

## Creating Profit Friendly Workplaces

Since its founding 26 years ago, Research Triangle technology leader SAS (which sold \$1 billion in analytical software to America's largest corporations last year) has made money every quarter. But according to SAS co-founder and CEO, Jim Goodnight, leading edge technology is not the only key to SAS success. One secret of this premier North Carolina company's success is that it has also helped set the national standard for creating a work environment that is 'profit-friendly', because it's family friendly." What's wrong with treating your people good?" says Goodnight. "It's worked for us." His company's 104 consecutive quarters of double-digit growth back him up—as does SAS's enviable employee turnover rate of just 3 percent.

"You don't have to be a 'mega' technology company like SAS to increase your profits with a family-friendly strategy" says Columbia, SC-based Ann Elliott, whose Berkana Company specializes in advising companies on how to implement family-friendly policies and practices. To prove her point Elliott cites recent winners of South Carolina's Family Friendly Workplace Award. "By any standards," Elliott insists, "most of these winners are small companies. In some cases they have only a handful of employees." What each of these winners does have plenty of, Elliott emphasizes is "a willingness to invest in their most valuable assets—their employees." These are firms that go out of their way, in Elliott's opinion, to help their workplace cope "with the often competing demands of family and work."

Just what does it take to be an award-winning family-friendly workplace? "Regardless of size," says Elliott, "these family friendly workplace award winners are firms that do a lot more than benchmark health and financial benefits in order to match or exceed them." Here are the clues Elliott looks for when she evaluates the "family friendliness" of a company's policies:

- \* An atmosphere of respect for all employees, "from the board room to the cleaning crew"
- \* A willingness on the part of supervisors to be flexible with employee work schedules or open to permitting off site work arrangements
- \* A company commitment to providing employees with training to deal with real life family concerns—like selecting quality child-care, parenting skills, managing money, or caring for elderly parents at home

- \* Tuition reimbursements for continuing education of all kinds, whether or not it's directly job related
- \* A company commitment to community involvement, including allowing employees release time to volunteer for family-friendly community projects such as child care, mentoring students or delivering meals to shut-ins
- \* Scholarship programs for dependent children of employees
- \* On site wellness facilities or childcare programs

According to Elliott, The Berkana Company's experience with South Carolina companies suggests that there are at least four key components to creating a family friendly workplace:

- \* Key Element No. 1., A willingness to take a hard, honest look at the current policies (both written and unwritten)
- \* Key Element No. 2., A willingness to ask employees what they need and want
- \* Key Element No. 3., A willingness to think creatively about what is possible
- \* Key Element No. 4., (And most important of all), a willingness to take action

Taking action to make a company more family-friendly, Elliott asserts, "requires more than lip service to principles. It requires the personal commitment of the leader or business owner." For this to happen, she says, "A leader needs a clear vision of what is possible." The major barrier to this kind of imaginative leadership, Elliott acknowledges, is that "In all too many organizations, decisions are driven *exclusively* by the short-term bottom line. Managers forget that when an employee punches in for work, the whole person shows up, bringing all of their family concerns with them."

But for the business leader with the courage to make the commitment, investing in family-friendly policies can be worth the effort. As Stanford University business professor, Jeffrey Pfeffer, puts it, "In order to be exceptional and earn extra-ordinary returns you have to dare to be different.": The benefits of being different enough to support the family-friendly approach, according to Elliott, are both documentable and impressive, with many firms reporting outcomes like:

- \* Reduced costs
- \* Increased productivity and higher profits
- \* More satisfied customers
- \* A positive impact on the community
- \* An energetic and dynamic organization where people enjoy working

Implementing family friendly policies can be a big win for your customers, your employees and your bottom line. © 2004 Ann Elliott

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