



Border Express Business Improvement Facilitator Ali Hutchinson with daughter Kate

As more women take on roles in the transport industry, companies face the challenge of providing equal opportunities for women, and flexibility for mothers.

Interstate transport company Border Express welcomes the challenge. The company recognises the value of employing women, investing in their training and making it easy for mothers to return to work.

Ali Hutchinson is Business Improvement Facilitator (Corporate) at Border Express. She says the company's equal-opportunity policies and family-friendly practices make it easy to balance work and family.

She is speaking from experience: Hutchinson has a two-year-old daughter,

Kate, and is expecting her second child in January.

She is one of 117 women working at Border Express, where women account for 18 percent of the workforce. She says four staff members are currently on maternity leave, and have been offered the option of a gradual return to work.

Staff are also offered part-time work, job-sharing and flexible start and finish times in the quest for the elusive work/life balance. For some positions, working from home might also be on the table.

Hutchinson took three months maternity leave after Kate was born, and then returned to her role at Border Express one day a fortnight. She didn't want to leave her baby in childcare at such a young age, but when she

was needed at meetings she was allowed to take Kate to work.

"When Kate was six months old it got hard to bring her in," she remembers. So she organised childcare and slowly increased her workload up to two days a week.

Hutchinson says flexibility has been the key to the success of her return to work.

"Now I work Thursdays and Fridays but I can change the days to whatever suits me, as long as I get the work done," she says.

She usually works from the Border Express Albury office, but is also able to work from home.

"I'm doing a bit today. I did a bit last night. It's very flexible with the workload," she says. "If I want to take on extra I can. If I need to earn a bit more money I can do more.

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Returning to work has obvious financial benefits. Hutchinson says it has also enabled

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the border balance

To hold onto valuable staff Border Express has made its depots family-friendly. Tamara Whitsed explains

her to retain contact with the people she works with, and with her role.

In her role in business improvement, Hutchinson has helped implement the company's Human Resource Information System (HRIS) — a tool that enables staff to access information including sick leave and holiday entitlements on computers at every depot.

Now she is helping establish process improvement teams. "We're trying to get employees to talk about things that are making their job hard and trying to improve ways for them," she says.

FAMILY/BUSINESS

Other mothers at Border Express are also benefiting from the company's family-friendly policies.

Donna O'Shea is an administration supervisor at the company's Derrimut depot in Melbourne. She has worked at Border

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Express for over five years and was working up to 11 hours a day before taking six months maternity leave.

O'Shea returned to work three months ago, and is happy she no longer works overtime. She has also been granted flexibility to change her starting time to fit in with childcare.

Most of the women working at Border Express work in the administration, operations and human resources departments. But there are also three women working in senior management and seven working in the traditionally male roles of drivers and forklift operators.

Hutchinson has been inspired by the success of many women working at Border Express, including Tracie Kachel who was

recently promoted to Regional Manager of Perth, Adelaide and Darwin.

When Border Express gives presentations at high school the company makes it clear the transport industry has a wide variety of roles for both men and women. Tiarne Pett joined Border Express as a school-based trainee, working two days per week for a year before taking on a full-time position as a data entry clerk with the Perth depot's operations team.

Hutchinson began working at Border in 2006 after 14 years in retail. It was a daunting move, she says, but the friendly environment eased the transition.

"Everyone helps you fit in straight away," she says. People here are just great. It all comes from the top down.

"If you've got good management that flows throughout the business."

Everyone working at the Albury depot enjoys a monthly casual-clothes day and barbecue. Each department at the depot takes a turn at cooking; Hutchinson says it's a great opportunity for employees from all departments to catch up with each other.

She is also impressed with the programs provided by the company's employee welfare team. Men and women have been given the opportunity to participate in Weight Watchers at Work, the 'Step into Life' personal training program, a physiotherapy program and pilates classes.

Border Express also provides an annual flu vaccination program for all employees and quit kits for smokers.

"This all helps to make Border Express an employer of choice," Hutchinson says.

There is also an employee assistance program, providing free and confidential counselling. Hutchinson suggests if mothers were having difficulty returning to work at Border Express, they could use this service. "It's free, and nothing is reported back to Border Express," she says.

Hutchinson looks forward to the arrival of her second child in January. She plans to take six months maternity leave, but is considering doing a few hours work a month from home during her leave.

Border Express is also supporting her to study a Masters in Business Management.

"I'll continue to study over the next year or so. And in the long term I hope to get back to full-time work and a good career path," she says. ■