

More employers are offering parents a chance to bring their babies to work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One mom at a label manufacturing company in Keene, N.H., used her foot to rock her daughter to sleep while she worked at her desk. Another at a social service agency in Boston breast-fed her infant son during meetings. At a credit union in Sacramento, a teller held her baby on her lap while she helped customers.

For a growing number of workers across the country, having a baby doesn't set off the customary scramble to arrange child care—at least not right away. That's because they are employed by the 300-plus organizations that allow employees to bring their infants to work.

On Jan. 1, the state of New Hampshire joined the babies-at-work brigade, one of a handful of state governments, including Vermont, and more than a dozen companies in New England to offer the perk, which usually lasts until babies hit the 6-month mark or start crawling. As in Vermont, where the population is also aging, the hope is that the New Hampshire program will attract more young families to the state, according to a spokesman for Governor Chris Sununu. All state agencies operating under the governor, a workforce of about 10,000, can participate; so far, none has opted out.

Employers note the morale boost it inspires in new parents, who save on day care and spend more time bonding with their infants. Productivity may dip temporarily, but employee loyalty soars, and some come back to work earlier than they otherwise might.

Skepticism abounds, of course. Employers wonder: Will coworkers get any work done with babies crying and cooing all the time? Is it all too much for a parent to handle?

In Vermont, which, like other states with babies-at-work programs, does not offer formal paid parental leave, there was plenty of doubt before the program began last year.

"Initially, I had a visceral reaction that we were going to be inundated with crying babies and smelly babies," said Dan Pouliot, deputy commissioner of the state's human resources department. But 20 office infants later, Pouliot said, he hasn't heard any complaints—and all the babies he's encountered at meetings have been quiet.

Massachusetts, which next year is launching a statewide program offering 12 weeks of paid family leave, has no plans to allow government employees to bring their babies to work. Both Vermont and New Hampshire are considering paid leave programs.

The key to a successful program is establishing clear policies, according to Carla Moquin, founder of the Parenting in the Workplace Institute in Salt Lake City, a research and resource platform for supporting babies in the workplace. The state of New Hampshire, for instance, requires that a participating employee change diapers in the restroom and designate a coworker as a backup care provider. Sick or "habitually disruptive" babies aren't permitted; if complaints can't be resolved, participation will be terminated.

It doesn't always work, cautions Moquin, who founded the institute in 2007 after returning to work just four weeks after both of her children were born. But when it's done right, bringing in infants can have a positive impact, she said. As with pets, babies can relieve stress. One new mother who worked for a firefighting agency told Moquin that her boss would walk in looking beaten down, play with her daughter for a few minutes, and "return to the battle totally refreshed." Conversely, it is good for babies to have a plethora of people to interact with, Moquin said. "This is essentially a village," she said. "I've talked to parents who say, 'My baby's actually happier at work with me than when we're home alone.'"

The village is in full force at Electronic Imaging Materials Inc. in Keene, which produces barcode labels for labs and warehouses. Both times employees have brought babies in, coworkers lined up to help out or volunteer to give up their office for the new parent, said vice president and co-owner Heather Bell: "People start coming to me the moment someone says they're pregnant: 'Can you talk to them about me being the baby holder?'"

The productivity of the parents went down, Bell said, which was expected. But their investment in the company soared.

Adding a baby to the mix also prompted people to have more face-to-face interactions, said Bell, whose company provides 11 weeks of

partially paid parental leave.

"Everybody was walking by to say hello to [the baby] in the morning, and goodbye in the evening," she said. "We were doing it for the baby so we started doing it for everyone else."

For parents, however, the experience can be stressful. In 2018, Julia MacMahon, started bringing her 8-week-old baby, Jameson, with her to work at the social services agency YW Boston, which offers two to four weeks of paid leave.

In retrospect, she said, she should have waited longer to go back: "I don't think I realized how much my ability to be fully present would be impacted."

The strain on parents is what most concerns Tracy Burns, chief executive of the Northeast Human Resources Association. Along with a "ton of pluses," she said, including potentially attracting a more diverse group of workers, bringing in a baby requires an incredible amount of multitasking.

"Is that just too much?" she said.

Mary Killgren admits that getting work done with her baby, Shamus, by her side, can be tough, especially as he reaches the six-month mark. Killgren, 27, is a customer service representative for W.S. Badger Co. in Gilsum, N.H., a manufacturer of organic skincare products that often smell citrus or lavender. On a recent day, she laid Shamus down on a crocheted mat and tried to concentrate on processing Whole Foods orders. As Shamus gurgled and chewed his sweat shirt, Killgren typed and clicked at her computer, looking back at him occasionally. When he started to fuss, she wheeled her chair over and rubbed his belly. That afternoon, he was in her lap. Then back on the mat. Then in her lap again.

"Sometimes I can get like a good 15- or 20-minute stretch out of him," said Killgren, who was temporarily moved from a cubicle to a small office and relieved of phone duty.

Realizing the distraction babies cause, Badger pays parents in the program for 32 hours a week instead of 40. "We see children as the responsibility of the community, not just the parent," said Rebecca Hamilton, co-chief executive at Badger, which offers five weeks of paid leave and has hosted 20 babies since 2007.

The company's sales director, Iris Piedmont-Fleischmann, just completed the program with her son, James, and loved the sense of community it inspired. Sometimes James, whose father also works at Badger, would get passed around so much she wouldn't know exactly where he was: "Oh you smell like patchouli, you must have been with Robin."

As much as she's grateful for the extra time with her baby, Piedmont-Fleischmann was eager to clear his gear out of her office.

"I am so excited to get back to work," she said. "There's never been a Pack 'n Play that's been put into a box faster."

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