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Breaking the Biology Barrier
By LYNETTE CLEMETSON

KATIE LEDBETTER, who is expecting a baby girl late this year, has delighted in the fawning of baby-obsessed colleagues, the cooing commentary on the joys of parenthood and the feigned laments over the loss of social life and sleep.

But because she is adopting instead of giving birth, Ms. Ledbetter, who works for Standard Register, a document services company based in Ohio, was initially told she was not entitled to the six to eight weeks of paid leave offered to pregnant employees.

Then in January, an ebullient manager told Ms. Ledbetter to check her e-mail. Effective this year, a memo to the company's 3,500 employees read, Standard Register would offer adoptive parents four weeks of paid leave and up to \$4,000 in financial assistance. Ms. Ledbetter, her manager told her, would be the first recipient. "It was like a gift from God," said Ms. Ledbetter, 45, a customer service specialist in the company's Charlotte, N.C., office. "When you are in this adoption mode, you just come to expect obstacles. I was so very, very touched to know my company backed us."

With more than 100,000 Americans adopting each year, adoption benefits are becoming a hot new perk in the panoply of workplace benefits. Whether paid time off, reimbursement for costs or both, the benefits help parents defray hefty adoption fees and afford bonding time with new children. Just as important, recipients say, the assistance sends the message that adoptive families are as valued and worthy of support as biological families are.

"Building a family through pregnancy or adoption are now viewed pretty much the same by most people these days," said Ms. Ledbetter, who has two biological children, Zachary, 11, and Amanda, 22, and who is adopting from an orphanage in Guatemala.

A 2006 survey of 1,000 companies by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption found that 44 percent of respondents offered paid adoption leave, up from 38 percent in 2000. And 83 percent of those surveyed offered financial assistance for adoptions, up from 70 percent in 2000.

The companies surveyed ranged from small nonprofits to Fortune 500 corporations. In March the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wis., a nonprofit organization with 65 employees, added three fully paid weeks of adoption leave for full-time employees, with three additional weeks at 50 percent of their pay. Bank Rhode Island, which has 300 employees, added four fully paid weeks of adoption leave in January.

"We see this as a significant increase, given the fact that in recent years companies have generally been looking for ways to cut expenses," said Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation, started in 1992 by Mr. Thomas, an adoptee and the founder of the Wendy's fast-food chain.

A similar study in 2005 by WorldatWork, a group of human resources and benefits professionals based in Scottsdale, Ariz., found that 39 percent of responding companies offered some form of adoption benefits, up 3 percent from the previous year.

Some work-force experts say the numbers may be overly rosy, because the companies that respond to benefits surveys tend to be those with commendable practices. Even paid maternity leave is not guaranteed in the United States. Companies must treat pregnant women like other employees with a temporary medical disability and give them time off.

But a 2005 study by the Families and Work Institute, a New York-based research group, found that just 66 percent of companies with 1,000 or more employees offer some sort of replacement pay during maternity leaves. Among companies with 50 to 99 employees, 36 percent offered paid leave after a birth.

If offering benefits to adopting parents is, in part, a matter of good will and creating parity with pregnancy leave programs, it is also a competitive gesture. Many adoptive parents are professionals, well into their careers – employees that companies fight to hire and keep.

Bank Rhode Island added its adoption benefit after a prized employee who was adopting from China came to her managers with a list of other companies that offered adoption assistance and a proposal for how such a policy could work for the company.

"We realized that from a recruitment and retention standpoint we wanted to stay competitive with bigger companies and the banking industry as a whole," said Marianne Monte, senior vice president for human resources for the bank, which is based in Providence. "People increasingly want to see these work-life balance benefits up front."

The Dave Thomas Foundation, which runs an advocacy program called Adoption-Friendly Workplace, provides kits for employees on how to lobby employers for adoption benefits, and guides for companies about how to introduce them.

Most paid adoption-leave benefits range from two to six weeks, but some companies are more generous. The Merrill Lynch Primary Caregiver Leave program offers 13 weeks of fully paid time off for all new parents, biological or adoptive, male or female. It also offers adoptive parents \$3,000 to \$5,000 in financial aid.

"It's a strong statement against the philosophy that the company has to get everything that they want first and you, as a person, and your family, come second," said Keli Tuschman, director of human resources for Merrill Lynch Commodities, who adopted a girl from China in December.

As an executive, Ms. Tuschman, 42, was determined to maintain her career. But after waiting so long to start a family – she married Jim Tuschman, a real estate developer, nearly four years ago and started the adoption process in December 2004 – she was also determined to enjoy her new baby. Since returning to work in March after her 13-week leave, the company has allowed her to work from home part time.

"You can't get that time with your baby back," she said. "Some other company might offer to pay me a little more, but this buys my loyalty."

SOME adoption agencies require, or strongly recommend, that adoptive parents take several weeks off to bond with a child. Kentucky Adoption Services Inc., in Owensboro, the agency Ms. Ledbetter is using, requires that at least one parent stay home after an adoption for at least six weeks and recommends eight weeks or more, especially for older children.

"No one blinks when a new birth mother takes off six weeks or more to be with her baby, but people then wonder why adoptive parents want the same time," said Lucy Armistead, the agency's executive director.

Neither Amanda Lawson nor her husband, Matthew, had paid time off for their adoption leave. The couple, who adopted from Guatemala through Ms. Armistead's agency in July, relied on financial help from family and friends so that Ms. Lawson could stay home for eight weeks.

Ms. Lawson, an executive assistant for a nonprofit organization in Owensboro, cobbled together vacation and sick leave for five weeks of paid time off. She took another three weeks without pay. But the salary loss after spending over \$25,000 on the adoption, she said, has been hard.

"It kind of hurt," said Ms. Lawson, 27, who returned to work this week. "I am as much a new mother as anybody else. Those few weeks of salary make a difference."

Debra Ness, president of the National Partnership for Women & Families, a Washington-based advocacy organization, said that increased lobbying for adoption benefits is part of a broader push to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act, enacted in 1993.

The law requires any company with 50 or more employees to offer workers 12 weeks of unpaid time off for certain family or health needs, including maternity, paternity and adoption leave. But labor experts estimate that 40 percent of employees in the private work force are not covered by the law because they work for small companies or do not meet the law's tenure or hour requirements. And many who are covered simply cannot afford unpaid time off.

"We have certainly come a long way from the days when people didn't even understand what work-life policies were," Ms. Ness said. "But people's lives and mind-sets are still far ahead of policies, and support is still out of sync with the day-to-day lives and needs of most families."

Ms. Ledbetter recently took vacation time to visit Guatemala, where her adoption is in its final stages. She and her husband, Russ, an import-export compliance officer for Goodrich Corporation, expect to bring their daughter home by the end of the year. She plans to take her new four weeks of paid adoption leave, and eight weeks of unpaid leave.

Their good fortune has become an inspiration. Among the handful of soon-to-be adoptive parents that she regularly talks with online, she is the only one with paid adoption leave. "They were just so thrilled for me," Ms. Ledbetter said. "People want to know how they can get other companies to realize the need."