

WORK & FAMILY

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Employers Step Up Efforts to Lure
Stay-at-Home Mothers Back to Work
February 9, 2006; Page D1

A growing number of employers are taking major steps to help women with an age-old problem: Returning to the work force after taking time off to raise kids.

Booz Allen Hamilton, Lehman Brothers, Deloitte & Touche and Merrill Lynch, among others, are working to lower the barriers with targeted recruitment, special retraining, mentoring, and new kinds of employment relationships designed to keep ex-employees tied to the firms. While such programs amounted to a trickle in the past, they've now grown to a stream, and a few employers are beginning to reap results.

When Susan Siverson quit her Wall Street human-resource job at a banking concern last April to stay home with her twin toddlers, she had no intention of returning for years. If asked then, "I would have said, 'You'd have to drag me kicking and screaming,'" she says. But a campaign by Lehman Brothers to woo at-home mothers like Ms. Siverson -- inviting her to an executive luncheon for ex-Wall Streeters, contacting her repeatedly and offering flexible work -- changed her attitude. She thought, "Maybe this is a tenable option for me," she says. She became a part-time consultant for the firm last month.

A need for skilled employees, particularly in accounting, consulting and finance, is leading big employers in these fields to get creative. Although their new programs are open to both women and men, they're drawing more females because skilled women are more likely to leave high-paying jobs in the first place, to raise children and for other reasons. In a study of 13,838 employees, Watson Wyatt, Arlington, Va., found women ages 25 to 40 making over \$75,000 a year were nearly 20% more likely to leave their jobs than men. Female turnover was 11.4% a year, compared with 9.6% for men.

But research also shows these women seek to return to the work force fairly quickly, as long as they have a workable and appealing setup. A survey of 2,443 women and 653 men, co-authored by Sylvia Ann Hewlett of the Center for Work-Life Policy, found women who take career breaks are only out of the work force for 2.2 years, on average. And only 5% of mothers who return even want to go back to their former employers; instead, they seek flexibility at smaller firms or by starting their own businesses.

Big companies are trying to win these women back by addressing the barriers to re-entry -- offering flexible schedules and helping women bring out-of-date skills up to snuff and

revive their neglected professional networks. Such efforts are often referred to as "on-ramping" because they create a path back into the workplace.

In one such program, called "Encore," Lehman feted 71 fast-track dropouts, including Ms. Siverson, at a half-day seminar and luncheon last November. The firm invited former employees and other professionals who had left Wall Street jobs, which it identified largely by networking with current employees. Lehman President Joe Gregory touted Lehman's alternative work setups and support of "nonlinear careers" that may have breaks in them for child-rearing. Lehman execs also offered a short course in recent industry developments.

RETURN ENGAGEMENTS

Some tactics employers are using to lure at-home moms back to work:

- Offering paid at-home work projects
- Providing training and career planning
- Assigning mentors to help stay in touch
- Issuing invitations to office parties and meetings
- Sponsoring mothers' networks for current and former employees
- Assigning internal recruiters to match skills with openings

A majority of attendees followed up with interviews; Lehman set up a special email address and assigned two internal recruiters to make sure the resumes, marked by gaps for child-rearing, didn't wind up in hiring managers' recycling bins, says Anne Erni, Lehman's chief diversity officer. Several prospective hires are "in the pipeline," Ms. Erni says, and Lehman is hosting another "Encore" luncheon today in London.

Eyeing similar goals, Goldman Sachs, New York, is planning an on-ramping event early in summer for ex-employees and others, says Melinda Wolfe, the firm's managing director, global leadership and diversity. Final plans are still being developed.

Other firms are creating new kinds of relationships with ex-employees. Booz Allen Hamilton 18 months ago designated 148 of its ex-consultants as "adjuncts." Under a new policy set for formal adoption April 1, adjuncts are offered work for pay on short projects, plus training, career planning and, if they perform well, an option to hire back on, says DeAnne Aguirre, a senior vice president for the McLean, Va.-based consulting firm. The idea, she says, is to maintain a relationship with the alums, so that when they come back to the work force, "they won't even look anywhere else."

One participant, Ani Singh, a former Booz Allen consultant in Washington, D.C., who has taken three years off with her young child, says she believes the firm has "shown itself to be a supportive employer -- a place that I could always go back to."

One of the earliest initiatives, Deloitte & Touche's "Personal Pursuits" program, which began in 2004, is so promising that the firm is preparing to enroll a second round of

participants, says Cathy Benko, head of the firm's initiative to advance women. In the first round, the firm allotted 28 top performers leaves of up to five years, with mentoring and training and the opportunity to do paying projects at will during that time. It's too early to tell how many participants will return to the firm. However, some seem intent on doing so.

One first-round participant, Debbie McLaughlin of Palatine, Ill., who quit as a consultant for Deloitte in 2004 to be a stay-at-home mom, says working on part-time projects has kept her skills sharp, and increased the likelihood that she'll return in a few years.

Other firms are using recruiting campaigns aimed at boosting women's confidence. Merrill Lynch co-sponsored three job fairs last year entitled "What To Do When Mother Is On Your Resume." The events drew about 400 women. Merrill has interviewed 80, hired several, and is planning more such events this year, says Rick Capozzi, a managing director.

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