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How Stay-at-Home Moms Are Filling an Executive Niche

WORK & FAMILY

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



Lots of employers would like to be able to hire cheap, temporary teams of seasoned pros with experience managing \$2 billion investment portfolios, running ad campaigns or earning Ph.D.s in neuroscience.

But few know the secret to finding temps of that caliber: Look on playgrounds and at PTA meetings.

The decision among some highly educated women to stay home with children is sparking a countertrend: The rise of the mommy "SWAT team." The acronym, for "smart women with available time," is one mother's label for all-mom teams assembled quickly through networking and staffing firms to handle crash projects. Employers get lots of voltage, cheap, while the women get a skills update and a taste of the professional challenges they miss.

CATERING TO MOMS

Here are a few flexible-staffing firms that find work for at-home mothers:

- FlexibleExecutives.com
- FlexibleResources.com
- FlexperienceConsulting.com
- MomCorps.com
- On-Ramps.com

The University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School was able to muster an "incredibly talented" team with eight at-home mothers -- including a Stanford University Ph.D. in neuroscience, a University of Virginia M.B.A., an attorney and a former news executive -- by tapping female staffers' neighborhood networks, says Mindy Storrie, Kenan-Flagler's director of leadership.

The team taught leadership skills to 100 M.B.A. candidates last year by role-playing difficult management situations with them and critiquing their performances. The simulation training was so successful that enrollment doubled this spring and Kenan-Flagler made it mandatory for leadership training. Cost to the B-school: \$21 an hour per woman.

In another case, a team of five at-home moms hopped on a one-month project at Lending Tree to rewrite 600 job descriptions after several acquisitions and integrate them into its



organization chart. "I was very impressed with the caliber of women" delivered by MomCorps, an Atlanta staffing firm, says Kathy Fritzsche, vice president, rewards, for the online lending exchange.

Ivanna Garibaldi Campbell, Charlotte, N.C., a former Bank of America senior manager who led the Lending Tree team, headed project meetings with her baby in tow. Once she became a stay-at-home mom, she says, it was "tough to go from 500 mph to stepping back. ... I found myself a little stir-crazy."

Skilled workers taking temp projects isn't new, of course. What's different about these teams is that they're available on short notice because the women are usually at home; they tend to work cheap because their main motive is to keep their skills fresh; and they're often extraordinarily well-qualified, having left the work force voluntarily when their careers were on the ascent.

Michelle Fenton used to manage \$2 billion in assets for Invesco AIM. But because the Denver executive quit her job a year ago to care for her two children, she was available to work for far less than one-tenth of her former salary to help tiny TangentWorks, a Web project-integration start-up, write a business plan. Her marketing partner on the project, which was staffed by Flexible Executives of Atlanta: Liz Ward, who used to direct the Levi Strauss, Dockers and Pillsbury brands for the ad agency Foote, Cone & Belding, then ran her own successful ad consultancy for several years.

For TangentWorks, deploying those two "was like having a C-level team" -- chief financial and marketing officers -- "without the salaries," says Zaina Ajakie, CEO of the three-employee firm.

Such successes partly reflect the growing power of women's networks. Ms. Fenton is a former client of Flexible Executives co-founder Jamie Pennington, a mother of three and former stockbroker and investment banker. Ashley Hewitt, Charlotte, a member of the Lending Tree team and a former human-resources director for Duke Energy, connected with a MomCorps executive at a children's birthday party. And Donnabeth Leffler, a former news executive, connected with Kenan-Flagler staffers through friends at church; it was Ms. Leffler who coined the "SWAT team" label.

"Using the brain cells, making the contacts, feeling productive and useful ... and being in a room with people a lot like me," she says, make such projects worth the effort.

MAILBOX

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