

## LEGAL/FINANCIAL GUIDE



### There's more to balance than having a program

Text by Elizabeth Reza

Work-life balance has become a hot topic at law firms, and for good reason. Attorney attrition is costly, interrupts a firm's ability to provide the highest quality client service and has the potential to demoralize other attorneys, especially in situations where a valued colleague leaves the firm due to an inability to balance work and family.

In response, law firms across the country have been developing programs to address retention issues. Flextime, part-time partner track and reduced schedule options – once rare at law firms – have gained traction, and recruiting materials now commonly address the issue of work-life balance.

But simply having a program in place doesn't mean that it actually works. NALP's analysis of its 2007-2008 "Directory of Legal Employers" shows that in 2007 most large law firms allowed part-time schedules. Nonetheless, only 5.4 percent of all attorneys and 9.6 percent of women associates were working part-time.

The problem: Law is a profession where success is often linked to billable hours and top-notch client service, and the traditional path towards partnership can take a toll on achieving "balance."

The emphasis on client service means that clients' needs often conflict with "life needs" such as children's doctor appointments, school conferences or family dinners.

Not surprisingly, a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. That's why a growing number of firms are now taking the time to develop customized programs that can be tailored to meet the needs of the individual attorney as well as those of the firm, the practice group and the client.

To make this approach work, law firms must invest a significant amount of time and energy in both designing and managing their work-life programs.

Indeed, signs of a good program are a willingness to assign partners the job of overseeing participating lawyers and the involvement of a career guidance manager who collaborates with participating lawyers and partners in managing the program.

These signs show that the firm is willing to expend its own resources to make these alternative arrangements work.

Those designing a program – or those looking for a job at a firm with a good program – should take note of current best practices.

- **See each lawyer's situation as unique.** Each attorney's needs are certain to change over time as children grow up and health care emergencies are resolved.

The best programs therefore consider both the long-term and short-term needs of all involved. That makes discussions regarding an alternative work arrangement a two-way street.

To come up with a workable reduced-time schedule, parents with young children, for example, may need to arrange for backup child care in case client requests need to be accommodated during an attorney's "off" day.

Those just returning from parental leave may want to gradually increase their work hours.

And someone caring for an aging or ill family member may need additional technical support so that he or she can work effectively from home.

- **Make expectations clear.** While each situation is unique, it's also important to have established rules.

A firm should clearly state the circumstances under which it is (or is not) willing to support an alternative schedule.

For example, if an alternative schedule is only available to accommodate child care and family health issues, a firm's policy should state that.

A firm should also communicate up front regarding the flexibility that it needs in return from a participating attorney, such as a willingness to take a client call in the evening or to attend an out of town meeting.

Clear expectations provide the best opportunities for success.

- **Create a path to long-term career success.** By working with a good career counselor, firms can help attorneys develop individualized career roadmaps.

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Those working a reduced schedule, for example, may find it makes sense to slow the pace of their partnership track so that they can develop their practice and skills before a partnership determination.

The best programs make sure that these discussions include department heads or practice group leaders so that expectations are clear and meaningful opportunities for advancement are made available.

• **Recognize that practice groups differ.** A lawyer who works in M&A is going to have different client demands than one who does litigation or another who handles regulatory matters.

Regardless of the practice area, it is critical to have early and active involvement by a lawyer's practice group leader when creating an alternative schedule.

The alternative schedule that results from this collaboration will be more likely to meet the needs of

clients and the practice area, and therefore more likely to be successful for the participating lawyer.

• **Have support in place.** In addition to career counseling, other kinds of support can make or break a flexible work program.

Attorneys on alternative schedules may need to try several different approaches before finding one that really works. That means they need to be working not only with their practice group leader, but also with others in the firm who can help them navigate these adjustments.

Matching each participating attorney with a partner, for example, can provide not only oversight but also some opportunities for mentoring.

• **Remember, it's not just for women.** Statistics show that women are more likely to take advantage of work-life programs, so men may be hesitant to raise their hand for alternative arrangements.

The combination of career counsel-

ing and individualized design, however, can make it easier for men to participate. That, in turn, can have a profoundly positive effect on the firm's work culture.

• **Remain a work in progress.** Many law firms are just beginning to explore the possibilities offered by flextime, reduced work schedules and other work-life balance offerings. As these programs take hold, it is likely that they will need fine-tuning or perhaps even a major overhaul.

Recognizing the need for evolution, firms with the best programs offer opportunities for feedback from participating attorneys, practice group leaders and other members of the firm.

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