

## **You Can't Have Everything — but You Can Be Successful At What Is Most Important To You: Workplace Trends That Support Professional Women**

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After being in the “working world” for about ten years, I came home to my husband in tears. “I have been lied to...,” I told him. As he propped himself defensively against the kitchen counter, he asked me what in the world I was talking about. “You see,” I explained, “My father has told me from time that I was four or five years old that I could have everything that I wanted in life as long as I was willing to work hard for it and believe in myself.” As I explained this to my husband, he was still confused, but relieved that the problem didn’t center around him. I counted on this advice through sports, college, graduate school, my first job with a Fortune 50 company, and now as the second generation with my family’s business. Over the past few months, as a working mother of two toddlers and the wife of an unusually supportive husband, I have come to realize what all working women eventually realize—I can’t do everything, at least not well and all at the same time. As I confronted my father with this perceived 25-year untruth, he corrected my recollection. What I had been told was, “You can do *anything* that you want, if you are willing to work hard and believe in yourself.” Big difference, huh?

The good news: workplace trends are rapidly improving to allow professionals like you and me to do anything (not everything) that they wish, without sacrificing tremendously in their personal lives. Three trends that I feel are allowing women (even in Greenville, SC) to make tremendous strides in their ability to balance personal and professional time are: flexible schedule/time off policies, leave benefits, and technology.

The SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management) 2002 Benefits Survey reports that a staggering 66% of responding companies in the U.S. offer Paid Time Off Plans. These plans roll sick time, vacation, personal time, etc. all into one “bank” of time that an employee can take away from the office. Not only does this type of time off policy “level the playing” field between working parents and nonworking parents, but it allows working mothers to take time away from the office to care for sick children, attend school events, and become involved in other significant parenting experiences without the guilt or negativity associated with absenteeism. (Others may not realize that we really *don't* want to take extra time away and *don't* want to be treated with favoritism.) Even better, in 2002, 64% of companies surveyed offer some type of flextime arrangement to employees. Still, flexible schedules are often offered only where there is an established, trusting relationship already in place. In addition, with the advent of the Family Medical Leave Act in 1996, many parents are now able to take long term leave that was not previously available to them for the birth or illness of a family member. Though this act provides the ability for many women to take a longer leave for birth or adoption, the real impact has been created by the significant increase in the number of companies who offer Short Term Disability Insurance (82%-- up from 75% in 1998) and Long Term Disability insurance (91% in 2002). The bottom line is that many mothers cannot afford to take the time off allowed to them by their companies if at least a part of it is not paid. In my opinion, it is not the employer’s responsibility to pay for the leave, in that many small businesses simply cannot afford to do so; however, it is certainly a plus if employees have the option to take STD and/or LTD coverage so that they can take this special time away from work and still pay the bills. The Society for Human Resource Management also reports that 37% of employers offered telecommuting on a part-time basis, with 23% offering it on a full-time basis. Futurists predict that this number will only increase. Before you breathe a sigh of relief: what employees don’t always consider is that technology also has promoted the 24/7 expectations of employers, coworkers, and customers. Telecommuters do not report a decrease in the number of hours worked, but only more control over when those hours are worked.

Though many of the trends that we are seeing in the U.S. are hitting home in Greenville, SC, our market tends to be very conservative rather than cutting edge. A large percentage of the employers in the Upstate are small and medium sized companies. Many cannot afford to implement the more expensive, cutting edge human resources policies and benefits; however, we

have found that the family and community oriented Southern culture found right here at home is very supportive of working women overall. The number of working women is increasing in Greenville, SC as well as across the country. As Sylvia Ann Hewlett writes in Creating a Life: Professional Women and The Quest for Children, [you must be] “willing to make sacrifices/exchanges for those things which are important to you!”