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Make your SME family-friendly or face the consequences

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Flexibility is the name of the game in today's business world – and the research suggests that if you snooze on it, you'll lose good employees, no matter how big your company is.

Marquee tech brands such as Facebook and Twitter are enthusiastically promoting generous paid parental leave schemes, while government bodies, academics and professional networks all say that the more family-friendly a company can be, the more productive and successful it will become in the long run.

At the start of September, [Business Chicks' 9 to Thrive event](#) saw prominent Australian business leaders address crowds of small business owners and professionals.

Many women in the audience had an infant in one arm and an iPad full of cashflow spreadsheets in the other – and they were keen to hear from Australia's largest tech companies about how important it was to be generous with employees that had families.

Twitter's Australian managing director Karen Stocks told the crowd she was "constantly talking" about maternity leave, and businesses needed an "open, transparent" discussion about parenting. Twitter rolled out its policy of 20 weeks' paid parental leave earlier this year.

Etsy director Helen Souness agreed, telling the crowd that women leaving the workforce to raise children faced a

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“pivotal moment” in their careers and needed to be properly supported. Etsy offers 26 weeks’ paid paternity leave for parents, “regardless of their gender, country of residence or family circumstance”.

“We’re aiming to prevent bias here at Etsy by providing more internal resources and support to parents and managers, so everyone can thoughtfully plan for changes,” a spokesperson for the online marketplace told *SmartCompany*. The company said in a statement earlier this year the company’s parental leave policy is key to “position[ing] Etsy for the long term”.

For SME operators concerned about cashflow, the idea of providing five months’ extra paid leave can be a daunting prospect – but experts say you don’t have to necessarily have the policies of billion-dollar companies to keep good staff.

There are small things that can be done in the name of flexibility for families – and the costs of not doing them are very high for small businesses. With so many competitors offering excellent policies, smaller operators will be squeezed out of the market when it comes to quality staff.

“Regardless of being big or small, businesses have to compete for skilled labour,” says Stacey Jenkins, lecturer in the school of management at Charles Sturt University. Jenkins completed her PhD on work life balance in Australian small businesses.

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“The main issue here is about attracting quality candidates – the good ones will go elsewhere.”

Jenkins says all businesses should be on the ball about their legal requirements for parental leave and consultation around flexibility, but after those obligations have been met, there many other small strategies to put into place.

“Things like access to phones to work anywhere, the ability to bring children into the office space if they are sick – and that is possible,” she says.

“What I’ve found with one-on-one conversations with people is without these things, morale is lower, productivity is lower. If a business has talented staff, if they don’t offer these things they will lose them.”

Start talking about value

Recruiters also say it’s time for SMEs to understand staff members who juggle multiple commitments are more valuable talent because of this.

“They have a greater capacity for time management,” says Kathryn MacMillan, founder of flexible recruitment agency Nine2Three. The business matches employees with companies that value work-life balance – and as an example of the effectiveness of that approach, the business has no full time employees.

“What I get in return for that is people who are very

committed to the business. I have employees who contact me out of hours, because they were 'just thinking about a client'," MacMillan says.

"Being flexible also offers small business the chance to get staff members they might not otherwise, in terms of quality."

The benefits can also extend to a better relationship between management, staff and franchisees. Day spa network endota spa says 90% of its employees are women and many of its franchisees are married couples, sisters or friends who work in partnership to share family responsibilities and business growth.

"We've embraced flexibility by offering part-time work opportunities and the option to work from home when necessary with the firm belief and trust that the job will get done," says endota head of brand and marketing Amanda Connors.

"We truly believe you can get the results and answers you're looking for and still have flexible working arrangements."

Five ways to boost flexibility in your business

1. Have someone on HR watch

Having a staff member who is responsible for tracking what parental leave and policies employees are entitled to will

make planning easier in the long term. "They don't have to be full time on HR," says Jenkins, "but having someone who knows the legislation is really important."

2. Understand your competition

When business owners are planning their own staffing policies, it's important to look around at the best practice in your industry – that's where candidates will be pitching themselves, explains Jenkins. "Then think about what can possibly be achieved in the business – be it earlier start or finish times, or something else."

3. Have one-on-one chats

Once you have staff on deck, start talking to them early on about their requirements for parenting or other commitments. Once you know the priorities, planning ahead is easier and staff morale is likely to be higher.

"You have to create a buy-in from workers in your business," says MacMillan. "We've done a number of things on this that doesn't necessarily break the bank. We have certain days where everyone has to be in the office 9-5 for instance, and then can offer more flexibility on other days."

4. Know what drives your employees

This extends beyond an understanding that parenting is important. It's also about knowing that employees want to be listened to, and can benefit from space to relax in the office.

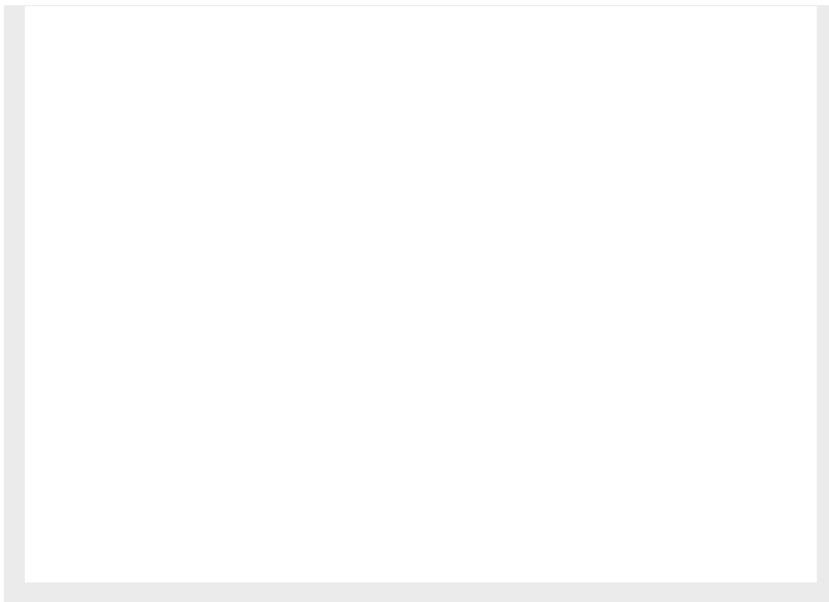
"We do very little things – in our business, we call the board room 'The Bored Room' and have beanbags on the floor where people can go in and watch something, relax," says MacMillan. There's also tools available to ask staff members what they want – a simple online survey takes seconds to set up. "You have to do this without people feeling intimidated or being unsure where their feedback is going to go," says Jenkins.

5. Think beyond the 9-5

Everyone agrees that the "9 to 5" economy is over. From job sharing to early starts and finishes, there's nothing new about many of the strategies that SMEs can employ. There are even tools to help your business find good talent, like specialist recruitment agencies and platforms like Gemini3, which aims to match employees wanting to job share with employers in need of good talent. The first step is to establish parameters around when people need to be in the office.

"I think some businesses do not think their role is to accommodate people," says MacMillan. "But these days you can still deliver great service to your customers this way."

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