

‘Virtual’ office life gives balance

Women all over the world are turning their backs on corporate business, seeking the flexibility that the Small Office Home Office (SOHO) promises. Queensland Women looks at a Gold Coast IT company where strategic planning meetings include rattles, bottles and spreadsheets.

ThoughtWare Australia Pty Ltd provides software and services primarily to the information and communications technology (ICT), biotechnology and scientific sectors.

It has 13 core staff and a turnover of around \$650,000, fitting the typical profile of IT businesses in Australia.

But its philosophy to work sets ThoughtWare apart.

“IT is dynamic, it is fast-paced, it can be stressful, so to balance that, it is important to have a philosophy that both accepts the realities of the industry and values the individual,” explained ThoughtWare CEO Sonja Bernhardt.

“Bearing that in mind, and building on my own experiences, we’ve created a work environment that is flexible so that balance in life can be achieved and the risk of burn-out minimised.

“As a single parent working for 11 years in the corporate world, I experienced the full gamut of child-related issues - child care, illness, school events, guilt, stress, and desire for flexible work hours.

“I’ve made sure these issues have been minimised in a way that has encouraged active work participation and balance with home life.

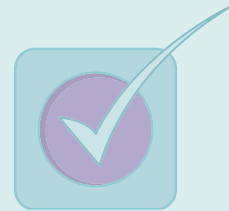
“It works well for us. Our practices mean zero absenteeism. We retain staff because we look after one another; we have respect.

“It makes business sense: recruiting and training new staff is expensive and staff have accumulated knowledge that is hard to replace.”

ThoughtWare project manager Simone Files is one worker who has experienced first-hand the reality of the family-friendly policies.

“Three and a half years of working for ThoughtWare has seen me work full-time, part-time and casually from home and on client sites, take two lots of paid maternity leave for the birth of my sons Harrison and Jack (15 months the first time, followed by five months), relocate three times within Brisbane and now a final move to Toowoomba to be closer to family,” said Simone.

“My level of pay has been adjusted on numerous occasions to take into account what I am working on, and how much I need to receive to survive on a reduced income.



“We’ve worked it out together and ThoughtWare has always supported me, understanding the importance of family and balancing this with the business requirements.”

Her experience is echoed by co-worker Janet Googe: “As a mother of three young children, my family’s needs take first priority. Work requirements for me need to be flexible. The projects I have undertaken for ThoughtWare include data entry and research work, a style of work that enables me to work from home and at my convenience for long or short periods of time. This flexibility allows time for ‘stress free’ thorough completion of projects.”

ThoughtWare staff work together in a ‘virtual’ sense using technology and a knowledge management system to hook up from their home-based offices, gathering at Sonja’s base on the Gold Coast for regular updates and planning sessions – complete with children, rockers, bottles, nappies, coffee, laptops and spreadsheets.

Sonja sees such progressive practices as the way of the future, particularly for IT firms wanting to attract and retain female staff.

“There’s an increasing need within the IT sector to be good communicators, to understand business needs and the client, rather than just be technical – and that’s good news for women who tend to be naturally communicative,” said Sonja.

ThoughtWare Australia was a finalist in the National Work and Family Awards in both the First Steps and Small Business categories in 2001.



Strategic planning family-friendly style at ThoughtWare Australia