

# TRAVEL WEEKLY

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agent life



**'People are not all about their work ...  
it's important to allow them to be human.'**

— Elaine Osgood, Atlas Travel International

# The benefits of putting family first

By Felicity Long

**M**uch has been made of the fact that the vast majority of travel agents are women — 83% in 2004, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — but does it automatically follow that agencies are any more family-friendly than other industries? In fact, issues over part-time employment, flexible hours and outside contractors are frequently the subject of debate and anxiety, judging from the popularity of seminars and literature on the subject.

Elaine Osgood, president of Atlas Travel International in Milford, Mass., takes a different approach.

Osgood is so clued in to the needs of her female employees that her agency was recently honored by Working Mother magazine as one of the nation's 25 best small companies for which to work. In 2006, Osgood was also featured in the Worcester (Mass.) Business Journal as one of the business leaders of the year.

While appreciative of the recognition, Osgood says her management style is not so much innovative as, quite simply, a no-brainer.

"Our agency's commitment to families came right from the beginning," she said. "My background [prior to becoming a travel agent] was all about building relationships, and I continue to do that with my company."

Of the many flexible arrangements Osgood makes with her employees, the most popular is that she allows them — 85% at last count — to work from home. Her agency is staffed with about 65 full-time employees and a shifting number of part-time agents, and her business mix is about 80% corporate.

To agency owners who balk at the idea of letting so many employees work from home, Osgood says, "We find we get more productivity from our folks. They don't have to put up with a long commute or worry about the kids at home, and because the word is out about us, it's so much easier for us to find people to hire. I frequently get calls from agents wanting to work for us because of the benefits we offer."

Other family-friendly benefits include hosting companywide parties to which entire families, including pets, are invited and flown in from across the country to attend.

Osgood is also generous with maternity leave and time off for staff members in the process of adoption. Nor are her policies geared exclusively to women: She has a male employee currently on paternity leave.

Osgood celebrates each agent's anniversary with the company by taking that person out to lunch and giving him or her a customized present, such as a weekend away or a gift certificate to a home-improvement store.

As to whether all this nurturing works, the proof is in the numbers: The agency reported a 65% increase in the number of transactions in 2005 over 2004, with the trend increasing in 2006, she said.

A former inner-city school teacher and child abuse investigator for the state of Massachusetts, Osgood turned her attention to the business world in the 1980s. Because she lacked hands-on business experience, she researched franchise opportunities and took the plunge with Uniglobe.

At the outset, Osgood spent most of her time scaring up business, with the help of one trained travel agent "who took care of anyone I could get to call us."

Lacking the capital for quick expansion, she built her business slowly with part-time staff who worked one at a time into full-time employees.

"At a small company, you get to know your employee's families, their pets and the issues we all have in our personal lives. People are not all about their work, and it's important to allow them to be human."

For agents seeking to create a warmer corporate culture, Osgood

## PROFILE

suggests starting by asking employees what they need. "Ask how you can improve the work environment for them, then listen. They know what they need rather than you guessing at it."

The next step is to act on what you've heard.

"The biggest mistake managers make is to say they will do something, then not do it," Osgood said. "You lose all credibility."

If agents want to work at home, she suggests picking a few with proven track records "until there is a comfort level with having people working from remote locations."

Finally, she said, be open to change. "For someone who is used to managing people face to face, it takes a different style when you don't see the person all the time."

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