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Removing the Glass Ceiling and Trap Doors: Best Practices for Engaging Working Mothers

By **David Thompson, MS**

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You have all seen the newspaper article like this, "Top female executive at Mega Industries to step down: Plans to spend more time with family." The intention of the article is often clear, to suppose a trend of professional women getting out of the rat race to be with their families. There are only two problems with this: first, there really is no trend and second, and most importantly, the real driver for them leaving is often the difficulty of being a working parent.

The real trends

According to a recent *TIME* magazine cover story, women now make up 49.5 percent of the total workforce and constitute over half of the students in higher education. In 2000, 39.1 percent of working women had children under the age of 18 at home, which is down from a high of only 40.8 percent in 1995.¹ But this is explained by the doubling of childless women in the past twenty years. Currently, 47 percent of women with graduate or professional degrees up to the age of 44 are childless.² These numbers are even more disturbing as they represent women's choices as they face the difficulty of having children while engaged in their career. Recent research which interviewed 1,647 "high-achieving women" found that 42 percent were childless, and that only 14 percent did not want children to begin with.³

Employees, and working mothers in particular, who do not have a supportive workplace environment, experience substantially higher levels of negative spillover from work into their lives off the job, which jeopardizes their personal and family well-being and work productivity.⁴ As a result of these trends, companies, like Microsoft, are recognizing the value in creating supportive environments.

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Creating a multi-faceted, integrated approach

For both women with children and those intending to have children, the issue of a successful, sustainable career revolves around many factors, such as work/life effectiveness, career development and solid mentoring. In addition to a strong benefits program, the solutions have come from many areas, such as WorkLife, Diversity, and training and development programs at Microsoft.

Work/Life services: A comprehensive resource and referral program is available to help parents find child care. Because even the best child-care arrangements can fall through, and often with little warning, Microsoft provides back-up child care as well. When school is out but Microsoft isn't, our School's Out program offers school age children day-long activities and learning.

Time is precious: Although work/life issues affect both men and women, they do not necessarily affect them equally. Although men have increased their hours each week on household tasks, women still work an extra day each week when their work hours and household tasks are added up.⁵ This is driven by the fact that twice as many women have spouses who work full-time, than visa-versa. Thus, the need for flexibility and work/life initiatives to manage home and professional responsibilities becomes crucial. By creating a formal, flexible work arrangement program, which included formal guidelines for managers and employees, Microsoft has seen a 45 percent increase in part-time arrangements. Eighty-five percent of these arrangements are for women.

Mentoring and networking: The Microsoft Diversity group has self-organized employee resource groups that are initiated and chartered by employees. These groups provide support and networking opportunities such as mentoring, recruiting, working in the community, and career development. Three such employee resource groups are for working parents, single parents, and women. They provide web pages with discussion boards and anonymous email alias service, and regularly sponsor workshops, brown bags, and social activities for their members. The women's resource group has grown from a simple email alias into an empowerment tool for mentoring, sharing job concerns, developing careers, and learning how to balance work and family for over 1,800 women employees at Microsoft.

Microsoft has seen great success with the advent of its mentoring program. Matching is based on similarities of goals, interests and career development. Once matched, both mentor and mentee can go through training, either on-line or in-person. The experiences and evaluations have been positive, and the program is proving to be a great success.

Long-term approach

Creating a supportive work/life environment for employees does involve the right mind set and culture throughout an organization. Individual efforts and programs will do little by themselves if there is not an appreciation of the difficulty working parents face and the value their experiences bring. Establishing a workplace that is supportive of its employees' needs to balance all the priorities in their lives is crucial to improving employee productivity.

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