

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL INDEPENDENT PROJECT

# Creating an Environment to Thrive

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How Companies Support Executive Working Mothers

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Our field study team undertook a project to understand how organizations can create an environment that is supportive of executive working mothers through both formal and informal policies, programs and practices. As part of our study, we conducted an extensive literature review. We also spoke with 39 working mothers and 15 human resources professionals and experts in the field. While we have each taken innumerable lessons from this study, we outline our key conclusions and takeaways below.

### Parent Focused Programs are an Important Baseline

Great improvements have been made in maternity leave policies, and many companies are beginning to offer paternity leave as well. In addition, company-supported child care, such as on-site day care or back-up care, is becoming more common. While many of the women we spoke with found these programs to be very beneficial, neither were true differentiating factors for success in balancing work and family. In speaking with working mothers, it seems that maternity leave policies have in some ways become a baseline benefit. Since maternity leave policies are increasingly becoming expected by working mothers, the absence of good maternity leave elicited a very strong negative reaction. The presence of good maternity leave, however, was not the most crucial element. Regarding child care, professional, financial and personal circumstances influenced the importance of this benefit. For many, child care was not a crucial factor in their ability to maintain career momentum. Despite this, many of the women we spoke with noted there is additional value in programs such as maternity and paternity leave and child care as indicators of a broader commitment to support working parents.

### The Three Main Enablers of Success Are Flexibility, People and Culture

While each woman's process for balancing work and family was unique, across all of our

conversations three factors stood out as being most beneficial: **flexibility, people and culture.**

#### Flexibility

One of the most often stated contributors to success as a working mother was access to flexibility, both formally and informally. For most women, flexibility as a working mother essentially meant the ability to prioritize family when they needed to, while maintaining a commitment to producing high quality work. Whether it was flexibility in when they arrived at or left the office each day or flexibility in where, how much, and when they worked each week, most women we spoke with found this to be invaluable to their success. Another important aspect of flexibility for many women was the ability to take alternative roles within a company for a period of time that provided greater flexibility, such as part-time roles, non-clients roles or reduced-travel roles. However, the women believed that it was critical that flexible roles not hurt their overall career progression, and that they would be able to move from these roles into more "fast track" roles when they were ready.

#### People

The majority of the women we spoke with mentioned it was crucial to have access to individuals who were supportive of their professional and personal goals and responsibilities. The individual that had the most influence over one's success as a working mother was unsurprisingly one's boss; many women talked about how having a supportive and understanding boss made the difference in their ability to maintain career momentum and a satisfying family life. Mentors were noted as the second most important individuals, with many women speaking of the importance of having both professional mentors who provided career guidance and more personal mentors who provided advice on the unique challenges of being a working mother. Finally, women noted that having access to other women, specifically

other working mothers, either through formal networking programs or informal relationships, was very beneficial in getting both advice and support.

### Culture

Over 75 percent of the women we spoke with listed a culture that was supportive of working parents as being extremely important. Given that culture is an inherently difficult thing to judge from the outside, the women provided potential indicators of a supportive culture. As mentioned above, the presence of formal policies and programs, such as maternity/paternity leave and child care can be good indicators of how an organization values working parents. However, many women reiterated that it was important for the company to see these programs as part of a strategic priority of keeping working mothers in the company because it is good for business. The CEO and senior leadership's viewpoints on family are important to gauge. Indicators may include whether senior leaders personally prioritize their family at times or encourage others to do so. How individuals in the broader organization view family is also important and is often represented by how open individuals are about having families. Finally, the presence of mothers at the top and in various roles and functions throughout the organization is a great indicator that there are ways to make it work within that company.

### **Finding Your Version of Balance is a Personal Process**

While our study was focused on how organizations can support executive working mothers, we have come to a greater appreciation of the fact that it is up to the individual to figure out how best to balance the demands of having a career and a family. Within the context of a career, this involves finding a career you love, forging a path that works for you and making conscious trade-offs when necessary.

### Chose a Career You Love

For most of the women we spoke with, the ability to maintain career momentum and success after having a family was strongly linked to choosing a career that they were passionate about. They recommended that women first and foremost pick their careers and companies based on a passion for the job, rather than on the parent-focused programs available. Although many women noted it was difficult to be away from their children each day at work, they relied on the fact that they felt motivated, challenged and inspired by what they do.

### Forge Your Own Path

Although speaking with these women provided many examples of how to balance a career and a family, all women will have to find a path that works for their individual careers and incorporates their own priorities, interests and goals. While one's path will be influenced by professional choices, such as company and industry, and personal choices, such as when to have children and how to structure child care, our interviewees emphasized that women should remember that they can make it work. They also strongly recommended that individual women figure out what they need to be successful and then ask for it.

### Be Prepared for Trade-Offs

While all of the women we spoke to are successful working mothers, they noted that their success came with trade-offs. For some women, the decision to take a part-time role meant that their career progression slowed in the short-term. For others, it was that the decision to take a heavy travel role while having a small child meant they had to find greater support at home. Regardless, the women recommend that individuals think through the trade-offs they would be willing to make before it comes time to make them. Further, for many women, the recognition that they were planning a long-term career, or "running a marathon rather than a sprint" made some of the trade-offs easier.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Harvard Business School MBA Class of 2013 has 39 percent women, a record high for the school.<sup>1</sup> Looking at history, it is evident that this number demonstrates significant progress in the realm of women's advancement in business. The HBS MBA class of 1995 had only 28 percent women and the class of 1975 had a mere 11 percent.<sup>2</sup> The increasing number of women in business schools is encouraging and would lead one to believe that women in the business world have enjoyed similar advancement. When we look at the business world today, however, we see many statistics that do not reflect the same degree of progress. A recent *Fortune magazine* article notes that women make up just three percent of Fortune 500 CEOs today.<sup>3</sup> Research Company GMI reported that out of 3,049 public companies, only 98 of the CEOs were females. This means female CEOs represent a mere 3.2 percent.<sup>4</sup>

It is with this knowledge that our field study team embarked on a project to understand how organizations can create an environment that is supportive of executive working mothers. We first examined a study by two HBS MBA 2011 graduates, titled "Women on the Fast Track," which had researched personal strategies that women could use in building a successful career and family.<sup>1</sup> One of the themes that came out of this research was that women should choose a career and a company deliberately. Many women referenced seeking out organizations with policies and cultures that were supportive of women and more specifically mothers and parents. Given that one's company was identified as a critical factor for success, we wanted to delve deeper into this topic. Our goal was to better understand the policies, programs and practices that were truly helpful to working mothers so that we could aid our peers in their search for organizations that would support them as they build their careers and raise families. Although there are publications that identify the companies that are "best" for working mothers, we felt the unique challenges for MBAs, many of whom are interested in becoming "fast track executives," were different from the broader market. These executive roles often come with challenging work hours, travel requirements and other demands. We also hypothesized that the formal practices covered by these publications may not be enough and wanted to understand the additional informal and cultural practices that were needed to support women as they rise in organizations. Furthermore, some women from MBA programs may go to medium-sized and small companies. These companies are typically not featured on lists such as *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies due to their size. Additionally, the formal benefits discussed in these publications are often not relevant for smaller companies due to the large cost and infrastructure required. We wanted to understand what is important for working mothers regardless of the size of the organization. Thus, we have focused on understanding the policies, programs and practices, both formal and informal, employers have enacted that women truly value and that enable women to have a career and a family at the same time. We set out with the goal of answering the following questions:

- What formal practices are most effective from the employee perspective?
- What are the informal practices that are most beneficial?
- What are potential indicators that suggest an organization will be successful in enabling working mothers to succeed (e.g., more women at the firm, more mothers in leadership positions)?

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<sup>i</sup> For access to the presentation on "Women on the Fast Track" see WSA website's resource tab (<http://hbs.campusgroups.com/wsa/resources/>)

Our ultimate objective for the study was to help others understand what factors make an organization a great place for working executive mothers. We also wanted to assess how working executive mothers can be strategic in finding the best companies and roles for their needs. Furthermore, we want to empower women with the findings from this study so they can act as change agents in their future organizations. Our belief is that as MBAs, we will have the power as leaders to help make organizations better places for women to thrive. In the next 10 to 20 years we hope to see statistics that demonstrate far better progress in terms of the percentage of female leaders of organizations.

### **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

To answer these questions, we took a three-pronged approach. First, in order to ensure we incorporated the knowledge of leading thinkers on the topic, we conducted a review and analysis of existing literature. We utilized various resources, including books, scholarly and trade journals, reports and newspaper and magazine articles. We also spoke with Harvard Business School professors who had relevant knowledge and contacts.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging that the working mother experience is a very personal one and understanding that there are many nuanced viewpoints not covered in the literature, the second part of our work involved interviewing working mothers themselves. These interviews were intended to provide clarity on what women see as the most effective organizational practices. Third, to get an institutional perspective on these practices we spoke with individuals who are involved in human resources, either as the managers of these programs within companies or as a part of companies with particular expertise in this area, such as professional development firms or executive placement firms for working mothers.

For our working mother interviews, we spoke with 39 women across 12 industries and a wide distribution of functional roles (see *Exhibit 1* for further information on our interviews). All of our interviewees and their companies will remain anonymous, as we felt that under this condition the women we interviewed would be more willing to speak openly about their experiences and give their honest opinions. In order to select women we felt would have experience most relevant to our target population of MBA students we set clear criteria: We sought out women who have been out of business school for five or more years or women considered to be executives in their organizations (at the management level). These women all have at least one child, though most have two children. In most circumstances the women are married and have husbands who also work. It is important to note that the majority of these women have been in the workforce consistently since having children, except for regular maternity leaves. Most have already reached higher management levels within their organizations and thus it could be assumed that these women prioritize career in addition to family.

Aside from speaking with the working mothers who are the beneficiaries of these organizational practices, we also interviewed 15 human resources representatives and experts in the field. We spoke with at least one representative from each of the larger industries we covered.

The working mothers and human resources representatives we interviewed were sourced through our own personal networks, through our classmate's networks and through Harvard Business School alumni outreach. All participants were asked a standard set of questions (see *Exhibits 2 and 3* for our questions). Their responses were typically gathered during the course of a 30-minute phone interview. The interviews

took place between September 2011 and December 2011 and were conducted by one of our three team members with another team member taking notes.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The topic of working mothers is increasingly becoming the focus of more studies and publications. While there is much research tangentially related to the topic of working mothers, such as broader challenges faced by women in the workforce, we focused on literature that helped us understand the progress that has been made by women and working mothers in the workforce, the additional progress that has yet to be accomplished and the influence children have on a woman's career progression. In addition, we looked at information indicating the benefits of keeping working mothers in the workforce for both working mothers and companies. Finally, we looked at information on the current programs being offered, the value of the programs and the current status of program implementation within and across organizations.

#### **Advancement of Women in the Workforce**

Over the last century women have made significant advancements in workforce participation. Between 1950 and 2009, women went from approximately 30 percent of the U.S. labor force to nearly half.<sup>6</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Labor, as of 2010, women "comprised 46.8 percent of the total U.S. labor force" and "accounted for 51 percent of all workers in the high-paying management, professional and related occupations."<sup>7</sup> Further, the gap in the number of jobs held by women versus men has shrunk from six million to half a million in the last 10 years.<sup>8</sup> Women are also making significant progress in educational attainment. Women earn 60 percent of college degrees, including half of all PhDs and professional degrees.<sup>9</sup> From 1970 to 2006, the percent of female students among all MBAs at top U.S. business schools increased by a factor of 10, from four percent to 43 percent.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Evidence of Residual Disparity**

Despite the strides made by women towards equal representation in professional and educational attainment, data suggests that there is still significant room for improvement. There is evidence of continuing disparity in pay between genders. In 2009, across all educational levels, women earned 75 percent as much as men.<sup>11</sup> For women earning MBAs, their labor incomes at the start of their career are nearly identical to male MBAs; however, 10 to 16 years after completing their MBA, men have an earnings advantage of nearly 60 log points over women.<sup>12</sup> Women are also still not appropriately represented at the highest levels of companies and on boards of directors. As mentioned above, women hold only three percent of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies.<sup>13</sup> When this is broadened to executive officer positions at Fortune 500 companies, women still held only 14 percent of these positions in 2010.<sup>14</sup> Further, women made up eight percent of the top earners at Fortune 500 companies in 2010.<sup>15</sup> In terms of board representation, women held only 15 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies and more than 10 percent of these companies did not have a single woman on their board.<sup>16</sup> It is also suggested that in industries like finance, where there is a culture of urgency, women are sometimes not appropriately considered for stretch assignments, which are pivotal for advancement.<sup>17</sup>

### **When and Why Women Begin Losing Ground**

While there are many hypotheses on the contributing factors as to why women are not progressing to the upper levels of organizations as quickly as would be expected, a leading cause is career interruptions driven by family responsibilities. It is during the early to midpoints in career stretches where women are stalled or sidelined.<sup>18</sup> These years often correspond not only to key years in career advancement, but also to women's prime childbearing years. Between the ages of thirty and forty, women must make the hardest choices regarding their careers, including whether to seek out a fast track position or role, whether and when to have children, and if they have children, whether to try to stay on the fast track.<sup>19</sup>

According to a 2010 McKinsey study, women are subject to a "double burden" syndrome since they are trying to combine work and domestic responsibilities.<sup>20</sup> These greater personal responsibilities are highly incompatible with the "anytime, anywhere" performance model that expects senior management to always be available for work purposes.<sup>21</sup> This then leads to reinforcing barriers that prevent women from reaching top management.<sup>22</sup> Further, conforming to the "Ideal Worker" model, which expects individuals to put work first at all times, is difficult for working mothers.<sup>23</sup> If they choose not to conform, they may lose out on key roles which then may lead them to tone down their ambition or potentially leave the workforce.<sup>24</sup>

In order to accommodate motherhood, women often leave the fast track during their pivotal career years; however, few men leave due to fatherhood.<sup>25</sup> As a result, according to a recent study, "across the first 15 years following the MBA, women with children have about an eight month deficit in actual post-MBA experience compared with the average man."<sup>26</sup> According to the same study, the average working mother works 24 percent fewer hours per week than the average male.<sup>27</sup> Further, female MBAs seem to have more difficulty combining career and family than other female professionals – within a cohort of Harvard graduates from 1990 who were mothers, 15 years after graduation only 75 percent of MBAs were working compared to 96 percent of MDs, 89 percent of PhDs and 82 percent of JDs.<sup>28</sup>

### **Women Lose From Career Interruptions**

While it is understood that the demands of motherhood are a leading cause for women taking time out of their careers, it is also becoming increasingly clear that these career interruptions have substantial effects on career advancement. According to a 2010 Catalyst study, women who took non-traditional career paths, defined as "working in the nonprofit, government, or education sectors; being self-employed; or working part-time, before returning to work full-time in a company or a firm" advanced less than women who stayed on traditional paths post MBA.<sup>29</sup> Further, the same study found that women who took non-traditional paths advanced less than men who took either traditional or non-traditional paths.<sup>30</sup> In terms of earning power, when compared to women not taking time out of their career, those who took less than one year out saw their earning power drop to 89 percent and those taking three or more years out saw their earning power drop to 63 percent.<sup>31</sup> Further, a recent study linked the "large and rising gender gap in earnings" that emerges after MBA completion to three reasons: "differences in training prior to MBA graduation, differences in career interruptions and differences in weekly hours worked."<sup>32</sup> According to this study, "presence of children is the main contributor to the lesser job experience, greater career discontinuity and shorter work hours for female MBAs."<sup>33</sup> Finally, not only do women lose from stepping off a career path in terms of advancement and pay, but they may also be less satisfied overall. A Working

Mother Media Research Institute study defined a career by the opportunity to grow and advance, the feeling of being supported and respected and the belief that one's work fulfills a meaningful purpose. The study found that women who identify themselves as having a career feel more satisfied and positive overall as compared to women who see themselves as having a job where there they are "just making money."<sup>34</sup>

### **Employers Also Lose From Women's Career Interruptions**

It is not only women who suffer from taking time off from their careers when they become mothers; companies also have strong incentives to keep working mothers in the workforce. Losing talented leaders costs organizations in several ways. In terms of replacement costs, it has been estimated that when a talented employee leaves, it costs 150 percent or more of the departing employee's annual salary to replace them.<sup>35</sup> In addition to attrition costs, there is also data on the benefits of retaining women and having more women executives. A study done at Pepperdine University found a strong correlation between high-level female executives and business profitability, with the 25 best firms for women outperforming industry medians of profit as a percent of revenue, assets and equity.<sup>36</sup> Companies with the highest share of women in their executive committees outperformed companies with no women in their executive committees in terms of return on equity and operating results.<sup>37</sup>

The need to keep women in the workforce was highlighted in 1987 in *Workforce 2000*, a document prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor by the Hudson Institute, that indicated "if the United States is to continue to prosper in its continuing shift from a manufacturing to a service economy in the 21st century, it must make reconciling the conflicting needs of women, work and families a top priority; demand for day care and more time off from work for pregnancy leaves and child-rearing duty will increase, as will interest in part-time, flexible and stay-at-home jobs."<sup>38</sup>

### **The Emergence of Practicable Solutions**

As companies have begun to realize the benefits of retaining women after motherhood, many solutions have emerged within companies, with a focus on actionable programs. In the early 90s, advice to companies on how to support working mothers was focused on improving attitudes toward women, including "increase sensitivity to women," "search out and review subtle negative attitudes" and "be open and sensitive to different styles."<sup>39</sup> Twenty years later there is much greater focus on identifying true best practices for companies. To celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies list, the Working Mother Research Institute identified the five best practices from the past 25 years, which included: "child care, flexible work schedules, paid maternity and time off, networking and mentoring and career customization."<sup>40</sup>

### **Child Care**

It is obvious that for women to be able to stay in the workforce after having children, they will need to have access to appropriate child care through a stay-at-home partner, family, a nanny or child care centers. However, establishing a strong child care situation can create a significant dilemma for working mothers and sometimes act as a barrier to employment even when women are committed to working.<sup>41</sup> Much of the difficulty stems from structural issues such as a mismatch between acceptable and affordable care options and the needs of the working family.<sup>42</sup> Employers can clearly play a role in assisting with this critical

element, and studies have shown that access to subsidized child care can increase female employment and productivity.<sup>43</sup>

According to Bright Horizons Family Solutions, a leading provider of child care, back-up care, early education and work-life solutions, on-site child care options allow working parents to “put their minds at ease and focus on the workday, knowing that their children are in a caring, safe and nurturing environment.”<sup>44</sup> Back-up care, another leading child care option provided by employers, provides care at a center or in the home when regular child care is unavailable or cannot be attended (e.g., due to illness) or when regular child care cannot be arranged (e.g., due to school closures).<sup>45</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that the provision of child care is good for employers. A 2004 study found that “quality child care for employees is important to employers because it improves productivity, reduces absenteeism, cuts turnover and can increase company value.”<sup>46</sup> According to Bright Horizons, “for 91 percent of women, access to on-site child care was important in their decision to come back to work with their present employer after the birth or adoption of a child, with 68 percent saying it was very important.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, they have found “90 percent of parents using full-service child care centers say that access to work-site child care positively impacts their ability to successfully concentrate on the job and be productive”.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in response to demand for this service, more than 80 of *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies offer either full-service child care or back-up care.<sup>49</sup>

### Flexible Work Schedules

Workplace flexibility generally refers to “a variety of arrangements such as job sharing, phased retirement of older workers and telecommuting, that allow workers to continue making productive contributions to the workforce while also attending to family and other responsibilities.”<sup>50</sup> Flexible work arrangements allow for flexibility in terms of “when one works, where one works or how much one works.”<sup>51</sup> Flexibility has changed significantly in the past 25 years and has gone from basic flexibility in start/stop times to broader flexibility in telecommuting and working from home.<sup>52</sup> Other new models of flexibility include “flex coupons that allow workers to take paid time off in increments as short as two hours, rather than forcing parents to take a full day off for, say, a kid’s doctor’s appointment” and compressed workweeks giving workers longer weekends to manage family needs.<sup>53</sup> Another new and innovative form of workplace flexibility is a system that evaluates employees based only on what they produce rather than how much they work.<sup>54</sup> The leading example of this method is Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), a “management strategy where employees are evaluated on performance, not presence [and] people focus on results and only results.”<sup>55</sup>

The increase in flexibility programs is likely influenced by the strong desire for such programs expressed by employees. “A study of more than 1,500 U.S. workers reported that nearly a third considered work-life balance and flexibility to be the most important factors in considering job offers. In another survey of two hundred human resource managers, two-thirds cited family-supportive policies and flexible hours as the single most important factor in attracting and retaining employees.”<sup>56</sup>

Flexibility programs are also bolstered by data indicating their value. A 2010 study done by the White House Council of Economic Advisors found that flexibility programs can “reduce turnover and improve recruitment, increasing the productivity of an employer’s workforce” and are “associated with improved

employee health and decreased absenteeism.”<sup>57</sup> In addition, a 1999 Japanese study showed that flexible work schedules have statistically significant positive effects on worker’s attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, satisfaction with work schedule, employee absenteeism and employee productivity.<sup>58</sup> However, an overall lack of data on the prevalence of various arrangements and limited studies on the mechanisms that lead to improvements prevent a deeper understanding of the costs and benefits of flexibility programs.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Paid Maternity Leave and Time Off*

The ability to take time off after having children has been directly influenced by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, which “entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave.”<sup>60</sup>

A more valued version of leave is paid maternity and paternity leave. A 2008 National Study of Employers found that 56 percent of employers reported that paid maternity leave was given to female employees, though it was typically less than an employee’s standard pay.<sup>61</sup> For men, the prevalence of paid leave is drastically lower; only 16 percent of employers offered men paid time off after their child was born.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Networking, Mentorship and Sponsorship*

Women’s networks inside corporations have been around for more than 25 years.<sup>63</sup> These networks grew out of the “overlapping need of companies to reach out to the women in their organizations and the critical need of women to reach out to each other.”<sup>64</sup> The goal of such networks is to bring women together to allow them to share common identities and discuss their particular experiences with others.<sup>65</sup> This desire to connect is heightened if women feel “different, isolated or unsupported in their firms.”<sup>66</sup> However, while over 90 percent of *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies offer networking and mentoring programs, only 18 percent of women at these companies participate in the programs.<sup>67</sup> Further, in interviews with 900 female executives about factors that have been critical to their success, programs for the promotion of women were ranked last.<sup>68</sup> Suggestions to improve these programs and ensure their success include having members address key business issues and ensuring that the needs of all employees, both male and female, are addressed in the initiatives.<sup>69</sup>

Mentorship is a commonly cited critical factor for helping employees advance. However, access to mentors becomes even more critical for women working in a male-dominated environment.<sup>70</sup> Mentorship is critical throughout one’s career and is most crucial during the ‘make-or-break years,’ particularly if women are trying to juggle career aspirations with family needs.<sup>71</sup> Beyond mentorship, there is a growing recognition of the importance of sponsorship, a version of mentorship where mentors “advise and advocate, using their sway to help protégés land high-level assignments and positions.”<sup>72</sup> Sponsors ensure that their protégés are considered for opportunities and defend them from backstabbers even at the risk of their own reputations.<sup>73</sup> Both mentors and sponsors can help women learn how to navigate the politics of an organization as well as identify the skills and competencies necessary for success.<sup>74</sup> However, Catalyst has found that “women are mentored more than men, but men’s mentors are more senior and more likely to advocate visibly for up-and-comers who, perhaps, remind them of their younger selves.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, women need to be very proactive in building networks. It has been suggested that “for every sponsor [a

woman] needs five mentor relationships,” and for “every five mentors [a woman] probably needs twenty-five strategic alliances,” as it has been estimated that 75 percent of an individual’s career capital is in relationships.<sup>76</sup>

### Career Customization

On the cutting edge of programs developed to increase overall flexibility across one’s career is the concept of career customization. These programs developed in response to the increasing recognition that the “career path for knowledge workers is not a straight climb up the corporate ladder but rather an undulating journey of climbs, lateral moves and planned descents.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, the “corporate ladder is already morphing into what we term the corporate lattice(TM), a more fluid model that allows for multiple, more varied paths upward.”<sup>78</sup> Another variation on the acknowledgement of new career models is the concept of “arc-of-career flexibility,” which encourages women to ramp-up after taking time out of the workforce.<sup>79</sup> This process has also been described as the ability to off-ramp, or partially off-ramp without career penalties, and then being able to re-enter or re-accelerate when it makes sense personally and professionally.<sup>80</sup>

### Implementation is Difficult and Positioning of Programs is Key

The success of the programs discussed above and other programs supporting working mothers hinges on the how the programs are implemented and positioned within the organization. The likelihood of successful implementation is increased if initiatives are linked to business objectives, such as lower turnover and higher productivity.<sup>81</sup> Programs are also more successful when the focus is on accommodating the different needs of working mothers or working parents rather than equalizing differences between genders.<sup>82</sup> In addition, there needs to be joint commitment from both the organization and the employees to do what it takes to make the programs work.<sup>83</sup> The push for change, including establishing both formal and informal initiatives, needs to come from the organization more broadly in order for the change to really take root.<sup>84</sup> It is also important to recognize that change will take time. For example, Gap, a pioneer in the use of a Results Only Work Environment, recommends that if companies are considering a ROWE experiment, they should do research on the model, acquire technology necessary for implementation and go slow.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to implementation challenges, companies may face challenges associated with program stigma. It has been found that if flexibility is positioned solely as a working mother issue colleagues may feel that working mothers are getting special treatment.<sup>86</sup> In order to ensure flexible career paths do not become ‘mommy tracks’ and to make sure fathers have the support they need, parental leave programs and reduced hours for child care should be routine for mothers as well as fathers.<sup>87</sup> Unless men participate in such programs, the culture will not change and family friendly will mean ‘mommy-trap.’<sup>88</sup> In addition to broad acceptance of the programs, it is also important to have “performance evaluation systems that neutralize the impact of parental leaves and or flexible work arrangements” during performance reviews.<sup>89</sup>

### Overall Scope of Programs is Limited and Companies Have Not Fully Embraced their Role

While the companies that make it onto the *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies list are at the leading edge of supporting working mothers, the majority of companies across the nation lag behind in programs offered. Over 95 percent of companies on the *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies list offer compressed

work weeks, job shares, telecommuting and flextime; however, when looking at companies nationally, less than 60 percent offer flextime, less than 40 percent offer compressed work weeks or telecommuting and less than 20 percent offer job shares.<sup>90</sup> The fact that these programs do not consistently exist across all companies makes understanding what to look for even more important for women evaluating future employers. Further, gender diversity is not seen as a strategic priority at many companies, with only 28 percent of 1,500 business leaders surveyed identifying it as a top-10 strategic priority.<sup>91</sup> A 1992 study published in Harvard Business Review rated companies on scale from zero to five, suggesting that companies offering child care, maternity leave and part-time policies are a two, companies that are truly responsive to women are a four and companies earning a five (which the study suggested did not exist at the time) would make sure that management structure is not a “power oriented hierarchy of ascending status but a jungle gym with lateral sidebars.”<sup>92</sup> However, companies feel that many of these programs are expensive benefits, and may not encourage workers to take advantage of them.<sup>93</sup> Another concern is that even if programs exist, they may be piecemeal and may not make a true difference for most employees, making it more important to look for evidence that work-life balance issues have permeated a company’s culture and fundamentally affected manager’s behavior.<sup>94</sup>

### **Getting the Real Story**

There is much that we learned from our literature review and much more to be learned through additional review and analysis. However, we felt that working mothers would be able to provide a more nuanced view of the programs and practices that truly helped them have successful careers and families. Further, much of the literature does not specifically address the target population of executive level women or women on the path to executive levels that we were interested in. Therefore, we coupled our literature review with extensive interviews in order to get a better sense of what women should look for in employers, relative prioritization of programs and practices and strategies on how to utilize the formal and informal practices offered by organizations.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD: RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS**

Through our interviews we focused on delving into the real life experiences of working executive mothers and human resources executives to determine what formal programs are truly impactful and what informal practices help women to achieve their career and family goals.

### **Formal Practices**

As we alluded in our introduction, many media publications, such as *Working Mother*, tout the various formal practices that companies offer in an effort to support working women. However, not all of these formal practices are of equal importance to executive women, particularly when one considers the broad range of careers that women have. Of all of the formal practices that were discussed, flexibility was emphasized as the most important. It was key for the women we interviewed to have the ability to work in a way that allows them to accommodate family needs. The availability of a flexible work environment was sometimes referenced as *the reason* that women could still make it work in their high-powered roles. Mentorship, sponsorship and networking programs were also important to women as they tried to navigate

and balance professional and personal lives, but the women noted that they supplemented these programs with their own informal mentors and networks. Interestingly, practices such as child care, back-up care or generous maternity leave were helpful to some but were not the formal practices that would make or break a woman's career. Some women saw these programs simply as indicators that a company is thinking about working mother issues and taking action. Additionally, how companies view the purpose and impact of these programs is just as important as having the programs. Companies that see these programs as a strategic way of addressing a business issue are often the most successful at implementation and continue to make great progress over time.

### Flexibility

The most talked about and most important formal practice for the women we interviewed was flexibility. Flexibility, however, can take on many different forms within an organization and our interviewees helped break down the types of flexibility that help and the types that may actually hurt one's career. It is also important to note that flexibility can sometimes blur lines between formal and informal practices, but here we will focus on formal practices that would show up in company documentation and human resources policies.

### *Flex Time*

The first type of flexibility enables women to structure their workday in a way that works for them. These programs help to break down the old school "face time" mentality that one can only succeed if working physically in the office for more than eight hours a day, a work structure that can be very challenging for working mothers. A few of our interviewees shared that their companies had established formal core working hours, typically from 9am to 3pm. The intention of these core hours was to allow employees to flex their individual schedules. One interviewee said that it enabled her to sometimes drive her kids to school in the morning or be there in the afternoons to pick them up; this seemingly simple life enhancement had a huge impact on her ability to manage her dual roles. Another flexible program was offered by some of the consulting companies we spoke to. Some companies formally offered the ability to structure client travel in different ways in order to accommodate people with outside work responsibilities. A woman we interviewed was able to do really long day trips to the client site instead of being there four days a week. She appreciated that she could create a schedule that worked better for her and her family.

Other companies went even further with their efforts to create flexible work environments. Some companies, for instance, have put in place a program called Results Only Work Environment (ROWE). The intention of ROWE is similar to the idea behind core hours, but it goes further by completely empowering the employee to structure their work day (where they work, when they work, etc.) as they desire as long as they deliver high quality, timely work. As one human resources individual from the retail industry noted: "It's a cultural shift that focuses people on measuring performance purely on results and not on how many hours they spend at the office doing their work." A working mother we spoke to who utilizes this program stated that she would not be able to continue working in such an intense senior role if she did not have this program. ROWE enabled her to work four days a week in the office and one day from home; a schedule that uniquely fits what she and her family need.

Flexible work environments have also been achieved by changing the physical structure of offices. This type of office set up, which is sometimes referred to as “hoteling,” allows employees to choose whether or not they want to be mobile or retain a traditional assigned desk. Mobile employees have the ability to choose where they want to sit in the office each day and are equipped with laptops that allow them to easily work from any location. The idea behind some of these projects comes partially from space constraints in certain offices, but also from the fact that employees today want flexibility in how, when and where they work. These hoteling programs are relatively new and not yet widespread. Other women we spoke to did not work in such unique physical set-ups, but did emphasize that they had purposefully chosen companies / teams within their organizations that allowed them to work virtually when needed.

These types of flexible work environments (both physical and otherwise) enabled women to work at home, which was a big value-add for many of the women we spoke with. For some women that meant working from home a few days a week, while for others it was simply the ability to leave the office when they needed to deal with family responsibilities and to be able to finish their work later in the evening after their children had gone to bed. The women we interviewed also noted that everyone has their own unique approach to dealing with child care schedules or responsibilities that exist outside of work. The hallmark of a successful flexibility program thus allows individuals to structure a work/family life that can truly fit their specific needs. An additional advantage is that these programs also allow for adjustment over time as needs change.

The women also noted that many of these programs are increasingly available to and, more importantly, used by everyone, which they felt was a very positive step forward. When programs become more about enhancing all employees’ work-life balance, they move away from being just “mothers’/women’s” programs. This can thus help to avoid the stigma that can sometimes be attached to programs that are specifically for or predominantly used by working mothers.

#### *Career Customization*

According to the women we interviewed another type of career flexibility that is making its way into formal practices is the ability for companies to help individuals create custom career paths, which is often a departure from the old ‘up or out’ policies. In some of the firms we covered, there was a formal process for enabling employees to dial down certain aspects of their careers at different points. In consulting, this might be about helping someone dial down travel for a period of time or perhaps take a more internally focused role that would allow for a more manageable workload. In another example, it was an individual development program that allowed individuals to state what their goals were at different points in their career. By putting these goals down on paper, it enables conversations about how to structure one’s career at different stages of life.

#### *Part-Time and Job Shares*

Many flexibility programs also offer opportunities to work part-time. From our interviews, it appeared that the most universally successful examples were in industries like consulting, where projects could be appropriately scoped and structured. One woman we spoke to in consulting never went back full-time after having kids and was able to reach partner while working a schedule that was anywhere from 50 to 80 percent. She noted that as a partner it is now actually easier to work part-time and manage the workload.

According to this woman, the real challenge was that: “At lower levels it can be difficult to figure out how to scope the project when others are working 100 percent. At my company we now pair a part-time person with a strong worker a level below that is trying to step up into the next role, which helps to balance the workload. It is also important that part-timers are paired with a supportive boss. It really takes investment from a staffing perspective to try to get this right.” Another successful example was a woman who was able to work part-time for 10 years at a consumer packaged goods company after having kids and later returned to work full-time in a more senior role. According to her, the key to her success was that she worked on project-driven assignments and that she was flexible about being flexible. She would adjust her work schedule as her projects required and kept in constant communication with her manager to ensure that she was being compensated for the time worked. She noted that: “Even though I was working part-time, the company continued to give me more challenging assignments. It showed me that they were willing to make this work if I continued to deliver good results.”

Some of the women we spoke to pioneered the use of part-time at their firms. One woman leveraged her status as a high performer and convinced her firm, a fairly conservative financial services company, to trial part-time for six months. She told them that if they were not satisfied with her results she would go back to full-time. During the trial period, she continued to deliver great results and was able to prove to the company that the model could work successfully. As a result of her actions, part-time work schedules became a formal practice that many women have taken advantage of in this organization.

Although we heard successful examples of women working part-time in areas like consulting, we also saw that it was role and firm dependent. Many women in fact still view part-time as a move that could potentially slow or even stall their careers. One woman noted that her organization was still working to crack the code on part-time. She felt that the challenge was that as individuals rise within an organization they typically get opportunities to run bigger businesses. The size and scope of these businesses often demand full-time attention. When women work part-time they inevitably have to run smaller businesses or take on smaller roles, which does not allow for them to have the same quality of experiences and challenges that one may have when running one of the larger businesses. This often leads to a longer or undetermined path towards promotion, which can be frustrating for some women. One woman commented: “Here’s the challenge, part-time sounds good, but it only works in lower level roles. I don’t know any executive who did part time and the reality is with the level of responsibility in an executive role it’s hard to do part-time or a job share. When trying to progress in your career, part-time is a side-step, not a continuation forward. If you are willing to take a side-step, and can afford to, it can be a good option.” Another woman we interviewed worked for a fast growing technology company. Her concerns about part-time stemmed from the fact that the business was moving at such a rapid pace she feared that if she took part-time she would fall out of the loop. Furthermore, many of the women we spoke to felt it was important to note that men rarely take part-time and thus these programs can have a stigma attached that many women want to avoid.

Whether it is a part-time or job-share program, it is important to look for women in the organization who have successfully taken advantage of these programs and have still been able to move forward into more senior roles. The presence of these women not only proves that the organization cares enough to make these programs work, but these women can also act as advocates and mentors for others who choose to pursue a similar path. The women reminded us that it is important for individuals who want to go part-

time to work with managers to truly scope projects and roles for part-time so that they do not end up working full-time and getting paid part-time.

### Maternity Leave

Although maternity leave issues typically only arise a few times in a woman's career, a company's choice of maternity policies can be important for a working mother and also act as an indicator of a company's culture. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has set a floor for the amount of employment guaranteed unpaid leave that is available to working mothers. Consequently, it is important to look at how firms are going above and beyond the FMLA as it is an indicator for how they are supporting women in their organization. Many of the individuals we spoke with noted that supportive firms were actually paying for a portion of maternity leave. This ranged from companies paying for two weeks of maternity leave to companies offering four or even five months fully paid leave. The women we spoke to also noted that many supportive companies allowed women to take more than the 12 weeks allotted under the act; some were taking as much as six months off by saving up vacation or taking unpaid time off. Another unique scenario we heard about was a company that allowed women to take up to one month prior to the due date in addition to the typical post-birth maternity leave. Many of these firms not only extended the amount of time allowed for maternity, but also guaranteed jobs for the duration of the extended leave as well. Perhaps even more importantly, we heard from the women that it was essential to know that taking maternity leave, especially extended leave, would not materially affect their career trajectory.

From our conversations, it was clear that maternity leave policies have not always been this generous and that some of the women still felt they experienced a lack of support in this area. One woman we spoke to who spent time at a law-firm and took 10 weeks off (pre-FMLA) for her maternity leave was told that it would cost her one year off her partner promotion record. Additionally, another woman spoke about what it was like to not have generous leave: "[My company's] maternity leave is not great. I had to use all my vacation time, which I had saved up. So after what the state paid for and all my vacation, I only got to 10 weeks, which is quite short. It was really, really hard coming back." For the women we spoke with who worked at companies with minimal maternity leave benefits, it took a toll on them and affected how they viewed their companies. Although there may be limited upside for companies who add a lot of bells and whistles to maternity leave, there is a big downside risk for those that do very little.

In addition to discussing maternity leave, the women we spoke with talked about how supportive companies put in extra effort to help women transition back to work. One woman emphasized: "Coming back to work after you have a child is the hardest thing you will do in your career. It is emotionally difficult, which is easy to understand, but it is also mentally taxing." At one consulting firm there was an assigned person who was there to help women navigate their transition to becoming working mothers. At other firms they ensure that a woman's manager is responsible for helping to figure out the best way to transition back, which could include coming back part-time for a few weeks. Another company offered sessions for women who were going out on maternity leave. The sessions would cover several different topics, such as how to transition in and out of the workplace or how to manage expectations and communicate with one's manager. These sessions were not just available for the women taking maternity leave, but also for fathers and for the managers that were learning how best to work with their employees during these transition times.

Maternity policies differ significantly between the companies we covered. What is clear is that the women we spoke with appreciated and valued firms that allow women to flexibly structure maternity leave. These women also appreciated support in transitioning back so that they could hit the ground running upon their return.

### *Child Care and Back-Up Care Benefits*

Our interviewees emphasized that knowing that one's child is in a safe, secure environment while at work is extremely important for their piece of mind. Some of the women shared that the stress of an uncertain child care situation can be so distracting that it is difficult to concentrate on work and it can even put pressure on their relationship with their partner.

In an effort to help women find some peace of mind when it comes to child care, some companies now provide day care options on-site. This practice seems particularly popular in industries like financial services and pharmaceuticals. One of the younger women we interviewed whose two children attend the day care at her company commented: "It's the fact that you don't have to worry about whether the children are safe. The physical locality makes it convenient, but I hardly get a chance to go over there during the day. It's really the peace of mind when you know your kids are with professional, high quality people." Another woman we spoke with who holds a very senior position at a financial services firm noted that because of the long hours and the need to be available 24/7, the day care was instrumental in helping her achieve what she referred to as work-life integration. Sometimes if work kept her a bit later than expected, she could pick up her child from day care and bring her to her office as she finished up her work. For many women, a company's choice to provide on-site day care was a "visible acknowledgement that the company is trying to find ways to make life more manageable for working parents."

Another useful formal benefit that companies offered was back-up care for both children and for the elderly. This benefit can be used when a child gets sick and cannot go to school, or when a woman's regular form of child care, perhaps a nanny, gets sick. Many of the women lauded this program, as they emphasized the need for multiple back-ups when it comes to child care. For some companies, particularly consulting firms, it does not make sense to have on-site day care due to the nature of their employee's extensive travel schedules and thus offering back-up care can be a great alternative. One of the human resources executives we spoke with also noted that her company tried to offer special programs on school holidays when parents would typically be at work in order to ease the burden of finding child care.

Many of the women we spoke with who were more senior in organizations had transitioned to using a nanny as their travel requirements / intense schedules did not allow them to work within the limitations of day care (set drop-off/pick-up times). Although many of these women did not use the child care resources of their organizations, they saw it as a valuable benefit for women who wanted to have children earlier in their careers and as a result may not yet be in a financial situation where other options, such as a nanny, are affordable. One of the women shared: "At the time I had my daughter, I did not have access to [my company's] child care support as there was a waitlist. I couldn't afford a nanny at the time, since I was only one year out of school and it was really tough and really scary to have to look for alternate child care. Later, at two years old, my daughter got into the company's child care program and it has made a huge difference." Some of the women we interviewed also worked for smaller firms where offering a benefit like

this would not make sense in terms of economics. According to an executive who works in the child care space, companies typically have to have over 2,000 employees in one office location in order to support an on-site day care facility. Even offering back-up care requires that the organization is typically over 1,000 employees. Even though this formal practice was not listed as the most important program for the women we spoke with, they did believe it could be interpreted as another indicator of a supportive company for working parents.

### *Mentorship and Sponsorship*

In addition to having flexibility options or supportive programs like child care, the women we interviewed noted that having mentors to look to for guidance and advice was incredibly important. Mentorship is another category that can fall under both formal and informal practices within an organization. Many of the women we interviewed spoke about successful formal mentorship programs that they felt helped them to navigate different challenging junctures in their careers, both professional and personal. One woman noted that a formal mentorship support structure was critical for her when rising through an organization that at the time did not have many women. The ability to access those few senior women provided her with the support she needed to keep pushing forward. These formal mentorship programs range from one-on-one relationships to mentoring circles of women in similar functional roles but at various stages in their careers. Some programs also made an effort to pair high potential women who had already reached higher levels within the organization with the most senior leaders in an effort to help them continue on the path to the C-suite. It was emphasized to us that when working through personal considerations the women often looked to female mentors who had experienced similar challenges. However, it was also made clear that many men had been great professional mentors to the women we interviewed, but were less likely to be the ones they turned to for personal considerations.

In addition to mentorship, our research and our conversations with interviewees made it clear that sponsorship will be a much bigger focus in the future. There was a feeling among some of the individuals we spoke with that women were over-mentored and under-sponsored. As we mentioned in our literature review, sponsor relationships are more than the typical mentor or advisory role; sponsors have power within an organization and act as an advocate for the individual internally to help them move up. The sponsor has a much higher level of accountability for the career advancement of the individual. Several of the human resources professionals and some of the women we spoke with noted that this was becoming a more prevalent and important practice within firms. One human resources executive commented: "In terms of advancement to the most senior level positions, mentoring is not enough. You need sponsorship and you need to be deliberate about making sure every high potential woman has [a sponsor]."

### *Networks*

Our interviewees referenced formal women's networks as another supportive program that many of them had leveraged. For many women this offered an additional support structure that complemented other relationships they had already built through mentorship programs and informal networks. The networks ranged from broad women's networks spanning an entire organization, to more focused networks centered on functional roles. Additionally, several of the women's networks were specifically focused on bringing senior women in the organization together to share perspectives from all over the world. Some of these

networks met on a more regular basis and some brought women together for annual meetings. One woman noted that she was skeptical of the women's networks at first. She wanted to be identified first and foremost for her superior performance and did not want to be "singled out" as a woman in this way. Nonetheless, she gave it a chance by participating in an annual retreat for top senior women in her organization and found that it was an amazing bonding experience. In her words: "It reminded me that men can have empathy for a woman's unique challenges as a working mother, but only other women really understand the experience and the multi-tasking it requires." The human resources professionals noted that these networks not only acted as a support tool for women, but also as an important tool for bringing out critical issues facing women in the organization.

Some of the organizations we covered also offered 'mothers' or 'parents' networks with the idea of bringing working mothers / fathers together to specifically share their unique challenges. This was particularly helpful for women in navigating certain decisions like child care and maternity leave. These networks most often served a specific purpose for women with regards to information and resources about parenting, but were not broadly used as a support structure.

#### *Additional Support for Mothers*

Companies offered a variety of other unique services for working mothers. Although none of these programs were deemed to be absolutely essential, many of them were listed as great additional perks that demonstrated that the company was trying to take further steps to support working mothers.

Some companies' hosted seminars on hot topics for parents, such as post-partum depression. Others offered on-site Lamaze classes or prenatal yoga. One company even sent meals to the home post-pregnancy to show their support. Another offered access to a lactation consultant and provided women with the option to purchase a subsidized breast pump. Some firm-wide assistance programs included access to on-site health services or concierge services for errands. On-site fitness centers were also listed as a way that companies are trying to make life easier for employees.

Other specific practices that were noted as being value-added for mothers were different types of travel arrangements companies offered. One company actually allowed for a mother to travel with their baby and even provided a stipend so that the woman could bring along a nanny or parent for assistance. Another woman talked about the fact that her company allowed employees to have flex days after long travel periods. As a result she could be home with her kids for a few days after being gone for an extended period of time, alleviating some of the stress that work travel caused.

#### *Making Programs a Part of Strategy*

It became clear to us through these conversations that regardless of the exact menu of programs that a company may have, how companies frame their reasons for putting these programs in place is incredibly important. Companies that focused on these programs as being a part of a business objective and strategic imperative to keeping women in their organizations appeared to more successfully leverage the power of these programs. For these companies, the programs enabled a cultural change. Some industries we covered that continue to lack women at the top often see the issue of retaining women in their organizations as a public relations issue, while the more successful industries appear to see it as an

opportunity to improve their businesses. One woman noted that in her company there was a stated belief that having a diverse group of people allowed them to make better decisions. “[My company] believes in the opposite of the old boys’ network. We seek diversity because diversity of thought is good for business. It’s not just for the sake of diversity.” Additionally, the companies who were at the forefront of implementing innovative programs, especially around flexibility and career customization, were focused on understanding the root causes of the gender gap and tried to assess how they could help women at different stages of their careers. Many of the successful programs we noted above are also available to men and offer opportunities for the entire workforce of an organization to enhance their work-life balance.

Similar to other business initiatives, companies that were focused on this as part of their strategy were also closely monitoring the success of these initiatives and constantly looking for ways to improve. They were tracking feedback via employee surveys, tapping into women’s networks, benchmarking externally and even conducting their own internal studies. Just as great businesses are always looking for ways to get ahead of the curve, these companies were looking for ways to push the envelope further. They wanted to continue to make progress in enabling women, and their employees more broadly, to thrive.

### **Informal Practices**

Throughout conversations with working mothers and human resources executives, it was made clear that even if a company has very thorough formal policies and extensive programs, at the end of the day, management and the culture of the organization set the tone for working mothers. Further, the working mothers emphasized that it was not just the programs that helped them succeed but how they managed their own career as a working mother that was imperative. These women shared the importance of having a great boss, finding informal mentors to be their supporters, identifying the right roles within the organization and setting clear expectations as the keys to success. It is the combination of formal and informal practices that create a successful formula for allowing working mothers to thrive.

### **Management and the Culture of the Organization Set the Tone**

More than 75 percent of the women interviewed referenced their organization’s culture when they spoke about their success. Discussions revolved around the attitude of the senior leadership, the involvement of family in their professional lives and the support from others within the organization. Women from some organizations, such as private equity firms, newer technology companies and smaller companies, explained that culture was especially important for them because the company did not have as many, or any, formal practices in place. A professional development coach for women emphasized that a supportive culture is essential so women feel valued: “When people have kids [the company must] make sure they are really utilized and feel valued and are engaged— [it is important to] shine a light around them at this time because it has to be that women love their job enough that they don’t want to let it go.”

### **Management and the CEO**

While it is difficult to accurately assess the culture of an organization from the outside, the attitude and actions of the CEO and other senior leaders provide a meaningful indicator of the organization’s culture and norms towards working mothers. Multiple women mentioned the CEO as a key reason why the organization is supportive of working mothers. One woman told a story about a colleague whose child got

hurt right before the most important meeting of the year with the CEO, which had been quite difficult to schedule. The colleague made alternative arrangements for her child so she could make it to the meeting, however, when the CEO found out about this situation, she immediately rescheduled the meeting, got the woman a car and sent her home to care for her child. The interviewee emphasized, "That is what sets the culture of how important family is."

The views and attitude of the CEO is especially important in a smaller organization where formal practices may not exist. One woman at a small financial firm emphasized that the firm really benefitted from having a CEO and founder who was an advocate for working parents. She explained that when the top leaders are involved in their children's lives, it sets a precedent and gives the other people at the firm an ability to find their own balance of work and home life. Women emphasized that it is the small things that both male and female leaders of the firm do, such as leaving at 4PM to see their child's soccer game or turning off for a weekend family vacation, that really set the tone for the organization.

#### *Culture within the Broader Organization*

In larger organizations or organizations where the CEO does not prioritize family, the culture of the broader organization is largely influenced by the men and women within it. One interviewee noted that her company's CEO outwardly acknowledged that he was not focused on the issues of working parents and as a result there were no formal practices in place to support working parents. Instead, it was the culture built by the people within the organization that made the company supportive of working mothers. She explained that because the company has so many working moms, they are able to band together and support each other. She also said it has been helpful that the human resources department is very supportive of working mothers. Another woman explained that the tight knit culture of her firm means that her colleagues know and care about what is going on with her family: "I think that this type of culture makes it more acceptable to acknowledge when you have to leave to take care of personal things."

#### *Determining an Organization's Culture*

So how does one figure out the priorities of the leadership and the culture of a firm before joining the organization? First, understand the CEO's family background and ask other individuals in the organization about leadership's views on working parents. Second, consider where women have risen to in the organization and what their lives are like outside of the company. One woman interviewed explained that she chose the company she went to because she saw how many women were in senior roles had families and husbands who also worked and spoke outwardly about this. Then, understand how others within the organization view working parents and the interaction of family and work. For example, a partner at a consulting firm emphasized the importance of inviting families to work functions: "Those events taught my kids to love [the company] and created a culture that felt more inclusive." Finally, consider whether the discussion of family comes up during interviews or the selling process. When making a job transition, one woman chose the technology firm she now works at because the interviewer spoke about his family and life outside of work in the informational interviews. She realized from those conversations that her values and the firm's values were likely to be aligned. Another woman suggested that people should ask questions about work-life balance during the interview process. An executive shared with us that if she did not feel

comfortable asking questions about work-life balance during the interview or decision making process it was a red flag for her about the culture of the organization.

### *Once Inside an Organization, There is Much a Woman Can Do*

All of the findings and conclusions stated so far are focused on choosing the right company that will be supportive of parents as they try to balance family and work at the same time. However, our interviews with executives have provided evidence that whether or not one chooses the 'best' company to work for as a working mother, once within an organization there are many decisions a working mother can make to enhance her dual roles as an employee and mother. The interviewees discussed the importance of choosing the right boss, identifying the best role within an organization during each stage of life, finding the right mentors and setting expectations with bosses as keys to finding that balance that worked for them.

### *Choosing the Right Boss or Mentor*

At the end of the day, a majority of the women interviewed concluded that it is one's boss who will really make or break professional experiences. As one woman said, "Your manager has a big impact on making life fun and exciting or making life miserable." While we acknowledge that it is not always easy to find the perfect boss and sometimes one just has to get lucky, we believe that within most companies, compassionate bosses who will help women along the way do exist. It is important for women to strategically align themselves with the right people over time.

There were many examples of amazing bosses who helped women navigate being a mom and executive at the same time. Some women found it valuable to have a boss that was another working mother with similar values in terms of work-life balance. In addition, a handful of the women interviewed discussed the importance of finding a boss, whether male or female, with a family. One woman who works in the private equity/venture capital space explained that after having worked for bosses who made it uncomfortable to discuss family, her current boss changed her outlook on flexibility and balance: "I work for someone who is very family oriented; if I need to take care of something outside of work for my family he expects and encourages me to go deal with it. He understands family obligations." Another woman explained that she excelled at her consulting firm when she first had children because she had a boss who was supportive and understood what she was going through. She worked for a partner whose wife also worked full-time so this woman felt that she could talk to him about anything. He helped her figure out how to cut down client travel when necessary and what to do when she had a personal conflict with a work meeting. Another interviewee had similar views about choosing a boss whose wife also works. She explained that her best bosses were men who were married to strong, successful working women because they "got it."

The women we spoke to explained that even if one does not have a supportive boss or formal mentor at work, having the support of informal mentors or networks is incredibly important. One woman who works in private equity explained that with a limited number of women in the office, it was very valuable to have an informal female mentor in the industry. She went to this woman for advice on personal situations like how to balance going to her child's sporting event and making it to a client meeting scheduled at the same time. Another woman in the finance industry told us that she uses the mentors she has in the office for advice when she has crises at home, such as the time her nanny quit on short notice. A third woman reiterated: "My many managers and mentors were all very helpful to me and guided me through the

stressful times. Moms who had already been through it were particularly helpful in giving all the ‘tips’ and ‘tricks of the trade.’ That was probably the most helpful as you need to know how others before you have navigated, especially in the early days.”

However, not all women we spoke to were interested in or comfortable turning to mentors in the office for advice. Many felt that their mentors in the office were only for professional issues. These women preferred to turn to friends and networks outside the office for advice. One woman shared how beneficial she found a mom’s group to be, “You need a network of other mothers to hang out with and get advice from.” While the women did not agree on the mechanisms for getting advice, all of the women did agree that having support was essential.

#### *Identifying Roles Within an Organization That Will Be Flexible*

The women we spoke to acknowledged that even with the best boss and the best culture, it is sometimes necessary while raising children to seek out a new role that is more flexible, requires less travel or requires fewer hours. When we asked an executive from a CPG company how she succeeded she said, “I understood the importance as a young working mom of taking the right roles.” When the women we spoke to explained their rationale for the roles they are in today, for many having children was an important factor. A woman who works in the finance industry shared that she chose a specific role within finance because it allowed her to work hours that were more sustainable and to control her travel more. An executive from a large consulting firm explained that she made the decision to move to an internal role because she loved her firm and the people, but was not able to manage the demands of her full-time consulting engagements and her family. She was able to find a role that involved strategy and execution internally but did not involve working 100 hour weeks and living in a hotel four days a week, as she had been doing before.

Many of the women emphasized that not traveling for work makes a big difference in succeeding as a working mother. An executive at a retail company explained that she chose her current role because of the limited travel it required. She acknowledges that as professionals move up in a large company it is not always possible to limit travel as an executive. Nevertheless, she said she may be willing at some point to sacrifice a promotion so she does not have to travel every week. Another woman who works at an international company shared that she specifically chose a North American role to ensure she was not jet-setting to China and India every month like some of her colleagues. Two other working mothers shared that they found it important to be in roles where they were the client instead of working in client services. One executive commented, “Being a working mother takes planning. It requires you to pick a job that you can plan for, which makes client services difficult since the client dictates your schedule.”

#### *Setting Expectations and Asking for What You Need*

Even if all of the boxes are checked by the company in terms of making it a great place for working mothers, many of the women we interviewed acknowledged that working moms cannot get what they need in terms of leave time, flexible working hours or part-time unless they actively set expectations and ask for what they need. One interviewee expressed the importance of setting expectations with bosses before going on maternity leave. She not only made it clear how long she planned to be on maternity leave but she also discussed what roles she desired when she returned. By making her expectations clear and asking for

what she needed, she was able to come back into a more sustainable, internal role. An executive at a healthcare company discussed the importance of being upfront with her needs because it took the tension out of the relationship with her boss and allowed them to focus on the work at hand: “I told my boss that I was committed to results, I just needed to do it on a slightly different, more flexible schedule and would need to leave at 4PM every day.” A successful finance executive told a story of asking to work part-time while she was raising her kids even though it was not part of the company’s culture: “My boss was skeptical of part-time work and flex time but he believed in me so he let me do it. I wouldn’t have been able to do it if I didn’t ask.” The executive went on to explain, “Build goodwill and deliver results. If you are good, people will try to accommodate you.”

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on what we had seen in publications like *Working Mother* magazine, at the onset of our study we hypothesized that a company that provides formal benefits, such as child care and a great maternity leave, is a great company for an executive working mother. However, we carried out interviews to determine what else companies do that supports working mothers. Through the interviews we found that while many of these women found the formal programs beneficial and discussed the importance of these programs as indicators of a supportive culture, these programs were not the distinguishing factors that enabled women to thrive as working mothers. The differentiating factors for success in balancing work and family for these women were flexibility, the people and the culture. The ability to work where and when the women wanted and take on different roles at various stages of motherhood made a huge difference in their lives. Further, when we asked these women how they did it, they always went back to the people at the firm, their bosses and the mentors who provided advice along the way. Finally, it was the culture of the company, often established by the CEO, which enabled these women to feel supported and comfortable as working mothers moving to the top.

Based on these findings, we recommend that when women look for new jobs they should look beyond the *Working Mother* 100 Best Companies list and the list of benefits advertised on the company’s website. Women should dig deeper into the company to understand what the culture is like, what the CEO values, who the women are who work there today and what their lives are like outside of work.

The research does not end with this paper. There are many other issues that arose as we explored the issues of working mother executives. We believe that these results may look very different if we asked the same questions to mid-level employees at large companies. They may place more value on child care benefits, for example, if they do not have the means to hire a nanny like many of the executives we spoke with. We hope that future research will look at what has allowed mid-level employees to balance motherhood and their careers. Our research also tees up questions about how to support individuals caring for their elderly parents, how to make it work for a dual career family, the feasibility of on-ramping after women have taken time out of their career and what women can do to blaze the trail for other women moving up behind them. Further, as companies place more value on work-life balance, more research should be done on these issues to understand the types of support that are most needed and most valued by employees.

## **APPENDIX**

### **ADVICE FROM THE EXECUTIVES**

From speaking to these 39 women, we found that companies can only do so much. At the conclusion of the interviews, every executive was asked to give advice to MBA students on succeeding as a working parent. These executives gave general advice about choosing a career and a supportive spouse, knowing oneself, maintaining networks and making decisions about the future.

#### **Do what you love**

“The best advice I have is to find something to do as a career that you love and then after you have kids, reassess and make sure you still love it. Don’t pick your career over the fact that you want to be a working mother one day, because you can’t look forward and control all of your future.”

“Make sure your job is worth it. Make sure your job is very interesting. Be ambitious! ... It is easier to leave your kid at home if you know when you go to work you are going to do great things. People shouldn’t compromise on ambitions.”

#### **Determine your priorities in life and know your limits**

“It’s really important to know your version of balance and that is not the same for everyone. It is important to reflect on what you want and prioritize it. You cannot have it all in life.”

“You have to know your limits and priorities. There is never enough time in a day to do everything so decide what is most important to you and plan out your days, weeks and months based on those priorities.”

“It really all starts with having a five year plan and a 10 year plan and knowing how your work fits into that. You can look at your life in terms of chapters and be clear about what chapter you are in right now and what is most important to you. You should be aware of your core values at each chapter. Your priorities will change as you move from chapter to chapter, so work in five year chunks. Ask what’s most important to me right now and how does my work fit into that.”

#### **Don’t just choose a company, choose a home**

“Find a home for yourself in the company you are working at. Looking back at the past 20 years a lot has changed in my life, but I always had this firm and the people here to support me. This was my permanent home.”

#### **Maintain your networks outside of your organization**

“Stay on top of your field through industry networks. This will give you mobility and the ability to continue to progress in the field.”

*Individual who took time out six years ago and then reentered:* “Establishing a network is very important. I was fortunate to be part of a network that allowed me contacts in the field so I could enter back in.”

#### **Find a great and supportive life partner**

“Pick your spouse wisely. When you have a demanding job, there is no way you can do it without a supportive spouse. You need to have back-up support and back-up for your back-up.”

“Choose a caring spouse and as long as between you and your husband you are able to serve your children’s needs, it doesn’t matter how you divide and balance everything.”

**Be thoughtful about when you have children**

“Get as far in your career as you can as fast as possible. It became harder for me to put in extra hours and time into my job after I had children. Advancing or even taking a new job takes time and energy. Often you don’t have as much time or energy after having kids.”

“I think it’s easier to do this when you are senior and you have already demonstrated your commitment. It’s not only about earning absolute trust, but it’s almost an internal battle that you want to demonstrate commitment and show you are working hard while making your schedule work for you.”

**Be flexible about being flexible**

“Being flexible about flexibility helped me to make my part-time role work over the years. There were ebbs and flows with work – sometimes I worked 80 percent, sometimes 60 percent. In the end it was about getting the work done and having great communication with my manager so that I was always being fairly compensated for my work.”

“Even when I was part-time and had boundaries set in place for when / how I would work, I knew when to break those rules because the most important thing was being available for the client.”

**Do not make any abrupt decisions before you leave or when you return**

“Stay in the game – don’t make any abrupt decisions right before you leave to have a child or right after you come back. Come back, work hard and keep the [mom stuff] to yourself. That way it does not take over your professional life.”

**Do not let other people’s limitations be your limits. You can do it.**

“A lot of people have opinions about what you can’t do – don’t let that be your limit.”

“You have to have the frame of mind that you can balance both [work and family]. You will need to get the help you need to make it work. It does take help. You need to be able to rely on people for the scheduling, juggling and organizing that are required. However, you should go in with the mindset that you can do it.”

“Today’s world is completely different than even 10 years ago, and certainly 20, so imagine what it will be in the coming decade. Technology plays a HUGE part in this. The ability to be on call 24/7 with Blackberries and the like while not always having to be present in an office allows for much greater flexibility of the entire workforce, in various stages of their career. If you are effective at what you do, having a child or caring for an elder or simply having extra outside activities in your life will all make you incredibly efficient and effective if you commit to being successful in all, while not ever letting the feeling set in that one is coming under too much sacrifice for the other. Remain calm under pressure and smile along the way....working moms are extra blessed to be able to experience it all.”

**Exhibit 1**

**Interviews Conducted and Summary Information**

**Number of Interviews Conducted:** 54

- **Working Mothers Interviewed:** 39
- **Human Resource Executives Interviews:** 15

**Industry Summary:**

<b>Industry</b>	<b># of Working Mothers Interviewed</b>	<b># of HR Executives Interviewed</b>
Private Equity & Venture Capital	7	
Financial Services	6	3
Consulting	4	4
Consumer Packaged Goods	4	1
Retail	4	1
Utilities & Industrials	3	
Healthcare (Pharma)	3	1
Entertainment & Advertising	3	
Non-Profit	2	1
Technology	2	
Insurance	1	
HR / Child Care Experts		4

**Number of Children:** 54 percent of the women interviewed have 2 children

<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Number and Percent of Working Mother Interviewees</b>
<b>1 Child</b>	<b>8 (20.5%)</b>
<b>2 Children</b>	<b>21 (53.8%)</b>
<b>3 Children</b>	<b>8 (20.5%)</b>
<b>4 Children</b>	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>
<b>5 Children</b>	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>

**Age when had Children:** 41 percent of the women who responded to question had children between the ages of 30 and 34

<b>Age when had first child</b>	<b>Number and Percent of Working Mother Interviewees</b>
<b>Under 30 Years Old</b>	<b>7 (17.9%)</b>
<b>30-34 Years Old</b>	<b>16 (41.0%)</b>
<b>35-40 Years Old</b>	<b>8 (20.5%)</b>
<b>40 and Above Years Old</b>	<b>2 (5.1%)</b>
<b>Unknown</b>	<b>6 (15.4%)</b>

**Exhibit 2**

**Survey questions for Interviews with Working Mothers**

1. Tell me a bit about your professional life in the context of being a working mom.
  - Did you always believe you would continue working after you had kids and did you ever consider changing your mind?
  - Did being a working mother impact your career choices at all (industry chosen, firm chosen, role chosen, etc.)?
  - How, if at all has your approach to your professional life changed since you had children? (hours worked, role changes, promotion goals, travel schedules, etc.)
2. From a formal organizational perspective what are some of the benefits your company/organization provides that have helped you manage your life as a working mom?
  - Does your firm offer maternity and/or paternity leave? If so, for how long? Do they offer adoption benefits?
  - Articles have mentioned that flexible work arrangements are important to some women in trying to manage both sets of responsibilities – what does flexible work mean to you and have you taken advantage of any such programs?
  - Are flexibility programs available for everyone (e.g., non-parents, working fathers)? If so, are they used by other groups?
  - Does your firm offer any child care benefits (for mothers or fathers)? If so what are they and did you take advantage of any of them? Are there some that appear more helpful than others?
  - Does your organization have a formal women’s network? Does this at all contribute to your success within the organization? Can these networks be used more effectively?
  - Are there any other organizational structures that help you manage your career?
3. From an informal perspective are there things within your organization that have helped you as a working mother?
  - Do you have mentors? Are any of these mentors working mothers?
  - Have you explored having sponsors within the organization?
  - Have you noticed any difference in support of your situation as a working mother depending on the gender status of your immediate boss? Parental status?
  - Who did you typically turn to (either internally in the organization or externally) for advice on how to handle certain challenges working mothers may face (e.g., communicating your pregnancy, asking for flex time, etc.)
4. What type of advice would you give future MBA graduates who aspire to be working mothers that can stay on the executive track?
  - What important criteria should they be thinking about in evaluating industries or companies?
  - What can we do within the organizations we join after school to ensure that women are best positioned to thrive within the work environment?
  - On a more individual basis, what advice would you give to working parents in how they can approach balancing their career and family?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not cover today?

**Exhibit 3**

**Survey Questions for Interviews with Human Resource Executives**

1. What types of programs has your organization put in place to keep women on the track to executive positions?
  - Can you describe these programs and tell us how they can contribute to women managing their dual roles as working mothers?
  - How did you choose this particular set of programs?
  - Do you benchmark with other companies? Are these companies just within your industry or do you look for best practices from other industries?
2. What do you believe are some of your most successful programs? What programs have you tried that have not been successful?
  - Do you actively try to measure the success/impact of some of these programs that you have put in place? How are they currently performing?
  - How often do you review these efforts and try to make updates?
  - Do you get feedback from the women in your organization on what is working and what is not? Are there formal processes to get feedback, or is it more ad hoc / informal?
  - Has there been anything that you have tried that has not worked?
3. Women success stories: who do you use as examples of people that this is working for?
4. Are there flexible working programs that are available to both men and women?

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