



Firms warm up to family-friendly policies

By *ROBERT RODRIGUEZ*

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FRESNO, Calif. -- Christina Wyneken's timing couldn't have been worse. She gave birth to her first child during one of the busiest tax times of the year.

But rather than being forced to make a choice between her accountant job at DeMera DeMera Cameron of Fresno, and caring for her infant daughter, the company's senior partner suggested an alternative.

"He said to bring the baby in with me," she said. "So, for nearly nine months, I brought her in. She took naps in my office while I did my work."

That was eight years ago, and Wyneken has since purchased the company with a group of other employees. Work arrangements like Wyneken's are becoming more common as a growing number of employers are recognizing the family needs of their employees.

Called "family friendly" by some, these companies feature on-site day-care centers, flexible work schedules and employees, like Wyneken, who are allowed to bring their children into work, if they need to.

Company owners say the extra effort is worth it because they get much in return -- such as loyal employees, reduced turnover and increased productivity.

"What we are seeing are work-force management policies that take into account the fact that working people today have a dual set of responsibilities to attend to," said Brad Harrington, executive director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family.

"Employers aren't working under the assumption that there is someone at home that can take care of the home side of life. And as a result they try and create a culture and policies for people who have to manage both work and family."

Flexible work schedules are among the more common family-friendly work practices. Employees now work from home, while others work four days a week, or job share.

Savvy companies interested in attracting and keeping talented workers, especially women and technology workers, know they have to make changes. The cookie-cutter, 8-to-5 workday doesn't work for some people.

"If an employee views their situation as all or nothing, they will just quit and stay home," Harrington said. "Or they will go to a company that will give them options."

Creating such policies doesn't work for all companies, and not all CEOs have embraced the idea of worker flexibility. Some still hold onto the idea that working 40-plus hours a week in the office shows commitment.

And researchers are finding that some family-friendly policies can have the opposite effect.

A study by California State University-Fresno management professor Julie Olson-Buchanan found that some employees who use cell phones, e-mail and other communication devices to stay in touch with work while at home can create more stress in their lives. "It can take its toll when you are trying to do two roles at the same time," Olson-Buchanan said. "It is the going back and forth between your job and your family, spouse or loved one that causes the conflict, because you can't give either your full attention."

At California Business Furnishings, accounting manager Robin Hankins worked from home for six months after the premature birth of her daughter, Paige.

Hankins couldn't put her daughter into day care because of her fragile condition, but she also didn't want to lose her job. Many employers would not have kept a key position open for that long.

But company owner Doug Davidian and Hankins worked out an arrangement where she could come in the office for a few hours a week and also work out of her home.

"I would assume that in most other places I would have to put my job on hold or (do) something else," Hankins said. "But not here. Here it is different."

Davidian said he follows a simple rule for running a business: "If you treat people well and they understand what they are supposed to do, money and profit will always follow."