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Meet the employers that don't 'do' flexibility

BY KATE MILLS / SEP 16, 2013 9:04AM / / / 0



Last week a female lawyer with a nine-month old son rang me to see if I knew of any flexible work opportunities. She is a highly qualified lawyer – trained at a top tier firm - and on maternity leave from her role in the in-house team at a well-known listed company.

After the birth of her child she no longer wanted to work five days a week so approached her employer about working four days instead. The answer was no: it was five days bum-on-seat or nothing.

This is a highly-qualified, experienced, lawyer who likes her job and wants to continue doing quality work. She is also a mother but the roles need not be mutually exclusive. A conversation with her could have drawn out other solutions – could she work extra hours one day a week and then be available for phone calls at home one day a week? Could she commit to making sure that her work would always be completed on time to a high standard, no matter where or when it was done?

That company will never know because it didn't have this conversation with her. Rather, it said there was only one way to work, leaving this well-trained lawyer in the market looking for another job.

A more progressive employer will hopefully hire her and gain a top-notch (and grateful and loyal) lawyer. Her previous company will lose a lawyer and start the costly and time-consuming process of re-hiring whilst also wondering why they struggle to hit gender diversity targets.

Meanwhile, in that company the perception that women can't combine motherhood and demanding jobs will be re-affirmed, making it harder for the next mother at this company to negotiate a more flexible package. And so the pattern continues.

Nothing about this scenario is particularly uncommon. Since I left BRW magazine to start **Professional Mums** – a platform where women in law, accounting, engineering and management consultancy to sign up to be contacted by firms that are attune to the needs of working mothers – I've been amazed by the firms that have told me, openly, they don't 'do' flexibility.

Partly I'm amazed because these are all firms that in my previous role editing BRW would have talked the talk on flexibility and diversity. But aside from that there's a huge talent pool of people that want to work flexibly that they are missing out on – which just doesn't make business sense.

Traditionally in labour markets employers are the demand and employees are the supply. But employees are a source of demand too – if enough of them want to work in a particular way the market will start to recognize that.

Professional Mums is supported by PwC, EY, Clayton Utz, Arup and Brown Wright Stein – firms that know that if they want to gain an edge in the labour market and attract a larger talent pool, offering flexible work practices is mandatory.

Unemployment may not be as low as it was but it will tighten again in the future. Savvy employers are those that realise flexibility isn't just a buzz-word or a short-term fad.

It is the future of work and isn't just for mothers– most workers need some degree of flexibility as our increasingly complex lifestyles no longer fit into nine-to-five.

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Flexibility isn't merely desirable; for a growing part of the population it's a necessity. Employers need to catch up.

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Megan Blandford · 2 months ago

The reality out there is frightening. I too faced this when returning from maternity leave to my senior management HR role. So disappointing as I'd been with the company nine years and the talk had been so positive... prior to my pregnancy. I applaud women like yourself, Kate, who help women in this situation.

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Patrick C · 2 months ago

This article highlights the continuing regression into the "good old days" where male bosses were akin to "God". Unfortunately for dinosaurs such as that the genie has been let out of the bottle and there is no going back.

What saddens me even more however are the numbers of female bosses who act in a punitive nature to their female colleagues either through a distorted form of jealousy or a desire to impress their male managers by being a "tough" boss.

I have occupied managerial roles at numerous organisations since 1989 and have always been a flexible manager to all my staff. The departments I worked for were always the most productive, happy, stable workplaces.

I have three children, two daughters and a son and all them understand that nothing can restrict or curtail their dreams. I would suggest that perhaps women who are restricted in their flexibility talk to each other and especially in the area of law band together and start their own firm. Watch their clients move over to follow them. We need to understand that with each month more and more people of both genders are realising that there is much much more to life than being a slave to a workplace. Three productive happy days are worth more than five resentful days where the staff member is chasing another role.

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Bindii · 2 months ago

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