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Firms Aim To Retain Employees By Focusing On Their Children

In order not to lose talented, young PR pros as they start families, agencies are making it easier for staff to spend time with their kids, even if that means making room for them at work. By Hamilton Nolan

PR agencies, like corporations in general, were not always known as family-friendly institutions. They, along with the rest of society, have progressed over the last half-century toward equality and liberalization, embracing cultural and gender diversity.

But what about the babies? Women in the PR world might have risen above the proverbial glass ceiling, but they still take responsibility for the bulk of the work involved in child rearing.

Today, the demands of motherhood are a real issue for agencies seeking to recruit and retain employees who become parents. Some have faced the prospect of losing promising young talent over a perceived choice between family and career; others have been proactive in their search for creative solutions. As it turns out, plenty of firms have found unique, forward-thinking ways to answer the question, what do we do with these kids?

Margie Fox, cofounder of Maloney & Fox in New York and the mother of a

5-year-old daughter, developed a simple philosophy: "Let the kids come first." She says the firm makes a point of cutting parents all the slack they need. That means generous maternity leave and flexible hours, and allowing new parents to work from home if need be.

Most of Fox's employees aren't parents, but they support the policy with the understanding that they will get to take advantage of it when the time comes. "We have a posse here called 'gotcha back,'" Fox says with a laugh.

At Vanguard Communications in Washington, DC, a 35-person firm that works exclusively for nonprofits and government entities, the childcare issue came to the fore a few years ago, when the director of operations was out on

maternity leave. Determined not to lose the top-level talent any longer than necessary, president Maria Rodriguez offered to let her bring the baby to work. Since then, several other staffers have taken advantage of the perk.

Though Vanguard has never had more than two kids at a time in the office, the effect on everyone has been cathartic. "Everybody gets the benefit of being around a child," says Deanna Troust, Vanguard director. "[It] totally changes the climate."

Florida-based RBB PR employees had no children 10 years ago; in the last seven years, they've had 10.

"It changed the way all our benefits work," says CEO Christine Barney, who is only weeks away from her own

Agencies and new parents

Smart agency strategies for new parents:

- Flexible scheduling
- Allowing kids in the office
- 20-hour work weeks after maternity leave
- In-house day-care facilities

Benefits for the firms:

- Easier recruitment
- Better retention rates
- Higher employee job satisfaction
- Clients love babies

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due date, RBB instituted flexible work schedules (including opportunities to work part time or telecommute), a generous insurance plan, and what Barney calls "the most robust vacation schedules you'll ever see." The effect has been a rise in employee loyalty, job satisfaction, and a tiny 8% turnover rate.

"We are able to retain people because we were able to adapt to their needs," Barney says.

Some firms have gone even further, making the ultimate commitment to parenthood by installing in-house daycare centers. In the Phoenix office of ad and PR firm Riester-Robb, the first-floor baby facility is "packed," says director of client services Cammy Wagner. The company opened the center—complete with a full-time nanny—about five years ago. The business ponied up the money for the design, materials, and space, and participating parents pay a small daily fee. Over a dozen children have made their way through it so far. Wagner, whose son was the "inaugural kid," says the arrangement has worked out very well.

"You invest so much in an employee," she says. "To lose them because they decide to have a family is an unfortunate situation."

In the lemonade-from-lemons department is tech firm MCC in Dallas, which took a hit when the tech bubble burst, leaving CEO Mike Crawford with more offices than employees. Instead of filling the space with the empty shells of doomed dot-com startups, he decided to convert it into a "child development center." On the last Friday of every month, MCC closes up early so that everyone can play with the kids. PR coordinator Michelle Owens says that the babies even give the firm a reputation boost.

"We bring clients down to see it," she says. "It's a wonderful experience."

PR pros shouldn't mind having screaming babies in the office; they can't be any worse than clients. Scott Hildula, a principal at the boutique Red Umbrella Group in San Francisco, believes that the little guys are leading the way toward a brighter future for young parents in the industry.

"If big agencies ever figure out the value of this underutilized talent pool," Hildula wrote in an e-mail, "there will be a whole generation of mentors for the fresh crop of communications majors who enter agency life every year only to burn out and leave the profession 18 months later."

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