

BUSINESS EDITOR DAVID BERMAN, dberman@flatoday.net or 242-3654

Working mothers take a hit

Firms trimming benefits in tight job environment

BY STEPHANIE ARMOUR
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

After Melissa Kimball's son was born, she asked her company to let her work part time on a permanent basis.

When the company said no, Kimball said goodbye.

"I didn't want to quit. I loved my job," says Kimball, 36, an architect in Washington, D.C., who left her job in April to stay

home with Chance, 20 months. "But I felt like, if I'm not valuable enough for them to make family-friendly policies work, then the job isn't for me," she said.

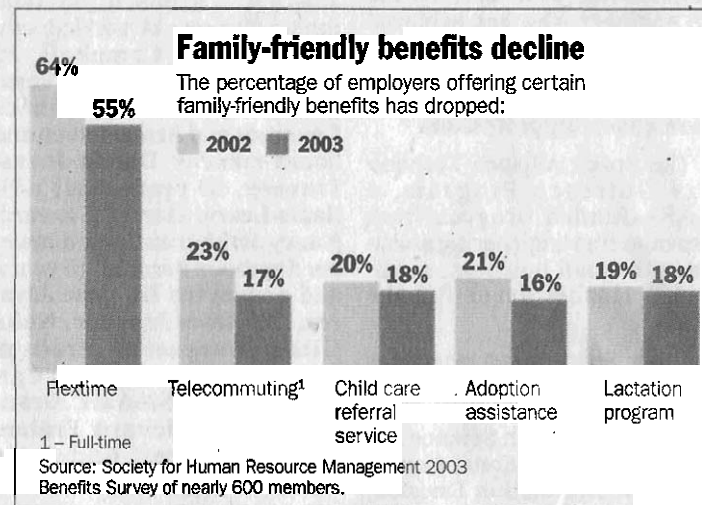
Companies that once touted family-friendly benefits are cutting back in this tight job market, slashing programs that let employees telecommute, work part time, share jobs or take paid family leave. The reversal is having a profound impact on a number of working mothers now struggling with whether to leave jobs.

The labor force participation rate of mothers ages 15-44 with children under 1 year old slid

from a record 59 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2002, part of the first downward slide since the Census Bureau began tracking the figure in 1976. While those women may represent a return to more traditional family arrangements, some workplace experts suspect they also may be leaving the work force — at least temporarily — because they can't find the flexibility they seek.

"Some of the reasons women are going to the home is because organizations are

See **MOTHERS**, 3C



Working moms

paying a price

MOTHERS, from 1C

not stepping up to the plate. Some organizations are cutting back," says Lisa Levey of Catalyst, a research and advisory group in New York.

Few programs are being spared. The number of employers offering paid family leave dropped from 27 percent in 2001 to 23 percent last year, according to a Society for Human Resource Management survey of nearly 600 members. Those offering flexible work hours tumbled from 64 percent in 2002 to 55 percent in 2003. Job sharing dropped from 26 percent in 2001 to 22 percent last year.

Not family friendly

A separate study by tax and business information provider CCH of more than 400 employers also found that family-friendly programs are getting the ax, with job sharing dropping from 37 percent in 2002 to 30 percent in 2003. Telecommuting fell from 47 percent to 45 percent during the same time. And those offering compressed workweeks, which generally let workers put in their hours over four days rather than five, slipped from 49 percent in 2002 to 40 percent last year.

Not all companies are slashing benefits, and some work-family experts say employers won't go too far because these benefits are so valued by employees. But the cutbacks have left some working mothers feeling squeezed.

After being laid off from her sales job two months ago, Krista Sweeney, 33, decided she'd had enough of the inflexibility. Instead of looking for another corporate job, she launched a Web site, a resource for moms called MomsVoice.com, and she is selling health-care benefits from home so she can spend more time with her sons, Tyler, 10, and Stephan, 1.

"It's much more flexible. I can be here for my children," says Sweeney, of Redmond, Wash. "I don't have to ask for sick time, vacation time. I can go to my son's games and plays, the things I couldn't do before. They see that family is important, not the dollar."

Companies are scaling back on their flexible programs in part because they're on a cost-cutting frenzy. Work-life programs are sometimes scratched as part of that effort and because they're seen as benefiting only some employees.

But many of these programs don't cost much to implement, so

cost-cutting is just one reason for the change.

In this competitive business environment where being accessible to clients is critical, some employers are reducing family-friendly programs because they perceive a greater need to have everyone in the office. Others have tried the programs but think they don't work: More than a quarter of supervisors say telecommuting can impair job performance, according to a 2001 study by Menlo Park, Calif.-based staffing services firm OfficeTeam.

And some employers remain uncomfortable with the benefits. They worry that some workers will abuse arrangements such as telecommuting and that so many employees will want the arrangements that they'll be forced to pick who gets the perk.

"In an era when employers have the upper hand, there's little upside to family-friendly policies," says Steven Friedman, a New York lawyer who chairs the benefits practice at law firm Littler Mendelson. "In the 1990s, there was this feeling that these policies were necessary. There's been quite a turnaround."

Vanishing benefits

While a number of work-family experts believe companies will expand those programs once the economy improves, others say the economy's health is so uncertain that any comeback will take time. Meanwhile, working mothers say it's frustrating to make life decisions based on benefits that can vanish as quickly as stock market gains.

But it's not just an issue for mothers. Childless employees who want to spend less time in the office and working fathers also say they're facing more resistance.

It was a rough lesson for Robert Smith, 30, a father of four children, all younger than 9. His wife also worked for a telemarketing company and the children were in day care. In 2002, Smith worked at a public relations job, but he often missed work when his children got sick. His company allowed 12 days to be missed for personal reasons or illness in a year. On the 13th absence, Smith says he was fired.

"It's rhetoric. Companies say they're family friendly, but it's only pro-family if nothing goes wrong," says Smith of Rockford, Ill., who has started his own public relations business, Robert Smith & Associates PR. "I was biting my nails, wondering, 'How are we going to eat?'" ■