

Flexible workplaces help employees find balance between family, job

By Matt Wickenheiser

July 7, 2012

A short day at Jasleen Leach's old job was from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., followed by a few hours in Washington, D.C.-area traffic to travel less than 50 miles, a quick dinner and short time with her two young children, then more work at home on her laptop.

A long day could have the IT proposal manager at work from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m.

Three months ago, she took a job at Tilson Technology in Portland, coming to Maine to seek a better balance between her professional life and her family life. Today, if a child is sick at home, she may stay there and be a mom, working remotely from home. Her commute is negligible. As the manager for federal proposals for Tilson, she's well compensated and is moving ahead in her career. At the same time, she has the flexibility to be available for her family.

"I do have it all," said Leach. "You put in the hours, you do your work well, and then you have a great family life. Overall, you can't ask for anything more."

Leach has what many seek but never find, the El Dorado of the career professional — a balance between work and life.

It turns out an increasing number of companies are offering flexible work environments as a way to attract and keep top employees, according to David Ciullo, president of Career Management Associates, a career coaching, job search and human resources firm with offices in Maine and New Hampshire.

"This is a critical part of what has to be arranged for in the workplace. Most employers we deal with in Maine and throughout the Northeast are looking at things like flex time, telecommuting, working away," said Ciullo. "This is a real change from where we were five, 10 years ago. There's a lot of companies that talked about it; now there's a lot of companies doing it."

That trend is driven in part by demographic changes, said Ciullo, with Gen X and Gen Y having different work expectations. It's also driven by available technology; being able to work remotely is far easier today with the advent of cloud computing than it might have been a decade ago.



Attorney Kat Joyce



Attorney Joan Fortin

“Computers — technology today — allow you to do almost anything, [and] from not necessarily in your own office,” said Ciullo.

Another effect from technology — social media in particular — is that more people have more information about what common practices are at other workplaces. So expectations of flexibility have risen, said Ciullo.

“We want to have a strong, vibrant firm so we can do great work. The way we do that is to hire top-notch talent,” said Joan Fortin, director of attorney recruitment

Traditionally, that balance was particularly important for career women who were regarded as primary caregivers and who often had to choose between work and family. But, noted Ciullo and the professionals interviewed for this article, that balance is increasingly important to men, too. And more professionals need flexibility to deal not only with children, but also with elderly parents, a significant factor in an aging state such as Maine, he added.

In some cases, a workplace’s flexible policies aren’t explicitly written out.

Karen Simonds came to Tilson four years ago, after working as an office manager at a plant where her presence was required, without exception. Today, she’s the manager of accounting and human resources at Tilson.

She knows if there’s a snow day, she may stay at home with her two teenage sons. She may come in at 6 a.m. so she may leave early to watch one of their sports events.

When Elissa Burke began her federal government job, she was a single woman without children. But after Burke gave birth to her daughter and had two stepsons to accommodate, her managers’ attitude toward her changed, she said, and it became clear that it was not OK to give her family life priority over work time — ever.

“It was quite rigid. There wasn’t any flexibility at all,” said Burke, who has been a senior consultant at Tilson for a year.

The opposite is true at Tilson she said. While there’s no written policy, the expectation is that people will work hard when needed, get their jobs done, but will have the flexibility they need for family.

In the IT world, Maine companies are competing for professionals who typically can work anywhere else. Flexibility is a key factor in attracting professionals, said Emma Lishness, manager of marketing and communications at Tilson.

“We need to have the best people working here,” she said. “In addition to flexible work, we have to pay people what they’re worth.”

Joan Fortin at Bernstein Shur agreed.

“We want to have a strong, vibrant firm so we can do great work. The way we do that is to hire top-notch talent,” said Fortin, who is director of attorney recruitment at the law firm. “Hiring them is step one. Retaining them is the critical piece.”

Acknowledging the importance of life outside work is a big factor in that, said Fortin. She said the firm does so formally and informally. For example, the company's parental leave policy is extremely progressive, she said, allowing for both maternity and paternity leave. Parents with new children may take up to six months off, with 12 weeks of it paid. Parents may use such leave for adoptions, too. And it's written into the policy that time off for parental leave doesn't affect an attorney's time frame for making it to partner status.

In fact, when Fortin made partner (called a shareholder at Bernstein Shur), she was on maternity leave, came in for the vote, and went back on maternity leave.

Katherine Joyce, an attorney in the energy and environmental practice group, was hired from other firms as a part-time attorney on a path to shareholder. At the time a single mom of two, she remembers just after she was hired getting a call that one of her children was sick.

"Being a single mom, I did not have a 'Plan B,'" she recalled.

"In a practical sense, I'm someone who has it all, and that's pretty cool," said attorney Kat Joyce

She walked into her boss's office, explaining she was almost done a memo she needed to write, but had to go pick up her child, when he stopped her.

Her boss told her to email him the memo; he'd finish it. Her child, he told her, is the most important thing.

"He meant it," Joyce said.

In other firms, she said, that would be a career-limiting move.

Fortin said when she was a younger attorney she had landed and was handling a massive, multinational client. Juggling that work and her private life was getting more and more challenging, until the firm's managing partner sat down and talked with her, asked her what she needed to handle it all. They brought on a paralegal and a full-time attorney to support her work with the client.

"For me, the support I've received from the top has definitely kept me here," Fortin said.

She said the demands from different spheres in her life aren't constant; sometimes family needs will spike, or work demands will. But it can all balance out, she said. And having an employer that's flexible and understands the importance of family is critical for handling all of that, she said.

"It's not like being a mother has to be hidden," she said. "Being a mother is very important to me; being a lawyer is very important to me."

From the employer standpoint, said Fortin, it's important employer decision-makers really pay attention to what their work force needs.

"If employers want to support families, they can do it," she said. "You'll ensure loyalty forever."

Joyce said it's vital to make choices about what's important, and to value that.

“You can’t have it all, but you can have what’s important to you, if you’re willing to make choices,” she said. “In a practical sense, I’m someone who has it all, and that’s pretty cool. That doesn’t mean life’s not hard.”