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US firms here among the most family friendly

Benefits include flexi-time, enhanced medical plan, teleworking

By ANGELA TAN

(SINGAPORE) Tackling Singapore's low birth rates is a big task. And as Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has said, it's not just a matter of financial incentives.

Noting that there were many facets to the problem, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also said it called for a comprehensive plan, which would include a change in people's mindset, to get them to think in a different way and to value children.

For many, balancing work and family is a strain. One has to give - and the low birth rate seems to suggest it's the family.

The basic benefits companies offer to working mothers - two months paid maternity leave for up to the third child, leave when a child is ill and various medical plans covering dependants - aren't to be sneezed at. But they're not likely to encourage a rush at maternity wards either.

There are, however, some companies that go the extra mile to make it easier for employees to juggle between work and family.

Checks by BT show that information technology companies - led by Hewlett Packard and Sun Microsystems - are among the more generous and flexible with their benefits to keep productivity growing while addressing family concerns.

Other family-friendly firms include American banks like Morgan

Stanley. And consultancy giant KPMG even included a nursing room for breast-feeding mothers during its recent renovations. At all these companies, employees appear to have a life - and still get ahead in their careers.

'At HP we are managed by objectives and results. How you spend the time in the office is not the primary criteria in my line of work,' says a father of four and HP consultant who enjoys the flexibility of working away from the office.

HP's vice-president of human resources for Asia Pacific and Japan, Rich Vosburgh, said HP offers Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) to help employees balance their work and home life.

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'HP's goal is to help employees handle dependant care responsibilities for children, elders or partners so they can achieve their business objectives while they are at work,' Mr Vosburgh said.

HP's FWAs include such components as flexi-time, which allows staff to start a normal eight-hour workday any time between 6 and 8:30 am, and teleworking and 'remote' arrangements that allow employees to do their jobs outside the office.

The guiding principles as to which FWA is best for employees include the business needs of work groups and a focus on 'what' is achieved - rather than 'when', 'where' or 'how'.

'FWAs encourage employees and managers to invent different ways of working and have been an integral part of HP's values and heritage all along,' Mr Vosburgh said. 'FWAs put in very real terms a core HP value of trust and respect of the individual.'

More importantly, an employee on FWA is considered for the same career path as any other.

At Sun Microsystems, the company's iWork concept, coupled with mobile technology, also enables staff to choose where, when and how to work.

According to Lionel Lim, a father of four and vice-president and managing director for Asia South, 70 per cent of Sun's 550 Singapore-based staff are on iWork.

At Morgan Stanley, the outpatient medical plan was recently enhanced. The previous benefit, which was in line with industry benchmarks, was boosted by about 10 per cent for families with one or two children. For those with three or four children, the benefit was raised 65 per cent. And for even bigger families, it was more than doubled.

'We increased the outpatient allowance as our family size was increasing generally around the office and many of our staff families were reaching the cap under the old plan,' said Michael Webb of Morgan Stanley's human resources unit.

Few companies provide a maternity allowance, leaving mothers-to-be to bear the bill for childbirth instead. At Morgan Stanley, however, it has improved its maternity allowance - providing for normal delivery, miscarriages and caesarian births.

'Another driver for revising these benefits was the Prime Minister's appeal to companies who could afford to give some of the CPF saving back to do so,' Mr Webb said. 'We weighed up a number of options and this was one good way to help our employees.'

And from Singapore's point of view, it was money well spent. Morgan Stanley, which has about 200 full-time staff here, saw 26 babies delivered last year.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Hewlett-Packard

- Flexible work hours - employees can start a normal eight-hour workday any time between 6 and 8.30am. Compensation and benefits

not affected.

- Teleworking and remote work arrangements to allow employees to do their jobs outside the office.

Morgan Stanley

- Outpatient medical plan increased by 10 per cent for families with one to two kids; 65 per cent for families with three to four kids; more than doubled for families with five to six kids.
- Maternity allowance - which is already uncommon - improved further to provide for normal delivery, miscarriages or caesarian births.

Sun Microsystems

- IWork (where office work space is shared) and mobile technology allow staff to choose where, when and how to work.

KPMG

- Recent renovations include a nursing room for breast-feeding mothers.

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