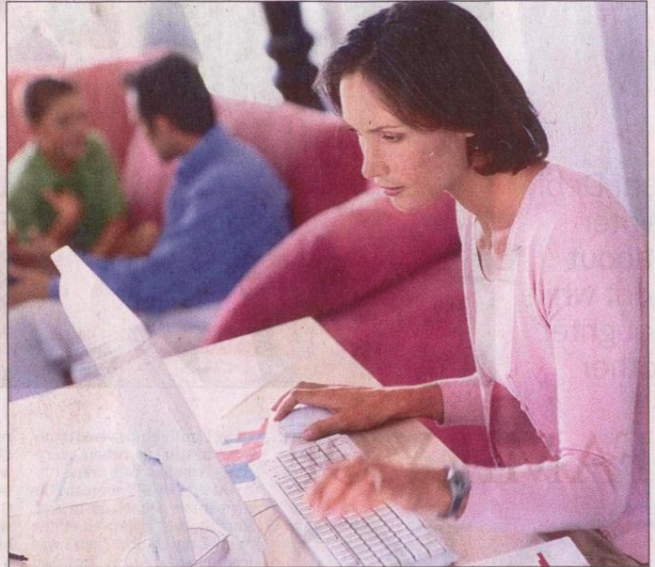


Yahoo! chief Marissa Mayer may think working from home hampers productivity, but those lucky enough to be able to do it in India say they have the best of two worlds, says **Varuna Verma**



HOME IS WHERE THE WORK IS

ing whether the employee is taking a power nap or picking her children from school during work hours. "The practice only works in jobs where there is a clear output requirement," Lala says.

But those who are in favour say that it gives women the opportunity to

Priya Rao took a six-month break from work when she had her baby last year. The Information Technology (IT) professional had thought that it would give her sufficient time to bond with the child and help her regain her strength before getting back to work. But when her maternity leave was drawing to an end, Rao realised that she couldn't leave her infant son at home in the care of a nanny for the whole day. "But I did not want to give up working either," says Rao, a software architect at a Bangalore-based software company.

That is when Rao approached her company's HR team to figure a way out. And she found them willing to make adjustments. "For the next one year, I worked half days and put my son in the crèche on the office campus. This way, I could check on him between meetings and conference calls," Rao says.

With the growing number of women in the workforce, the practice of flexi-hours (which particularly helps women mind both their jobs and homes) is slowly catching on in India. Not surprisingly, Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer's recent decision to annul a company policy that allowed employees to work from home has triggered a debate on the pros and cons of the practice.

Hundreds of women in India would disagree with Mayer. "Flexible work routines are a growing trend in India," says Sairee Chahal, founder, Fleximoms, a portal that connects women to companies offering flexi-work job options — such as work from home or doing suitable hours. "Workflex is gaining currency because of better access to technology, a lack of traditional care giving and the rise in double income households," she explains.

Launched in 2009, Fleximoms claims to have a community of 1,00,000 virtual women members, of whom 5,000 have found suitable flexi-jobs. Its corporate clients include Honeywell, Intel, the Royal Bank of Scotland and Castrol.

Many companies have been encouraging employees to adopt flexi-time. PricewaterhouseCoopers India has several options on offer. Telecommuting is an option where employees working in their local office may sometimes work one day a week at home, while Flexitime is an arrangement where an employee starts and ends the

workday outside the "normal" working hours.

"Individuals continue to work the standard 40-hour work week, and receive full-time income and benefits," says Mark Driscoll, leader, human capital, PwC India.

Those in favour of working from home argue that the practice gives employees, especially women, the opportunity to work and look after the family. Studies have shown that this jacks up productivity, makes employees happy and leads to lower attrition rates. And, of course, it cuts a company's infrastructure costs.

"At PwC we believe that



Marissa Mayer

flexible working arrangements are alternatives that assist employees in balancing work and personal commitments while meeting business needs and objectives," Driscoll stresses.

Sangeeta Lala, senior vice-president and co-founder, Teamlease Services, a Bangalore-based staffing firm, believes that women professionals in India don't seek work from home options on a priority basis. "Flexi-work ranks below job role, salary, proximity to home, work load and bonus on the checklist," she adds.

Those who don't believe in flexi-hours hold that they

hamper employees from performing to capacity, take away the opportunity to network or exchange ideas or scale up the career ladder. Bosses are often left wondering whether the employee is taking a power nap or picking her children from school during work hours. "The practice only works in jobs where there is a clear output requirement," Lala says.

But those who are in favour say that it gives women the opportunity to work professionally, as well as take care of domestic and familial needs. "I work so much better from home," says a media group employee who often edits from home. "At home, the telephones

don't ring constantly, visitors don't keep streaming in and colleagues don't tempt you with coffee and gossip," she says.

Many organisations encourage women to work from home to retain staff. Chennai-based consulting firm Avtar Career Creators (ACC) conducted a survey in 2005 which found that 18 per cent of all attrition in Indian industry was caused by women who stepped off the career track, never to return. "This totalled around 50,000 women quitting their careers every year in the major metros," says Saundarya Rajesh, founder, ACC, which specialises in providing flexible work choices to career women.

Started in 2000, ACC has a network of 26,000 professionally qualified women. In the last five years, the company claims to have created second career and flexi-working opportunities for 3,500 women. Its clients include Goldman Sachs, PepsiCo, Unilever, Heinz, Standard Chartered Bank, Google, Microsoft and Cadbury Kraft.

The Tata Second Career Internship Programme, started in 2008, also helps women who want to return to a career after a break by offering them flexible work schedules to help ease the transition process.

"There is a great deal of emphasis on flexibility as well as relevance of business projects," says Amit Chincholikar, vice-president, management development,

Tata Group HR, Mumbai. "Technology that enables telecommuting (or working from home) provides participants the flexibility so that they can balance their personal situations as well as deliver on deadlines," he says.

Rajesh, however, feels the Indian corporate sector still has some navel gazing to do on diversity and inclusion at the workplace. "The investment made in empowering women goes waste as they often do not get the right work choices or the infrastructure to manage home responsibilities along with a career," she says.

But it may not be long before India Inc embraces the practice of working from home or flexi-hours. For one, it's slowly catching on everywhere. Polling firm Ipsos found that in a survey published recently almost a fifth of over 11,000 workers from 24 countries surveyed said they telecommuted "frequently", while 7 per cent said they worked from home every day.

Another study — this one by Stanford University and the University of Beijing — found that telecommuters at a call centre in China handled calls more efficiently, took fewer breaks and were 13 per cent more productive than those who worked from office.

On the other hand, American retailers J.C. Penney found last year that a third of its headquarters' bandwidth was taken up by employees watching YouTube in office!