

## Employers win award for flexible workplace rules

*By James A. Merolla, contributing writer*

Christine Heenan is a working mom. She likes to meet her kids after school, and she wants to be able to go to soccer games. So as she has built her own public relations company, she's made sure it not only accommodates her needs, but also those of other parents she employs.

Only four of her 13 employees at The Clarendon Group, the Providence firm she founded in 2001, work a traditional 40-hour week. Of the others, one is at Boston College and telecommutes two days a week. Four others are working moms, who work around a family schedule.

"We recognized early on when we founded Clarendon that we should provide work flexibility year-round for families," said Heenan. "With this flexibility, employees are more loyal and happier. When they are happier, they have greater productivity."

That approach has earned the company some national recognition. On Tuesday, at a Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce breakfast, Clarendon and three other local employers were given the 2006 Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility.

Also honored were Embolden Design, a Web development and consulting firm in Pawtucket; Lefkowitz, Garfinkel, Champi & DeRienzo, a Providence accounting and business consulting firm; and Rhode Island Housing, the quasi-public housing financing and advocacy agency – a winner in 2005 as well.

In addition, Family Service of Rhode Island, a human services agency focused on children, received an honorable mention.

The Alfred P. Sloan Awards are part of the When Work Works project, a national initiative to highlight the importance of workplace flexibility and effectiveness as strategies to enhance businesses' profits and their competitive advantage in the global economy. The project is led by the Families and Work Institute in New York City.

Providence is one of 17 cities where businesses were invited to apply for the awards; any employer with 10 or more workers could apply. Entries were evaluated in a two-step process: First the employers' policies were compared with a nationally representative sample; those that scored in the top 20th percentile for workplace flexibility were then asked to validate their self-description through confidential employee surveys.

"This award is one of the most rigorous in the country," said Ellen Galinsky, president of Families and

Work Institute, in a news release. "These businesses understand that workplace effectiveness and flexibility are part of being an employer of choice today. "They are truly models for other companies."

But how do they do it? It's easier to imagine a small company such as Clarendon or Embolden being flexible, but Rhode Island Housing, with 165 employees and a bureaucratic structure?

"We value our employees and realize the importance of their families," said Patricia Trink, director of human resources. "Nobody has the luxury of being able to set a schedule today. We realize that. When we find an employee who believes in our mission in helping people, we know that employee deserves recognition and respect."

Rhode Island Housing allows working moms to take up to three months off after a new baby is born and also provides paternity leave for new dads. When they return, parents can work part time and keep their jobs. There is also job-sharing.

At Embolden, President Ann-Marie Harrington said "employers with progressive work policies definitely have an edge over those that don't. In general, employees are working harder and longer, so flexibility in the workplace enables them to have more control over managing this work load."

Harrington also said she felt staff members would be more "happy and productive" if they had some freedom. "I'm just implementing policies which I would personally seek out if I were an employee," she said.

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