family-friendly benefits, is building an office in Newport, New Jersey, with a high-speed communications system designed specifically to allow employees to send information home and back to the office quickly. In addition, the New Jersey office will have lactation rooms for nursing moms who want to relax while they express their milk. J.P. Morgan Chase is also switching these New Jersey staffers' computers from desktops to laptops that can go easily from the conference room to the kitchen table. Close to a quarter of the bank's employees have flexible work arrangements and, in a study conducted there last year, the most satisfied workers, and those

most likely to stay with the company, had control over their work schedules.

That a growing number of businesses of all sizes provide beleaguered working mothers with family-friendly benefits and services is about far more than being nice or politically correct. It's about morale, loyalty and productivity.

According to a study conducted last year for CIGNA, the insurance company saved more than \$300,000, or \$1,600 per mother, in health-care expenses when they provided room and encouragement for nursing mothers to express their milk; it also reduced absenteeism. And Bright Horizons Family Solutions reports that the

76 companies interviewed recently, all with child-care centers, outperformed the Standard & Poor 500 companies over the last three years.

### Schedules that fit your life

By far, the most important amenity companies can offer working mothers is the ability to creatively schedule work hours. This includes flextime, a compressed workweek, job sharing, telecommuting, part-time work and day-to-day flexibility.

At Moving Companies Ahead (MCA), a Mountain View, California-based public-relations firm with high-tech clients, 11 of the 34 employees telecommute. "I (continued)

## BUILDING YOUR CASE FOR A FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENT

Whether your company is family-friendly or not, flexible work arrangements are the one benefit you may be able to realistically expect. While you can't make your boss build an on-site child-care center, chances are you can convince her to give you some sort of flexible work arrangement. Try these strategies:

**Don't get personal.** Instead of saying you want to spend time with your kids, explain how the arrangement will positively impact your boss. She's thinking, What's in it for me? Make your case from her perspective.

**Explain how the arrangement will improve your work.** You'll be more focused, save commuting time, produce more without distractions, and bring a refreshed approach to your work.

**Anticipate potential problems and ways to offset them.** Can someone else in your department with similar expertise take on some of your workload in a pinch? Does your home office have the equipment you'll need to do your job efficiently?

**Address how you'll keep in touch—**e-mail, a regular morning telephone call, once-a-week

update meetings—so your boss understands that you have an office communication plan. Tell her that for a critical meeting on a day you're scheduled to work at home, you'll gladly come into the office.

**Suggest a three-month pilot period** and a follow-up evaluation.

**Give your boss a written proposal** after you've made your pitch.

**Check out these Web sites for information, studies and advice:**

[www.workfamily.com](http://www.workfamily.com), [www.workoptions.com](http://www.workoptions.com), [www.gilgordon.com](http://www.gilgordon.com), [www.womans-work.com](http://www.womans-work.com), or [www.jobsandmoms.com](http://www.jobsandmoms.com).

## BEST JOBS FOR FAMILIES

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believe it's the wave of the future and why not?" says MCA president and CEO Jean LeMoin. "The employees are more productive because they're not distracted by tons of meetings and don't have to waste time driving to and from work."

LeMoin gives her staff scheduling leeway in every dimension: Some work part-time, others job share, and still others have a compressed week. Then there are those who start and leave early, and some who come and stay late, to put in their eight hours.

Jane Evans-Ryan, a 38-year-old account director at MCA, is at the office from 8:45 A.M. until 2:45 P.M. when her 11- and 13-year-old daughters, one of whom is wheelchair-bound, are in school, and then works from home in the late afternoon. In the summer, Evans-Ryan telecommutes exclusively. She'll work in her home office in the mornings while the girls entertain themselves; in the afternoon, she might take the kids to the pool, where she'll work on her laptop. In return for this flexibility, "I probably work harder than I have at any other job," she says, noting several recent promotions.

### Taking care of the kids

A major reason 36-year-old Amy Hughes took her job four years ago as a technology consultant at Novant, a conglomeration of nonprofit hospitals and health services in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was because she was pregnant with her daughter, Anna, and the company ran Today's Child, a top-notch company day-care center. (This year North Carolina, which ranks licensed day-care centers, placed Today's Child among the top 11 percent of day-care centers in the state.) Hughes takes her 20-month-old twins, Caroline and Claire, to the center, along with her older daughter, Anna. Next year, when Anna starts school, Hughes will bring her to the center, where a van will take her to and from school. "I wouldn't leave Novant because of it," says Hughes. "For a mother to have good day care is beyond words."

Employees at Novant pay a below-market cost of \$98 a week for 50 hours of child care. The company chips in \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year to cover the deficit. Some businesses don't offer child care, but help defray a portion of its cost. At Protem Professional Staffing Services, in Portland, Oregon, for example, the company will pay 75 cents an hour, including commuting time and lunch, toward a registered family day-care provider or center for its 108 employees. (They draw the line at in-home baby-sitters.) That can translate to \$140 or more a month tax-free.

### The workplace concierge

It may seem a luxury to have someone to run employees' personal errands, but more and more companies are realizing that offering concierge service is a small price to pay for employee satisfaction, morale and productivity. Andrea Arena, president of a service aptly named 2 Places at 1 Time, based in Atlanta, oversees 42 busy offices in the U.S. and Canada. On average, companies pay Arena \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year to make their employees' lives easier. Workers pay a nominal fee, often \$5 to \$10 an hour for the service. The business will do practically anything—buy birthday decorations, find a housekeeper, research vacation spots, meet the plumber, pick up dinner, plan a honeymoon, even investigate adopting a baby from Romania. (It won't pick up kids at soccer or transport elderly parents.)

Catherine NeSmith, a 35-year-old executive assistant at Arthur Anderson, in Atlanta, uses 2 Places at 1 Time at least once a week to pick up dry cleaning and buy groceries. She's had the service bring her car to the repair shop and go pajama hunting for her kids, William, 8, and Jacqueline, 4. "It makes my life a little saner," says NeSmith. "and tells me that Arthur Anderson cares about me and realizes my time is valuable. They're saying we know we ask a lot of you when you're here, and this is what we do to help you." ■

*Sally Abrahms has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and Newsweek, among other national publications.*