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Economy Driving More Work/Life Balance at Law Firms

Perhaps there's an upside to the downturn after all. As [this article](#), from *Working Mother* magazine describes, law firms are more willing to accommodate flexible schedules these days -- not necessarily out of noble motives, but because it's financially expedient to do so.

The article describes a bunch of changes at law firms, many of which are news to even someone like me who's been tracking this issue since the start of my beat here at [Legal Blog Watch](#). According to the article, of the [50 Best Law Firms for Women](#), nearly all offer reduced schedules to lawyers, while 62 percent offer full-time telecommuting, and 42 percent have written flexible-schedule policies. Still, I'm a little bit skeptical -- and I wonder how many women are actually taking advantage of those full-time telecommuting options. The article doesn't say.

Still, a desire to work fewer hours now coincides with law firms' desire to cut costs. So some firms are allowing lawyers to reduce their hours to a 60 percent schedule and retain full-time healthcare, an arrangement that is preferable to layoffs. At some firms, experienced lawyers are paid by the hour on a project-by-project basis, which enables firms to offer high-quality service at lower costs.

All of the changes are heartening, but it's not clear how much they'll help younger female associates. Most of the lawyers mentioned in the article who've been provided the hourly-work arrangements or reduced time are experienced, partner-level attorneys in their 40s or even 50s. Most of these women had at least a full decade of uninterrupted work experience before having children and have plenty of options available to them. So it's no surprise that firms are now trying to retain them. But for younger associates with families who don't yet have work experience or a client roster, it's not clear how helpful these new flex policies are in practice.

Still, the article emphasizes one important point about the workplace and work/life balance: It's all about the economics. Now that times are bad, firms are finding it financially advantageous to offer flex time. But once the economy ramps up again, there's little guarantee firms will be so flexible. Ultimately, the lesson for lawyers who want work/life balance or any other benefit from law firms, in good times or bad, is this: Find a way to make yourself economically attractive, and you can write your own ticket.

Posted by Carolyn Elefant on August 11, 2009 at 03:36 PM