

It pays to be family friendly

Firms realizing need to accommodate. Work-life balance is a priority, not merely an afterthought.

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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, Minn., 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, 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."

For many employers, the challenge of recruiting and retaining talent means that recognizing the needs of a work-life balance has to be a 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.

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," Fowles said.

Their very presence on yummymummycareers.com gives employers an opportunity to market themselves as offering family-friendly workplaces. So far, Fowles said 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," Fowles said. "They want a company that is at least aware, 'I have a family and that has implications.' "

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