

WOMEN IN ESTATE AGENCY: DEXTERS

by Jenny Barlass

In the first of a series on how agencies are helping women who need to combine working with a family, we asked Dexters about their drive to promote family friendly policies

The issue of women returning to work is one estate agent Dexters takes very seriously – not surprisingly when around two thirds of its workforce is women. In its 13th year of business, and now with over 20 sales and lettings offices across south west and west London, Dexters is on a drive to promote the agent's work-life balance policies for its 250-strong workforce. Dexters' Group Managing Director **Jeff Doble** said: "We have a large proportion of female staff - about 63% of the workforce and around 50% of all senior management are women.

"With this in mind we have to be flexible when wanting to retain valuable female employees over the years. Having honed their skills, we're anxious that they're still able to work with us whilst also bringing up a family."

Sarah Sargeant, Dexters' Personnel and Recruitment Manager explains how the agent's family friendly policies came about. "Estate agency is a popular career for women. We knew it was important that when the Government introduced new work-life balance legislation a few years back, that what we offered as a company was in line with those laws."

"We updated our policies and published them in the company handbook, and have since had a number of female staff working flexibly. When a woman wants to return to work after a baby and is doing reduced hours such as a three day week, we judge each case on its merits. We work out the best plan for them, and for the company. People realize we're a very family friendly company. Having said that, flexible working is not an automatic right and people wanting to apply are expected to show how reduced hours, different times or working from home is going to work for the good of the business as well as the individual. Sometimes there may be cases where the impact on quality of service, cost to the company or inability to reorganize working amongst existing staff doesn't always make this possible."

Dexters' positive employment policies must be effective as there is an annual staff retention rate of over 80%, which is unusual for

the industry. And in a company-wide survey of women who went on maternity leave to have a baby, all but one returned to work part-time. Sarah herself is a case in point. She was off work for 12 months during which time she had daughter Lucy, and returned to work part-time in November last year. "The arrangement works really well," she said.

"Some parts of my role had to be taken on by other staff as I was obviously only able to do 3/5 of my previous job. So I sat down with my Line Manager and worked out which areas of my job I should retain according to the best use of my skills and time."

Emma Merrison is back doing what she does best, troubleshooting, three days a week after having her son Toby 16 months ago. Emma is a Director at Dexters and has been with the company for seven years.

"I took six months maternity leave," she said. "Then when I was ready to come back to work, it was clear I wouldn't have been able to go back to my previous role as a full-time Sales Director running a branch. All sales and lettings staff work on a commission basis, and it would be difficult to ascertain who earned the commission if you set up a lead on a Monday, for example, which was followed through by a colleague later in the week and then resulted in a sale. So I took on this new troubleshooting role, which I absolutely love. I go into an office for about three months at a time, and help sort out any problems they have, or streamline operations. It has the same level of responsibility as before and I still have the same title. It's not a job share but it works well as it means I can be home with Toby the rest of the week. It's making the best of both worlds as I really love being able to use my brain at work and thrive on the challenges of the job, and then I can appreciate more the time at home with Toby."

Jeff Doble adds: "We were delighted when Emma and Sarah came back as it meant all the time and resources we'd invested in them were going to stay within the company. And they could go on and further their careers with Dexters."

