

Family Friendly Work Benefits

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Kathleen Hall

As any working parent knows, it can sometimes be tough to juggle work and family and the ensuing stress damages all aspects of your life.

Fortunately, some companies are increasingly appreciating the value of family-friendly, or work/life, benefits as a way to attract and retain excellent employees. Locally, Bon Secours Richmond Health System has been recognized by *Working Mother* magazine for the fifth year in a row as a 100 Best Company for working mothers. Companies are scored on more than 500 points of information, including the number of work/life programs they offer, the employee usage of such programs, and the representation of women throughout the company.

According to Bonnie Shelor, vice president, Human Resources at Bon Secours, such benefits clearly support Bon Secours' mission to provide good help to those in need – patients *and* employees – and, not surprising, there's a direct correlation: happy employees provide better care to patients.

Consider these statistics about the 100 Best companies as reported by *Working Mother*:

96% offer child-care resources and referral services versus 18% nationwide

100% offer flextime versus 55% nationwide

98% offer eldercare resource and referral services, versus 20% nationwide

94% offer compressed workweeks versus 31% nationwide

Employees who need such benefits do not always fit the mold of a young working mother. Shelor recounts the story of a grandparent who gained custody of her grandchildren, which at the time, created a stressful situation for that employee. In addition to providing childcare, Bon Secours was able to offer the employee a scholarship to help with the cost of daycare. Through the hospital's wellness center, the employee took classes on stress management and grandparenting. "We helped her in transition," says Shelor. "It's a real success story. The employee is loyal to Bon Secours and the children are happy."

Teri Fisher, a technician in the EEG Department, has significantly benefited from such benefits at Bon Secours. Her five-year old son, Cameron, who has special needs, has been attending the onsite Family Center at Bon Secours since he was one. Fisher says the Center found a therapist to work with him and set aside space for them to work together. They also made sure that Cameron was included in all activities that were age appropriate, and worked with Fisher to ensure his special needs were being met. "Even when he was not potty-trained, they worked with him," she says.

Fisher attributes Cameron's progress in speech and development in part to the Center's personalized, caring attention, and she is comforted that he is close by when she is at work.

Growing trend?

Bon Secours is clearly part of a growing trend. This year's *Working Mother* winners for Best in Class categories are mostly familiar names: Liz Claiborne, Inc. (representation of women), Booz Allen Hamilton (advancing women), JPMorgan Chase (total compensation), IBM Corporation (child care), S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. (flexibility), and Wachovia Corporation (family-friendly company culture).

Every five years, Families and Work Institute conducts a *National Study of the Changing Workforce (NCCW)*, which delves into the work, personal, and family lives of Americans, and studies how home and work change over time.

The 2002 study, the most recent, reports some noteworthy trends.

Despite somewhat increased work-life support on the job, employees with families report significantly higher levels of interference between their jobs and their family lives than employees 25 years ago. Further, men with families report higher levels of interference between work and family than women in the same situation.

Elder care tops the list, too

One work-life program that has increased significantly is eldercare resources and referral services. Today, 24% of employees have access to this benefit, compared to 11% in 1992. And more employees report needing this service: 35% of men and women say they have provided care for a relative or in-law 65% or older in the past year.

Shelor agrees that the need for elder care is increasing. "We run into this time and again" she says about employees coping with parents who are ill or need special care.

Natalie Smith, a public relations professional at Carter Riley Thomas (CRT), says that her firm offers employees a subsidy for elder and at home care. This subsidy takes two forms: monetary and time off.

"If you need to move your parents into a nursing home, you can take time off to do this," explains Smith.

Creating content employees

Despite the fact that working couples have less time off the job, the combined time that spouses with children spend caring for and doing things with their children on workdays has actually increased since 1977. Where does the time come from? Parents are giving up time for themselves.

The Family and Work Institute Study finds that supportive work-life policies and practices clearly result in positive results: more positive work outcomes, job satisfaction, commitment to employer, retention, and more positive life outcomes for employees, including better mental health.

Carter Riley Thomas is an employee-owned firm and everyone there shares a set of nine values on which all decisions about the company are based. One of these values is that employees are to keep a balance between work and family.

Smith says everyone agrees that it makes good sense to allow employees to focus on work by helping with personal situations that may distract them.

Not just moms

Although the *Working Mother* designation recognizes companies for policies specifically designed for women, this need is not exclusive to women. Men have expanded their role at home, taking on more childcare and household responsibilities.

At CRT, it's not uncommon to see employee's children at the office on days, for example, when school is closed but most people are working. "We see as many, if not more, men who bring kids in," says Smith.

Allowing employees to bring children into the office is just one of the ways CRT offers flexibility.

A May 2003 article in the *HRM Guide USA* [Human Resource Management] reports that when work and family conflict, men have higher levels of 'work-family angst' than women, and are more likely to leave their jobs as a result. The researchers suspect the difference is due, in part, to the roles men and women have traditionally assumed: women commit to roles that support the family and men are accustomed to being the breadwinner. These men can find it difficult to adapt to increased demands of taking care of family and home.

Although Bon Secours' workforce is predominantly female, the company offers the same flexibility and support to male employees and encourages them to take time to care for their children.

Key is flexibility

Most family-friendly benefits and policies have one common element: flexibility. This can take the form of part-time work, flexible work hours, or extended childcare hours, and benefits may change over time to reflect employees' changing needs.

"We strive to identify benefits and programs to meet all needs of a diverse workforce," says Shelor. Bon Secours has also been recognized by the AARP as a Best Employer for Workers Over 50.

Theresa Crist, a department manager in the Radiation Oncology Department, enjoys a number of Bon Secours' benefits. She has used the Family Center for 10 years with all of her children. Next summer her oldest will begin volunteering at Bon Secours, another benefit and an ideal situation for children who are too old for daycare and not yet old enough to get a

job. Her children have also taken summer classes in first aid and can become certified to be babysitters.

At Bon Secours, management works to redesign jobs so employees can adjust their hours to spend more time with children or elderly relatives as needed. The company provides quality childcare in on-site centers, with extended hours for late shift workers, before and after work coverage, holiday and summer programs, and sick-child care.

CRT offers employees a great deal of flexibility as well. "Some of our benefits are less tangible, but still really, really important," says Smith. "Employees are allowed to select a schedule, within reason, that best fits their situation [flex time]."

Maternity and paternity leave is encouraged and new moms have the option of gradually returning to work. Smith returned to work three days at first after her son was born. She has brought both her children, Spencer, two, and Quinn, six months, to the office on numerous occasions. CRT offers childcare subsidies that range from \$220 per month for an employee's first child, to \$55 for the third.

Think Wellness

Both Fisher and Crist participate in Bon Secours' Wellness Program, a three-month course of health appraisals, classes on proper eating, exercise, and strength training. Employees often join the program together. "We can do so much better as a team," says Crist. "There are three levels [to the program] so it's not discouraging."

Good health pays off. "I earned \$600 last year by participating," chuckles Fisher. Shelor notes that, as you might expect, employees' use of sick days is less for those who participate in the Wellness Program.

In addition to greater employee satisfaction, Bon Secours sees positive results on the bottom line. It has a lower turnover rate than the industry average and this rate has been declining. Despite the well-documented nursing shortage, Bon Secours' vacancy rate is considerably lower.

Shelor believes that Bon Secours is on the cutting edge of the recruitment and retention movement. The impetus for this aggressive approach to family-friendly benefits is driven in part by the critical shortage of health care workers. "We're in the mode of looking for workers," explains Shelor. She acknowledges that while there *is* a cost to these benefits, it is more than offset by the increase in productivity and employee retention.

Pushing policy changes at your workplace

For companies such as Bon Secours and Carter Riley Thomas, implementing benefits and establishing policies that help employees balance their work and personal responsibilities comes easy because it hails from the top of the organization.

The employees interviewed for this article could not say enough about their employers and the value of these family-friendly benefits and workplace flexibility.

But what if you work for an organization that is in the majority and has not yet recognized that helping employees is a good thing to do *and* translates into positive business results?

“Go to the leadership or human resources department and make a case for the return on investment,” encourages Shelor. “There is research out there that makes the case.”

“Come to work at Bon Secours,” chuckles Fisher. She encourages others to “become active within your company to make changes. Hold Bon Secours as an example.”

Crist says if your company is very rigid and you can’t make changes, you must evaluate your own personal situation. “It’s important to have a strong family life and career. Find a place where you can.”

Fisher believes that women have a tough time and often feel guilty going back to work if their child has special needs. “They cannot work at peace.” She urges parents to push hard to find an organization that provides support. “You can still have a normal life with a child with demanding needs.”

Smith acknowledges that CRT is also not typical in an industry (public relations) that often requires long hours and demanding clients.

“It can be difficult when working with clients,” she says, “but it’s refreshing to work for a company where everyone supports each other so you can have balance between work and your family.”

[box] Evaluating your employer’s family-friendliness

A child care management association out of Mobile, Alabama offers a helpful checklist of programs and perks potential employees can use to evaluate a company, including:

- Demonstrated commitment to work/family issues through inclusion in company mission statement and on-going needs assessments
- Flexible job opportunities including job sharing, flextime, part time, or condensed workweeks
- Flexible, cafeteria-style benefits plans, including health insurance
- Paid maternity leave
- Child and eldercare resources and referrals
- Wellness counseling or support groups or onsite fitness centers and exercise programs

(www.grcma.org/ for full list)

The Society for Human Resource Management (www.shrm.org) is another site for parents to check out. Bonnie Shelor, vice president, Human Resources at Bon Secours, recommends this

as an excellent resource for employees who want research to make the case for workplace flexibility and support.

PBS' Juggling Work and Family site (<http://www.pbs.org/workfamily/help.html>) has information and resources about easing the burden of work/life conflicts.

Workoptions.com provides fill-in-the-blanks proposal template (for fee) plus free planning tools to help you get your boss's approval for a flexible work arrangement at your current job. The site also has links to other related sites.