



Each year, Working Mother magazine releases a list of the top 100 companies nationwide for women. Employers that make the grade offer an impressive menu of “mom-friendly” benefits, from wide-ranging flex options to generous paid maternity leave to affordable day care options. Baptist Health South Florida topped the 2007 list, with Va.-based Booz Allen Hamilton and the global accounting firm Ernst & Young following close behind.

Surprisingly, despite the fact that Orange County is home to major national and international corporations and our recognition as one of the country’s most family-friendly communities, no locally-headquartered companies made this year’s list. That prompted us to conduct our own investigation to see just how “mom-friendly” area companies really are. Keep reading to see how local employers, both big and small, are making it easier than ever for working moms, and dads, to balance their careers and family commitments.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

When it comes to maternity benefits, the U.S. lags sadly behind the rest of the world. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides 12 unpaid, job-guaranteed weeks off to care for newborn or newly adopted children. Canadian parents, in contrast, get up to 50 partially-paid weeks off, while in Sweden, parents enjoy up to 18 months off while their paychecks keep coming.

Orange County parents can take some solace in knowing that they live in one of the few states that offers paid parental leave: the California Family Rights Act (CFRA) grants new fathers up to six weeks off with partial pay to bond with a new child.

All 100 companies on the Working Mother survey augment the FMLA with fully or partially paid time off. While most local companies don't go beyond the CFRA benefit, the Capital Group Companies, with offices in Irvine and Brea, is setting the local standard. The investment management company, which employs nearly 1,400 women, offers moms an impressive 90 days of paid maternity leave beginning at 60 percent of their salary. Associates with five or more years of service are eligible for fully paid leave.

But even if OC moms are back on the job long before their far-flung sisters, many return to a workplace that is more willing than ever to accommodate a new generation's quest for professional satisfaction and personal fulfillment.



Jennifer Hughes, who works at Edwards Lifesciences Corporation in Irvine, used her company's adoption assistance program when she adopted her daughters Emma, 4, and Megan, 3.

"Gen X'ers have different needs and a different perspective on the workplace than baby boomers," explains Sharon A. Smith, vice president of People Services at Cox Communications' Orange County facility. "They are looking for a work-life balance."

This shift in view has led companies to respond with a host of progressive work arrangements, policies and programs offered to all employees that seek to facilitate the desire for work-life balance. Though not intended exclusively for women, they certainly enable working mothers to better juggle the competing demands they face.

At Cox, many employees choose to work a "4-10 schedule"—four ten-hour days with three days off each week, according to Smith. With nearly 33

percent of its 950-employee workforce composed of working mothers, that means an extra day at home to spend with family.

Flexible workweeks have been helpful to Laura Luciani, who, as a medical surgical nurse at Children's Hospital of Orange County, gets to choose the days she works.

"Being able to self-schedule takes a lot of stress out of it," says the Huntington Beach mother of two boys, ages 13 and 10. "My sons have a lot of extracurricular activities, and it's easier to mold my schedule to theirs than having to change their schedules around. They have a lot of things going on on Mondays and Thursdays, so I don't have to work those days."

VIRTUALLY WORKING

The explosion of modern technology, including computers, email and instant messaging, has meant that the workplace is no longer a precondition for getting the job done. According to the Conn.-based information technology research company Gartner Group, nearly 41 million corporate employees telecommute at least one day a week, while as many as 20 million are believed to work from home part time.

Telecommuting allows working mother Emily Carlton to be both a full-time employee and a stay-at-home mom. The 37-year-old director of client relations at the Tustin public relations firm HKA, works from home three full and two half-days a week, while caring for Nicholas, 2 and Gabrielle, six months.

On a typical day, Carlton checks email over a family breakfast, then goes off to do her “heavy concentration work” while one of the children’s grandparents takes over for her. At 11 a.m., everyone breaks for a mommy-and-me activity, lunch and a walk before Carlton goes back to work and the kids go down for a nap. She returns to her home office once more in the evening after Nicholas and Gabrielle have gone down for the night.

“I feel like I’ve truly got the best of both worlds,” says the Long Beach resident. “I’ve been able to not only sustain my salary, but grow my career while raising a family—that used to be unheard of. Having my boss make this work for me makes me feel really valued and appreciated.”

Carlton says she works 12-hour days, sometimes even more, because she wants to keep her boss happy with the arrangement and show her appreciation for the opportunity to contribute financially and emotionally to her family.

“Work-life balance is critical in building a strong and lasting corporate culture,” says Kim Shepherd of Laguna Beach, CEO of the recruiting company Decision Toolbox.

She should know. Her company has taken telecommuting to the extreme, eliminating its “bricks and sticks” Long Beach headquarters in 2003 and replacing it with a “virtual” network of employees – including 22 mothers—who work 100 percent from home.

“We operate under the premise that women can manage their time best by themselves,” says Shepherd. “We said ‘let’s build a company where there’s no separation between personal and work life.’ As long as you’re productive, you should be able to work whatever time of the day you want.”

Decision Toolbox employees, who are based from New Hampshire to New Zealand, decide how much they work and when they want time off. Compensation is based on performance. It’s a model Shepherd says that is ideally suited to today’s professional working mothers, whom she calls “born multitaskers.”

“I think I work harder because of that flexibility,” says Nicole Cox, the company’s full time recruitment director, who says she is much more productive from home than she was in an office setting.

“I’ve been able to grow professionally just as much or more than if I were in a different environment,” says the Laguna Niguel mother of a 14-year-old son and a 13-year-old daughter, who began as a recruiter with the company in 2003.



Flexible work weeks have been helpful to Laura Luciani, Huntington Beach mom of two and medical surgical nurse at CHOC.

GROWING THE FAMILY

Besides work time flexibility, companies are increasingly offering their employees assistance and support when it comes to personal and family matters.

Jennifer Hughes, director of global talent acquisition at Irvine-based Edwards Lifesciences Corporation, used the company's \$2500 adoption assistance program when she adopted her daughters, Emma, 4 and Megan, 3.

Nationwide, financial aid for adoption is being offered by 47 percent of major U.S. companies, according to the human resources consulting firm Hewitt Associates (up from 12 percent in 1990). In Orange County, Alcon Laboratories and Allergan Pharmaceuticals are among other companies that offer this benefit.

The money helped offset the \$15,000 and \$8,000 in fees Hughes incurred in adopting her girls. Even more important, she says, was the message it conveyed.

"It's another example of how Edwards really strives to meet everybody wherever they're at in their life phases and situations," says the Lake Forest mother. "They're very supportive of families and recognize that there are different ways people need to support their families.

Wellness programs are also finding their way into corporate life, as employers increasingly understand that a healthy employee is a more productive one. To that end, a growing number of companies offer services designed to take care of the whole employee, inside and out, providing everything from stress reduction and nutrition advice to financial management.

When problems arise, working moms at Edwards, Allergan, Alcon and elsewhere find support through employee assistance programs that provide counseling referrals and subsidized consultations to help cope with personal matters, parenting and child issues, and financial difficulties.

In March, the University of California, Irvine rolled out an Expectant Moms and Dads Workshop to help new parents prepare for time off from work due to pregnancy, childbirth or adoption, and bonding, according to university spokesperson Allan Taing. The workshop is being expanded to a full series which will include support with breastfeeding, nutrition, fitness and stress management.

Despite recent media reports that the economy has forced some companies to cut wellness programs and eliminate flex time, most experts agree that these programs are here to stay.

"Retention of good employees will continue to be very critical and the economic situation won't change that," says Cox's Smith, who has introduced award-winning wellness programs such as ergonomic fitting of office equipment, massage therapy and chiropractic services.

"It would be short-sighted to eliminate these programs in the interest of reducing costs because they support the whole employee and ultimately the employer benefits."

That's good news for working moms, whose careers and families will continue to flourish as companies make it ever more possible to have it all.