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## A New Track for Women CPAs

By Max Messmer

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, and that is certainly true where the concept of "parent tracking" is concerned. The term "mommy tracking" has been widely used, but we decided at Robert Half International that parent tracking more accurately reflects the fact that there are also daddies who elect to take advantage of this new career track.

Parent tracking is a term that will be familiar to most readers of this magazine. For those unfamiliar with it, however, it is a management concept to allow professional, career-oriented parents to achieve success in their careers but on a slower "track" that allows them more time for their parallel roles as mothers and fathers. Generally, it involves offering employees the opportunity to work fewer or more flexible hours in order to spend more time raising children.

There are those who debate whether the parent track option actually appeals to a majority of men and women in the American workforce. It evidently does, according to an independent national study we recently commissioned. We asked 1,000 men and women whether they would sacrifice rapid career advancement in order to spend more time with their families. Nearly **eight out of ten** said they would.

Seventy-eight percent of those responding to the survey chose the slower, family-oriented career track, and **two out of three** said they would be willing to reduce their work hours — and salaries — an average of 13 percent in order to gain more family and personal time.

I was especially interested in another finding from this study: only one-third of all the men and women surveyed said they would be likely to accept a promotion if it required them to spend less time with their families.

The proverbial handwriting is on

the wall: skilled and qualified professionals who are also parents must be offered opportunities to successfully fulfill both roles.

It is, of course, good and decent when the management of public accounting firms or of other companies seek to accommodate the personal needs of employees. Nevertheless, economic and managerial necessity is largely responsible for the concept of parent tracking. A look at our nation's demographics and labor picture explain why the need for parent tracking has arisen.

The Conference Board, a leading New York research group, indicates that the fastest growing segment of the workforce is women with pre-school children. Furthermore, 65 percent of mothers with children under 18 are working — three times as many as in 1960. Clearly, dual-income families with children are here to stay.

In addition, many of today's baby boomers are looking for more fulfillment in their family lives, as evidenced by our survey. Combine this with the shortfall of some 23 million workers in the United States in the next decade and the message to American business becomes clear: respond to the needs of millions of workers with flexible work options like the parent track or lose a major portion of your labor pool. In the coming decade, progressive firms in accounting and in other industries that **do** respond will be far more competitive in attracting and keeping valuable employees than those who do not.

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**Harold M. "Max" Messmer, Jr.**, is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. Robert Half and Accountemps divisions specialize in permanent and temporary placement of accounting, financial, tax and data processing personnel.

To more specifically address the readers of this column and magazine, more than half of today's accounting and MBA graduates are women. Firms such as Arthur Andersen and Touche Ross are keenly aware of this. At Arthur Andersen for example, it may take a "parent tracker" 15 years to become a partner versus the traditional 11 years.

Joel S. Koenig, managing partner of Touche Ross's Century City, California, office was recently quoted as saying, "Twenty years ago, women in accounting were few and far between. Not today. More than 50 percent of the people we hire these days are women, maybe even more. We're trying to be responsive and flexible. So many of our best people are women — we want to keep them and recruit more of them. The parent track concept allows us to do that."

Interestingly enough, the need to provide more flexible routes to career success coincides with the phenomenal growth in the number of temporary workers. There were 6.5 million temporary workers in the United States in 1988. Temporary workers are no longer only those filling lower-level jobs. Top-level professionals, including accountants and financial executives, are increasingly choosing to work on a temporary basis because of the flexibility it provides. We're seeing this in our Accountemps and Executive Corner divisions.

The growing need to fill crucial jobs in accounting and other professions has spawned greater interest in the use of temporary workers as well as in flexible work options — both of which allow employees to combine successful careers with successful parenting. Simply put, the need to attract and keep good people has "invented" the parent track. And while it is relatively new as a management tool, it will, again of necessity, grow in importance and utilization.