

Staffing firm factors in family

Mom Corps, now in Chicago, acts as a non-traditional headhunter

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Dianne Michael never thought it would be easy raising a daughter while managing her career at a large investment firm. But she never imagined dropping out of the corporate world, either.

Then she lost her job in a downsizing in 2002 and temporarily took up independent consulting.

"I could clearly see the benefits both for my family and for me--how much I enjoyed taking my daughter to a doctor's appointment or a school event," Michael said.

Now, in her new job for a fledgling staffing firm, she hopes to help other professional women find the flexibility she enjoys by placing them with family-friendly companies.

Michael heads the Chicago-area office of Mom Corps, which bills itself as a matchmaker between employers hunting for experienced talent and professionals looking for non-traditional career opportunities, ranging from part-time and project work to flexible full-time jobs.

Founded in Atlanta last year by Allison Karl O'Kelly, a certified public accountant and Harvard MBA with two children, Mom Corps also has offices in Charlotte and the Washington, D.C., area.

For employers facing a shortage of skilled workers as Baby Boomers retire, the nation's 5.6 million stay-at-home mothers with children under 15 represent a large potential pool of untapped talent, labor experts and women's advocates say.

"The market of women looking for solid, meaningful part-time work could be huge," said Anne Ladky, executive director of non-profit Women Employed in Chicago.

Mom Corps comes along during a time of intense debate among policymakers about whether increasing numbers of highly educated, affluent women are abandoning careers to stay home with children.

If they are, that could have wide implications for the economy. The steady march of women into the labor force has helped fuel the economy's growth for decades, economists say.

About three of every four women in their prime working years, ages 25 to 54, work outside the home, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. But the percentage peaked at about 77 percent in 2000 before changing direction in an apparent reversal of a decades-long trend.

Some argue the decline was related to a slowdown in hiring, not an attitude shift. Others say the trend toward delayed motherhood spurs more thirty- and fortysomething women to quit jobs to care for toddlers.

The percentage of new mothers working outside the home peaked in 1998 at nearly 59 percent before trending down to about 55 percent in 2004, according to the most recent Census Bureau data.

Jennifer Goodnow, owner and managing director of Chicago-based Forbes Technical Consulting, a small IT recruiting and staffing firm, had been trying to hire a bookkeeper since January when she learned about Mom Corps.

"It's really hard to find somebody in this role because it requires wearing a lot of different hats, everything from handling contract employees' benefits to payroll and accounts receivable to ordering cups," Goodnow said. "Other agencies sent candidates, but when I explained they were also going to be ordering cups, that really turned them off."

"We need a whatever-it-takes attitude. And it needs to be done in a conscientious way."

She had interviewed at least 15 candidates from other agencies before she met Michael at a networking event and decided to work with Mom Corps.

Michael, after spending time learning about Goodnow's firm, sent Christine Ridgway, a financial professional and mother of two. The placement clicked.

"We were looking for somebody who's going to make this a better place, and Dianne understood that," Goodnow said. "Christine is that person."

Ridgway is scheduled to start work four days a week in November. Her schedule will allow her to be home when the bus picks her 7-year-old son up for school before 8 a.m., then drop her 5-year-old daughter at a Montessori School before heading downtown from the south suburbs to work.

Ridgway kept working full-time after each child was born, sharing household responsibilities with her husband, a business development manager for an industrial construction firm.

Now she looks forward to having an extra day each week with her children. "Their schedule is getting a little bit busier as they get older," she said.

The typical Mom Corps candidate is college-educated with at least three years of professional experience, including mothers with advanced degrees who left the workforce when their children were young and want to re-enter, Michael said.

"We do a lot of recruiting in non-traditional ways" on playgrounds and at parent associations, she said.

"What we're presenting to employers is, it's really time to think a bit outside the box" when hiring and scheduling, she said. "Our talent could find a job very easily. What they couldn't find was a job that would also fit their family responsibilities."

The firm's fees vary depending on the placement. Like other staffing firms, Mom Corps charges employers a percentage of salary when placing candidates in permanent part-time or full-time flexible jobs.

Hourly rates for employees hired on a contract basis typically range from \$80 to \$120 depending on the skills required.

Michael was a manager at the former Kemper Financial's investment arm in Chicago, now DWS Scudder Investments, before her job was cut in 2002.

With a 4-year-old and a demanding career, "it was always a juggling act," she said. "You always feel you're short-changing someone."

Her daughter was 8 when she decided last year to hunt for a company to join. She read about Mom Corps in Working Mother magazine and called its founder, O'Kelly, in Atlanta.

Now she works for Mom Corps from her Evanston home.

"I could so relate to the idea that I wanted to be home but I also enjoy working," Michael said. "I know so many talented professional women who, if given the opportunity to stay in the workforce, they'd be thrilled."

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