

This Mommy Track May Go Somewhere

Some companies offer a chance to advance on a schedule that allows more time at home

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Attorney Becky Belke works at a Los Angeles law firm where colleagues regularly toil nights and weekends. But as a mother of three children under the age of 5, she wants to work only three days a week — even if it means she can't become a partner soon.

No problem.

Not only has Belke's firm, Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, agreed to her part-time schedule, it will put her on its partnership track if she wants to boost her hours when her kids are older.

"I know if I were home with my kids every day I'd be insane, and if I were here every day I would not be happy," the 39-year old said of her part-time schedule. "It's a good situation for me."

Welcome to Mommy Track 2.0.

The old Mommy Track was a path where up-and-coming women found that having children effectively disqualified them for top positions. They either took themselves out of the running, settling for lower-level positions with more predictable hours and less responsibility, or their male bosses assumed that because these women had children, they wouldn't or couldn't give their all to the office.

Now, some employers in high-pressure professions such as law, medicine, accounting and finance — that years ago may have fired women who became pregnant — are finally giving working mothers what they've wanted for years: a shot at the top jobs but with flexible hours, part-time schedules or other concessions to their care-giving responsibilities.

They are increasingly willing to change the criteria for young mothers to reach top positions, giving them more time or the ability to leave for several years of child-raising and come back. Breast-feeding lounges, support groups, mentors and sabbaticals have become more commonplace as services for working mothers seeking to break the glass ceiling.

Years ago, the attitude of male executives was, "OK, let them compete in exactly the same way that men do," said Myra Strober, a Stanford University labor economist. "What's really changed is the appreciation that some sort of accommodation is required."

"So what if it takes 15 years to get 10 publications instead of seven years?" said Janet Bickel, a Virginia-based executive career consultant, arguing for more flexibility in

tenure or partnership tracks for younger working mothers.

Although many of these employer efforts — and the working mothers trying them out — are too new or young to show measurable results yet, the problem is clear. Women comprise nearly half of all law and medical graduates and a growing chunk of those earning business and engineering degrees, yet their share of top managerial and partnership positions, although growing, is much smaller.

The work-family squeeze eventually prompts a third of women professionals to leave their jobs for a couple of years or forever, said Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the New York-based Center for Work-Life Policy.

By showing that leaving a successful career to care for children did not prevent her from returning to a top job in corporate America, Brenda Barnes can be seen as a Mommy Track 2.0 pioneer.

Among the first mothers to reach the executive suite a decade ago when PepsiCo Inc. tapped her to lead its Pepsi-Cola North America division, Barnes' decision in 1997 to step down to spend more time with her three school-age children generated headlines and considerable angst in the business community.

"I'm not leaving because they need more of me," she said of her children at the time, "but because I need more of them."

Like many senior women executives, Barnes depended on full-time child care and little sleep to make the PepsiCo job work. She said then that she routinely rose at 3:30 a.m. to work a few hours before the nanny arrived. Breakfast with her children was a priority and she tried to leave the office by 7 p.m. to be with them in the evening.

But for many mothers like lawyer Belke, that full-throttle pace leaves them too little time to enjoy their children. Ultimately Barnes came to feel the same way — at least for a while.

After a year off, Barnes — who declined to be interviewed for this story — returned to the executive suite, this time as interim president of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. In July 2004, her children by then teenagers, she was named president of food company Sara Lee Corp. and now is its chief executive.

But she and other female CEOs — such as Indra Nooyi at PepsiCo, eBay Inc.'s Meg Whitman or Patricia A. Woertz of Archer-Daniels-Midland Co. — are still a rarity. Only 11 Fortune 500 companies have a female CEO, and as of last year more than half had fewer than three women corporate officers, according to Catalyst, a nonprofit research group based in New York.

The total number of female corporate officers at Fortune 500 companies grew by only 0.7 percentage point, to 16.4%, in the last three years, Catalyst said.

The percentage of female partners in law firms has nudged up slowly, to 17% in 2004 from 13% a decade earlier. In medical schools, the percentage of women in tenured faculty posts has stagnated at about 18% during the last two decades.

After rising steadily during the 1980s and 1990s, the percentage of adult women who are working has flattened. Overall, 75% of adult women were employed in 2004, down from nearly 77% in 2000, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Although there are many reasons for women dropping out of the workforce, or not entering at all, the difficulty of juggling children and a job has been cited as a key factor.

To keep their best women employees, some employers have come to recognize that they need to get creative — even if it means risking resentment from some male workers.

"Men have to come to grips with the fact that a growing proportion of the most talented people coming out of graduate and professional schools are women," said Paul Irving, managing partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips. "Working with them is a privilege, not a burden, and advancement processes have to be adjusted to reflect those changing demographics."

Although fathers are also generally eligible for the same leave programs or reduced schedules, relatively few take advantage of them, fearing they will be viewed as career lightweights, managers say.

The greater willingness to accommodate working mothers has a lot to do with the bottom line, because clients and customers are increasingly female.

"It's not acceptable for a law firm to pitch business to a client with five white men in the room," observed Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, a networking group.

Employers also recognize a different attitude toward work among those in their 30s and 40s. "This generation is a little bit less likely than the baby boomers to trade it all away for their professional career," noted Carol Mangione, a UCLA medical school professor who counsels younger physicians.

Accounting giant Ernst & Young hopes a companywide push for flexibility will retain more women. The traditional route for an accountant to become a partner involves 12 years of 10- to 12-hour days, said Billie Williamson, an Ernst & Young human resources manager. That pace has prompted many women to bail; only 15% of partners at major firms are female although women have earned half of all accounting degrees for some time, she said.

Accordingly, Ernst & Young launched its Working Moms Network in June. The program, aimed at new mothers coming back after maternity leave as well as those with older children, organizes quarterly gatherings where mothers can vent and share advice

and pairs new mothers with older women who serve as informal mentors.

Another big accounting firm, Deloitte & Touche, allows employees to take as many as five years off to care for children or pursue a personal goal and then come back.

Health products maker Johnson & Johnson credits its 11-year-old Women's Leadership Initiative with dramatically boosting the ranks of female executives through formal networks and mentoring aimed at middle managers. In 1995, no women served on Johnson & Johnson's executive committee; today 5 of its corporate officers are women and the company has promoted more than three dozen other female executives worldwide.

In smaller firms, including many law offices, retention efforts are more informal. Margaret Levy, a partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, said young women had individually hammered out arrangements that gave them more flexibility yet kept many on a partnership track.

Like Brenda Barnes, Sandra Kanengiser is a Mommy Track 2.0 trailblazer and proof that a slower partner track can work. The 50-year-old real estate lawyer had the first of her three children while in law school. When she looked for jobs, she insisted on a part-time schedule with a shot at becoming a partner.

Los Angeles-based Irell & Manella agreed to let her try. Kanengiser started with the firm in 1983 and became a partner 11 years later, one of a few who have made it to the top working at a two-thirds schedule.

"My kids are really proud of me. I think they are happy because I'm happy," she said.

Other women who have found a workable balance in their lives say the professional and personal rewards have been worth the struggle.

Lawyer Belke dismisses those who might consider her an "underachiever."

"I don't care about the title as long as I can come to work, be stimulated and be happy," she said.

For now, Belke has put off the decision about whether to try for a spot as partner.

"My life will probably be a lot different in 10 years because my kids will be older," she said.