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# Helping working mothers find the right balance

Mom Corps finds part-time work for professional women with young children

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Laura Williams-Tracy](#) Contributing writer

When executives at document-storage company **Patterson Pope** gather soon for a two-day leadership retreat, a newly hired part-time employee will take a seat at the table. It's unusual for someone who works just 20 hours a week to be part of a company's executive ranks. But Heidi Marky, Patterson Pope's first human-resources director, brings the knowledge gained from her time as a vice president for a \$200 million company.

Three mornings a week, Marky spends five hours in the office. She adds another five at home. Afternoons are spent with her 6- and 4-year-old sons, helping with homework and arranging play dates.

Marky found what she considers an ideal arrangement though **Mom Corps**. The 3-year-old Atlanta-based placement firm matches highly educated professionals, mostly mothers, with employers that offer a flexible schedule. For these women, the jobs offer a chance at a balanced life — their work load doesn't overwhelm family responsibilities.

When they moved here from Connecticut four years ago, Marky and her husband figured Charlotte's lower cost of living would allow her to quit working and tend to a growing family. She did just that but found herself eager to put her professional skills back to work.

"I really enjoyed being at home, but I always kind of longed to be back in the work force. A piece of me was missing," Marky says. "I never thought I'd be able to find a job doing the level of what I wanted to do on a part-time basis."

The arrangement benefits more than moms, advocates say. Companies that can't afford skilled talent on a full-time basis and those that need a temporary project manager can tap into a pool of workers.

"Heidi has brought an experience level we've never had," says Denny Hammack, president of Patterson Pope. "We didn't want to bite the bullet and hire a full-time HR person."

Allison O'Kelly founded Mom Corps in 2005 when she was a young mother struggling to find balance with a 2-year-old and a newborn. A certified public accountant and an executive at Toys "R" Us Inc., O'Kelly quit her job when her second child was 6 months old. The demands of home and work became too much, but O'Kelly thought she could handle a small amount of contract accounting work. She soon found ample assignments on projects.

"Pretty quickly I saw there were companies looking for talent and moms looking for opportunities to work, but not full time," O'Kelly says. "I thought this doesn't just have to be me and my friends."

Mom Corps opened its Charlotte office a year later. It handles about 40 placements per year.

The placement company remains loyal to midsized accounting firms but also places employees in human-resources and marketing jobs as well legal and information-technology positions. Employees are hired as contractors and paid through Mom Corps or hired directly at a company, which pays a finder's fee to the firm.

Flexibility is the lure for most job candidates, though schedules can vary widely from as few as five hours a week to a more typical 20 to 30 hours. Some placements are full-time with summers off.

### More than 'all or nothing'

"Women should have options other than all or nothing," says Meredith Ritchie, vice president of sales in Mom Corps' Charlotte office and the mother of 8-year-old triplets.

Ritchie says many of the company's job candidates are professional women who have taken time off to raise a family. They are willing to sacrifice on salary and prestige in exchange for not missing activities at home. It's a balance that many professional women struggle to achieve while working full time.

That frustration often prompts women to choose family over work, which ultimately feeds a talent pool that benefits employers. When she shows résumés to employers, Ritchie sometimes hears, "Oh, she would never take this job. She is too senior."

Patterson Pope's challenge was to find skilled talent to lead a new human-resources effort at a salary it could afford. It solved that problem when it hired Marky through Mom Corps.



photo NANCY PIERCE

Heidi Marky, Patterson Pope director of human resources, enjoys a visit from her son, Cameron, at the document-storage company. Denny Hammack, Patterson Pope president (rear), says Mom Corps supplied a top-notch professional whose part-time schedule made economic sense for the company.

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Hammack says managers debated for a long time about whether to take the burden of HR duties from two employees in the accounting department and hire someone to focus solely on those responsibilities.

Hammack believed an applicant with the requisite skills would want a full-time position. He met with Mom Corps' Ritchie at a coffee shop and immediately loved the concept.

"There are all of these talented moms who are doing what I think is an extremely noble thing in raising kids," Hammack says. "What a great way to get someone who is extremely talented who wants to work part time."

**The Compass Group** in Charlotte is also a Mom Corps client. Christine Paciolla spent almost five years at home with her children, ages 10 and 6, before finding a position this summer handling payroll tax at the food-service company.

Paciolla, a CPA and former executive at a restaurant conglomerate, lasted only a year working full time after her second child was born. She found the juggling act exhausting, and her husband's career made it hard for him to help with the children.

When her younger child started kindergarten, Paciolla placed her résumé with Mom Corps. She now works three five-hour days a week and is home when the children get out of school.

"It has been easier than I thought it would be," she says.

#### **Overcoming lingering bias**

While employees who find a good match are happy, O'Kelly says Mom Corps still sells against a bias about its labor pool. Some employers believe women with young children will miss work more often or be less focused on their jobs than other workers.

Some also believe women who've been away from the work force for several years no longer have sharply honed skills.

O'Kelly concedes re-entering the work force after a stint at home with children can be a daunting task. But Mom Corps' experience shows employers' doubts about the abilities of its candidates quickly fade.

"Their children are their priority," O'Kelly says. "But that doesn't mean they are not smart professionals and ready to work."

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