

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Many Companies Say They're Family-Friendly. But It Often Isn't the Case.

Finding a truly family-friendly workplace requires going beyond an employer's image. Or even its policies.



Even at companies with family-friendly policies, people can have difficulty putting boundaries around their work hours.

PHOTO: SONIA PULIDO

By Sue Shellenbarger

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It isn't easy to find a truly family-friendly company these days.

Plenty of employers are promoting parental leave, flexible hours and work-at-home plans. But such claims often amount to a family-friendly facade. Broad changes in the way people work are making it more difficult for employees and their managers to set boundaries on work. People who need time for family care must look beyond corporate image-building for subtler markers of support.

Nikki Trojanowski was told by hiring managers when she interviewed for a previous job that the company was family-friendly, and that some employees had work-at-home or flextime schedules. The company had been named a good place to work in media competitions, and she took the job.

She was so grateful when her manager said she could work a four-day week, allowing Fridays off with her baby at home, that she agreed to a 20% pay cut—with no reduction in her duties. But work soon spilled into her day off. If she was asked to review a project on a Friday, “I’d feel a gut punch, thinking, ‘I should just do it,’ ” says Ms. Trojanowski, a former TV producer and public-relations coordinator in Indianapolis. After she was asked to take on part of a former colleague’s workload, she found herself working almost every Friday.

“I thought this was family-friendly. But really, my employer got a hell of a deal,” says Ms. Trojanowski, a mother of two. She eventually resigned, partly because of the pressure to remain constantly plugged in, and now works as a freelance public-relations writer and marketer.

The time trap

People who try to put boundaries around their work hours are battling some powerful countertrends. Many employees now spend 85% of their working hours collaborating with multiple teams of co-workers across time zones via meetings, email, conference calls or instant messaging, says Rob Cross, a professor of global leadership at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. This makes employees’ time at the office and 24/7 availability online more valuable to employers.

Collaboration can easily consume typical working hours, forcing people to do the individual work required by their jobs after hours, Dr. Cross says. “That leads to a tremendous bleeding of work into home.”

It also leaves those who spend fewer hours working on the losing side of a pay gap.

People who work 50-plus hours a week are paid about 4.5% an hour more than similarly qualified employees who work 35 to 49 hours, says Kim Weeden, a sociology professor and director of the Center for the Study of Inequality at Cornell University. This is a reversal of pay patterns before 2000, when long-hours workers were paid less per hour, according to research by Dr. Weeden, with Youngjoo Cha, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University, and Mauricio Bucca, a postdoctoral fellow at European University Institute near Florence, Italy. While the research doesn’t capture the reasons for the pay-gap reversal, some experts say it reflects a trend among employers toward awarding the highest-paying jobs to people who are willing and able to work continuously in long blocks of time, and to time their work to overlap with colleagues’ hours.

Working mothers are less likely than other employees to put in 50-plus hours a week, Dr. Weeden says. This helps widen a gender gap in wages between working mothers and everyone else.

Mikaela Kiner took advantage of a flextime policy at a previous employer so she could make it home for dinner and bedtime with her husband and two small children. But her workload was hefty enough that it spilled into nearly all remaining night and weekend time.

- i A standing joke at the company was that you could work whenever you wanted, as long as you put in your 80 hours. “The feeling of not being done when you get home, of having work hanging over you, is draining,” says Ms. Kiner, author of “Female Firebrands,” a book about women in the workplace.

Returning to work after maternity leave was like stepping into a tsunami. When she left her office at 5 p.m. on her first day back after her first baby, a co-worker asked, “Only working a half-day?” After her second leave, she immediately took the lead on several projects. “With no time to settle in, the speedometer went from zero to 80,” says Ms. Kiner, who has held senior-management jobs at several companies.

“I couldn’t help but feel that there was about 25% too much work required in each of the big corporate jobs I’d had,” she says. She was eventually able to negotiate more manageable hours at a smaller company, but the switch meant taking a major cut in pay and other compensation, including leaving unvested stock options on the table. Ms. Kiner left corporate life in 2015 to found Reverb, a Seattle leadership-development firm.

Finding a friendly spot

Scoping out a truly family-friendly company in this climate requires looking beyond an employer's image or policies. Watch for sizable numbers of women and working parents in senior management. Explore whether many of them openly disengage from work on nights, weekends, parental leave or vacation.

Talk about setting boundaries on work shouldn't be taboo. Jessica Calzaretta, a vice president at Insight Global, an Atlanta-based staffing firm, recently spoke to colleagues at an internal meeting about how her definition of giving 100% on the job has evolved. After being promoted three times and having two children since 2016, Ms. Calzaretta says, she is splicing more breaks into her workday to eat meals with her children, ages 1½ and 3, or take them to the pediatrician. "I'm finding my new 100%," she says.

In a subtler sign of flexibility, some employers train employees to perform each other's jobs so they can readily fill in for each other during family leaves or emergencies. Before Jenn Schultz, a senior account manager at Insight, gave birth to her daughter, Abigail, in 2018, managers helped prepare a subordinate to fill in for her during maternity leave. Her junior colleague learned new skills and has since been promoted.

For Ms. Schultz, having a skilled, motivated backup enabled her to immerse herself in caring for Abigail. She disengaged so completely, she says, that she even left her laptop at the office.

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What family-friendly accommodation would you most like to see from your workplace? *Join the conversation below.*

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