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BIRD...

A PLANE...

THE WORKING MOTHER!

Innovative HR programs allay working parents' worry and guilt by providing a support system that offers parents peace of mind so that they can be superheroes at work.

By **Nona Phinn**

MAY 9, 2011 — I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT DAY. Around 4:00 a.m., my alarm clock rang and I popped up from my pillow. All night long I had tossed and turned. There were butterflies in the pit of my stomach and I wasn't even certain whether I had slept at all. When I finally mustered the courage to put my feet on the ground, I fled my bedroom straight across the hall to my little girl, just six days away from turning three months old. I looked down at her in her crib and asked her to forgive me. Then I picked her up, drew her as close to my chest as I could and with my lips against her ear I whispered how much mommy loves her and how much she means to me. I walked her to the love seat in the nursery and we began to nurse.

We can be great mothers and great employees with the aid of our sidekick – the power of human resources.

This was the perfect moment to reassure her and myself that everything was going to be alright. I prayed that angels be sent to care and watch over my little angel. That a special hedge of protection grow around her to keep her from any harm. I asked for an extra boost of wisdom and understanding for every caregiver who would come in contact with my baby so that each one would meet her needs beyond their normal capacity and give both my bambino and myself comfort and peace to endure our first day apart. To face the day with courage, strength and the hope of knowing that the day would end with us coming back together again. After my prayer, I took a deep breath, swallowed the huge lump in my throat and continued savoring our time to bond.

“It’s going to be okay,” I told myself. “Millions of moms do this every day,” I repeated to myself every second until I sat in my cubicle for the first time in months. “I have to learn to let go at some point, right?”

That was almost two years ago and I still have to talk myself through the same guilt and fear I felt the first day I walked out the door and left my baby behind in day care while I ventured off to the office where I am supposed to take off my “mommy” hat and put on the one marked “employee.”

I needed to know that I wasn’t the only mother in the world who felt like this, so I began to hunt for other mothers to talk to. Indeed, I found I wasn’t alone. Most mothers share the same sentiments I did about returning to work after maternity leave. Some decided they just couldn’t do both: They could not be the best mom for their child or children and the best employee for their company all at the same time. They either didn’t know how or didn’t want to switch identities throughout the day, just as comic book hero Kristin Wells shifted seamlessly into her secret identity of Superwoman at exactly the right moment. In addition, I found some mothers worked for employers that just didn’t have the resources in place to assist with this transition and the adjustment required to create and develop, to employ, the true Superwomen — working mothers. It is estimated that approximately 11 percent of mothers either change employers or begin working for themselves post-maternity leave.

I must admit that the struggle and conflicts between being supermom and awesome employee have become more and more difficult as time has passed. I am not only dealing with that constant nagging guilt of allowing someone else to raise my child, but also doctor appointments every week because she catches some germ from the massive number of children in her day care, and work travel that forces me not to see my baby’s face for days on end and redefining where to draw the line on how much work follows me home to be accomplished during time that is supposed to belong to my little one and family. How do mom — and dad — balance home and work? Can there truly be a happy marriage between the two?



In talking with some of our certifiants, I found that there can be. Well, maybe it is not a perfect marriage, but it is possible and capable. Many organizations offer benefits offer their employees that allow for this balancing act to be done with poise and grace. Programs such as mentor moms are provided to new mothers returning to work, enabling them to talk to and learn from other mothers who have walked in the same shoes. Such programs create a support system to help carry a new mom through tough days when she wants to give up on herself, her career and her child. Flexible schedules and telecommunicating are other options that aid working parents to create balance.

I came across a unique and lesser available benefit — the on-site child care center. What an amazing and thrilling concept! My first encounter with one about a year ago was a visit I made to quick-service chicken restaurant Chick-fil-A’s website. A video showed one of the company’s senior marketing executives speaking about how great the company is to work for. She described her workday, which began with driving to the on-site child care center on the Chick-fil-A campus and dropping off her two children. She spoke about how much comfort she derived from knowing that her children were so close and how much this benefit enabled her to be a better employee.

As I watched the video, I began to visualize myself pulling into the garage of my office building, parking the car and getting out to open the back door. I saw myself reaching in for my baby girl and picking her up with her diaper bag, and then heading to the elevator vestibule, patiently waiting for a ride. When the elevator doors finally opened, I stepped inside and selected the button marked “Child Care.” Oh, what joy! I had to then pinch myself to



wake up from this daydream.

At many companies it is more common than not to find a gym, a mother's room or a lunch room that might even serve hot lunches, but a child care center? Even today, this seems to be a one-in-a-million benefit. I wonder if employers truly know the impacts this benefit can have. Has human resources considered every aspect? I wanted to learn more.

Evelyne Steward, vice president of LifeWorks and Inclusion for Discovery Communications, a large nonfiction media company, manages the HR function. Her sole focus is work-life integration, wellness, flexibility and diversity and inclusion. Her HR team creates and builds out services and programs that support employees and their families in well-being and work life. Discovery's philosophy and goal are to foster a culture that places employees first: "We are committed to being a destination employer or a great place to work. We want to be an employer of choice and do so by creating a culture where employees are one of the most important stakeholders," explains Steward. Discovery realizes that the creativity, innovation and contributions of employees are what make the company successful. The goal is to ensure that employees grow professionally and achieve their career goals while their personal and family responsibilities are taken care of.

This strong focus on employee well-being helped foster the implementation of the on-site child care center at Discovery. The company is young, with the average employee, 34 years old, and many are newly married, have young families or are planning and preparing for children. The HR department routinely conducts employee opinion surveys to help stay on top of employee needs.

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Through survey results and focus group discussions, Steward learned the importance of child care services.

She worked with Adria Alpert Romm, senior executive vice president of Human Resources and Global Diversity, whom she credits as a visionary and an HR leader who understands how to meet current needs and stay in front of changing and growing needs of employees and the organization. They decided that the missing element in Discovery's portfolio of well-being programs was an on-site child care center. After the polling and focus groups with employees and a feasibility study with Bright Horizons, a provider of employer-sponsored child care and early education programs, Discovery Kids Place was born.

Four years in the making and managed by Bright Horizons, Discovery Kids Place, is open to employees' children who are six weeks to five years old. With space for 107 children, the on-site



child care center services 175 to 200 children per year. But the children who attend the center are more than just the employees' kids — they are part of the Discovery family, and the center has become engrained in the company's culture. The children are involved in company events and they visit the offices from time to time to deliver flowers on Mother's Day, to show off their Fall Festival costumes and even to celebrate Lunar New Year with the staff. Employees without children of their own look forward to running into one of their smaller colleagues in the elevators or the hallways of Discovery.

Steward notes, "We recognized the importance of providing flexibility in one's schedule and as a result employees feel comfortable integrating their children into their workday." It is normal to see parents leaving their office space to check on their children, taking a break to have lunch with their kids or even stopping by the center just to hang out or read books. The commitment to satisfied, high-performing employees who stay fresh and innovative is critical to Discovery's continued growth and success. Discovery Kids Place is an important way to support working families. "The child care center is just one of our many programs. The whole package keeps employees involved, motivated and excited," Steward proudly explains.

Nikki Bread, a Professional in Human Resources (PHR®), is another HR professional who agrees with Steward. Bread is the HR director of St. Luke's Cardiovascular Consultants, an entity of St. Luke's Health System. She had the opportunity to recruit for and enroll her children in the company's on-site child care center. Bread found that the child care center became part of her support system while her child and foster children attended. It offered her the peace of mind she needed to focus on her job while knowing that her little ones were in the care of people she

knew, trusted and called colleagues. She could simply walk down the street and check in on how they were doing or be involved in the activities the center hosted for the children. One of the best benefits Bread found were the phone calls: A teacher might call in the morning suggesting she should come have lunch with her daughter because she was having a difficult day or the call would come later to reassure that all was going well on days when Bread had had a bad dropoff in the morning.

Peace of mind is vital to any employee, and especially to working parents. Because Bread trusted her children's caregivers and was accessible when needed, she was able to take on additional responsibilities at work. She could accomplish the same as or even more than her colleagues and did not have to sacrifice her development on the job because she was a mother. "I could be the best employee I could be," she says. "I could still do those things that could better me in my career knowing that my child was being taken care of. It allowed me to do what was needed to progress."

In this case, Bread's employer, St. Luke's Health System, understood that she and her fellow working mothers needed that assurance to be successful as employees and as mothers and provided it. Part of the company's philosophy is to take care of employees' professional and personal needs to ensure workers are well engaged and happy. St. Luke's established the on-site child care center in 1982, and the center has become a component of the organization's lifestyle and work-life balance benefits that "helps employees take care of self, families and finances," explains Bread. The goal of St. Luke's Health System is to provide employees the tools they need to be happy employees because that is the best way to ensure that patients are happy.

Bread describes the child care center as a "win, win" because

the hospital has fully engaged employees who are able to pour themselves into their jobs and give 100 percent to their work because they are comfortable with who is caring for their children. “Their mind is completely on the job.”

Being a mother has not been a barrier for Bread. She began with St. Luke’s Health System in 2001 as an HR coordinator and today is the HR director for Saint Luke’s Cardiovascular Consultants. Motherhood also didn’t stop Amanda Duncan, a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR[®]) and vice president and chief business development officer for Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, which provides resources for job seekers and employers in the region. Duncan, who recently returned to work, came back to a new role — she was promoted while on maternity leave — and a new office mate — her daughter.

Duncan took advantage of a different type of benefit offered by her employer: the Bring Your Baby to Work Program. This program, implemented by the state’s former governor and current secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, allows parents to bring their newborns to work until the babies are six months old. Under the program, employees must share their intention for using the program and create a plan that designates staff who will care for the baby while mommy (or daddy) is in meetings, days that the baby will be in the office and length of time the employee will utilize the

she set for herself and her daughter.

Duncan has gained so much through the program. She is able to spend almost every day with her baby during this important time in her baby’s life. She proudly confesses that she has not been away from her daughter for more than a few minutes. “I know her better and can anticipate her needs more.” Duncan describes avoiding “the guilt of leaving my young baby to spend 10 hours a day with a stranger.” She wasn’t comfortable with that option, and through the program she could be the mother she desires to be and continue to be the employee she has worked so hard to be. Duncan says, “I was able to be a good mom and a good employee. It made me a happier person. When you are happy, you are more productive.”

By providing on-site child care and other programs for employees who are parents, employers make a commitment to success. Steward characterizes it as a “big investment in employees. It takes commitment, time, resources and great management.” She suggests HR managers study and understand the needs of the workforce to truly know which resources are necessary to support employee work-life balance.

Although it may not be “an easy proposition,” as Steward describes it, I believe it is worth looking into. If a company begins to see an increase in young families on its staff, employers should take the time to learn what can be done to support these employees and find out what their challenges and struggles are. If

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program.

Duncan turned her office space into a little nursery. She installed a crib, play pen, swing, bouncer, toys and of course diapers. She also got a refrigerator for storing milk. She takes breaks from motherhood-on-the-job when her husband comes to the office on his lunch break to spend time with their daughter and during her daughter’s daily walks with the office manager to pick up mail. When private time to nurse is needed, she hangs a sign on the door to inform others to come back later.

Duncan credits the Bring Your Baby to Work Program with helping to strengthen her bond with her new daughter. She did not have the same opportunity with her first two children, and she states, “What I have with number three is just different than what I have with the first two kids.” Her goal was to nurse this baby longer than she did the other children. Duncan always had to end nursing once she returned to work, but this time was different. She was able to continue and fulfill an important goal

these employees are truly vital to the organization, the HR team can find ways to meet their needs within the constraints of the company’s resources.

Mothers no longer want to be forced to choose. There should not be that feeling of being backed into a corner or having to choose between their career and their very own heart. For mothers who want to be mom of the year and employee of the month, there should be vast opportunities available to do so. I want both, and both are important to me. When I am asked (directly or indirectly) to make a choice between work and my baby, my daughter wins every time. When my career loses, I fall one step behind my colleagues and watch my career suffer.

I can be Superwoman. All working mothers can be the unstoppable Kristin Wells — but only when we have a wind under our capes helping us leap above skyscrapers. We can be great mothers and great employees with the aid of our sidekick — the power of human resources. ■