

Companies key into family values

Firms realize they must accommodate lifestyle needs to attract and retain talented people

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David Hemler had only been at the helm of Microsoft Canada for a few months when he faced the kind of dilemma that today's so-called sandwich generation is increasingly coming up against.

The Microsoft executive was waiting for his wife and children to join him from the U.S., but before the family could be reunited in their new Canadian home, Hemler's father-in-law suffered a major stroke that left his wife and family torn between his career commitments and their personal responsibilities.

It's perhaps a testament to both Hemler and Microsoft that he relinquished the coveted job as president of Microsoft Canada after only a year to return to Minneapolis so he and his wife could be close to her ailing father.

And it speaks to a growing awareness among companies that they must be increasingly aware of the work-life balance concerns of their employees if they are to attract and retain top talent.

"On the one hand it was the hardest decision and on the other, it was the easiest decision I ever made," said Hemler, who is currently vice-president within Microsoft's small and mid-market group in the U.S., a position that title-wise amounts to a step down but in reality, considering the amount of business involved in his new posting, is really a lateral move. "I loved the Canadian job, but I love my family more.

"It made me demonstrate my priorities and in my mind, to have that really straight."

As a boss himself, Hemler had helped other Microsoft employees who faced the crunch of family and personal crisis coming up against their work, but he had never had to ask his boss for the same understanding and assistance. It wasn't a challenge he took on lightly.

"It was with some fear and trepidations that I went to my boss, the head of North American operations, to tell him I needed to be back in Minneapolis," said Hemler. "Frankly to Microsoft's credit and to his credit, he was really supportive -- he said, 'What do you need, what can we do?'

"This was the first time I ever had to ask for help and it was really quite heartening and amazing to see that they did help and they helped in a big way. They really came through."

Hemler's story had a happy ending in more ways than that. Since the stroke, he said his father-in-law has "recovered in grand style."

Still, Hemler doesn't regret the decision to put his family over his career.

"To me that was the catalyst that said, 'Wait a minute, do we really want to move the family and move away from my wife's parents and all those other sorts of things?' " he said.

For many employers, the challenge of recruiting and retaining talent means that recognizing the needs of a work-life balance has to be priority -- not an afterthought only pushed by the human resources department.

"I think employers are getting a lot of questions from potential candidates around what kind of work-life balance they can expect and how the employer supports the employees," said Alexis Wise, vice-president and co-founder of LifeSpeak, an organization that helps companies develop programs around such work-life issues.

"It makes business sense for companies to invest in their people."

And while a glut of talent in the past meant companies could simply replace one burned-out employee with the next person standing in line, the shortage of talent today means that is not always an option.

"Employees are making the choice, when they feel overburdened a lot of them are taking the choice to step back and focus on family responsibilities for a time," said Wise. "And when employees are looking to make a change to a new job, one of their high priorities for evaluating positions is, 'What will my lifestyle be like at that job?'"

"Lifestyle considerations are very important and they continue to increase in importance."

At Ernst & Young, a seminar program run by LifeSpeak that covers three major areas -- parenting, caring for aging parents and the elderly, and personal health and well-being -- is only one measure the company has in place to address the needs of its workers.

For Lokesh Chaudhry, the parenting seminars not only gave him valuable advice, but also opened up a network of colleagues at his workplace who shared similar parenting concerns.

When Chaudhry's daughter was born almost two years ago, he and his wife Nidhi suffered all the anxieties and uncertainties of new parents.

And it seemed to Chaudhry, tax senior manager at Ernst & Young, that he was the only one in his office who was struggling to cope with the demands of a newborn and a hectic career.

That all changed when his company initiated the program, offering experts who came in and talked to employees about everything from getting your kid to bed at night to caring for aging parents.

Now, instead of feeling alone in dealing with the day-to-day issues that face many people who are trying to reconcile home and family with the demands of work, Chaudhry has not only experts to turn to but, even more importantly, he now can turn to colleagues who he knows face the same issues.

"The child we have is our first one and we spent tons of time on the Internet figuring out how to take care of the kid -- we were calling the nurse every second day," he said.

"It was quite a rough experience for us initially."

Flexible work arrangements that allow for such schedules as four-day work weeks and other programs combine to place Ernst & Young among companies that are recognizing the value of a work-life balance for their employees.

"It is always a challenge to balance our role as employee, as spouse, as the person caring for aging parents," said Chaudhry. "It takes a heavy toll on all of us -- it takes a toll on workers and their families.

"It's not only their personal life that is affected; it is their work that is affected as well."



CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun

Lokesh Chaudhry, tax senior manager at Ernst & Young, balances work and family with wife Nidhi (left) daughter Saanvi and mother Aruna. His employer offers flexible work arrangements and other programs to help employees with families.

The focus on family-friendly workplaces is proving to be a plus for Sarah Fowles, co-founder of Yummy Mummy Careers. While just launched last fall, www.yummymummycareers.com -- a service that brings together wannabe working mothers with perspective employers -- is already attracting postings from employers who realize there is an entire employment pool of educated and talented mothers who took a break from the workforce when their kids were born and are ready to re-enter it.

"It seemed to me that there was a gap in that there are employers looking for talented people and there is this amazing resource of educated and talented women who are ready to get back into the workforce," said Fowles.

Their very presence on yummymummycareers.com gives employers an opportunity to market themselves as offering family-friendly workplaces and so far Fowles said some 65 employers are regularly posting jobs on the site, which covers both Canada and the U.S.

"Employers are having to be smarter about how they are hiring because there isn't this huge pool of people waiting around to be employed," she said.

Attracting working mothers can include a wide variety of measures that certainly go far beyond the once trumpeted workplace daycare.

"The No. 1 thing mothers are looking for in a company is awareness," said Fowles. "They want a company that is at least aware, 'I have a family and that has implications.'"

"They want to be successful in their careers but they need some awareness and they need to be able to balance that out with their family."