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Meeting employee needs

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Life, Not Just Work.

That motto, plus progressive policies to back it up, has made Vertex Inc. of Berwyn one of the "Best Delaware Valley Employers for Working Parents" - and a place people want to work.

"We've found that our best contributors are people who don't have to worry about what's happening at home," says Jan Mehnert, executive director of human resources for the tax software development company.

Vertex employees largely set their own hours: Some work a standard 9 to 5; others choose nights; some compress their 37.5-hour week into a few days. They have access to a new day-care center on the site and can get help with personal financial planning.

The reward for the company? Loyalty. Vertex's turnover rate is 3.4 percent, compared with an industry average of 23.8 percent. About 43 percent of new hires result from employee referrals.

These practices make sense in a changing workforce. Nearly half of America's workers are parents of children under 18. In the 1990s, their jobs on average became more demanding and their commutes and workdays longer, putting stress on their families.

Forward-looking companies, especially those trying to retain high-quality workers, are trying to ease the tug-of-war between work and home.

In that vein, the Delaware Valley Child Care Council last weekend honored Vertex, as well as AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals of Wilmington and the YWCA of Chester County in its seventh annual awards ceremony. The companies have some practices worth emulating.

AstraZeneca won the large-employer award. Its generous parental-leave policy offers up to 52 weeks of combined paid and unpaid time off to care for newborn, adopted and even foster children. New fathers can take five consecutive paid days off.

The pharmaceutical company also offers flexible scheduling around its core hours of 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Options include flex time, part-time, telecommuting and compressed work weeks.

Backup child-care referrals are available, as is a program to help parents with those pesky days before and after summer camp. On-site day care is planned by 2003.

Even small companies, like the YWCA, which employs only 11, can be family-friendly.

These policies give the companies a competitive advantage and the parents peace of mind. It's a good deal all around.