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August 12, 2008 6:49 AM

Best Law Firms Report Examines Female Workforce Issues

Posted by Rachel Breitman

The playing field may not yet be level, but some law firms are getting more women into the game, according to the second annual "Best Law Firms for Women" list published today by [Working Mother](#) magazine.

Leading off with the stat that nearly four of five female associates leave their firms within the first five years, the list singles out fifty law firms that have made strides to curb attrition rates and keep women lawyers happy.

"We want to arm firms with information so they can start improving their retention and promotion of women," says Deborah Epstein Henry, president of [Flex-Time Lawyers LLC](#), a consulting company she started after working as an associate [Patterson Belknap Webb and Tyler](#) in New York and [Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis](#) in Philadelphia.

Henry approached *Working Mother* in 2006 with the idea for the collaborative study, proposing a report focused solely on this one segment from the magazine's annual examination of the top companies for women. The research is based on a 400-question survey taken online by firms with 50 or more lawyers. The final 50 firms are chosen based on their responses, measuring areas such as workforce profile, family-friendly benefits and policies, flexibility, leadership, compensation, advancement and retention of women.

The finalists represent a wide range of small and mid-sized practices alongside perennial Am Law 100/Am Law 200 firms. San Francisco's [Folger Levin & Kahn](#), at just 68 lawyers, made the list for a second year as did [Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom](#), which employs 1753 lawyers in the U.S. alone.

This year 115 firms participated--up from 85 last year--though several did not reapply, which may help explain the 52 percent year-over-year turnover in those firms that made the list.

This year's research touched on some positive trends: the average maternity leave inched up to 14 weeks from 12 last year and the rate of female equity partners rose to 19 percent from 16, with non-equity partners at 28 percent, up from 22 percent.

Working Mother and Flex-Time don't rank the firms, but instead highlight some firm programs and statistics. The reason: to encourage participation, says Henry. This year's

special mentions included [Bricker and Eckler](#), a 325-lawyer Columbus, Ohio firm, lauded for having 28 percent female equity partners and a job share program.

"We think it is important for attorneys to have balanced lives," says Faith Williams, an equity partner and executive committee member at Bricker, which has offered part-time options for 15-years. "We try to be aware of the needs of all our attorneys to help them with their family life."

While the survey says family-friendly policies are on the rise, advocates for increased work-life balance and policies that support this say progress has been painfully slow.

"In the past generation, we have seen a slower pace of progress than we thought we would," says Holly English, an employment lawyer of counsel at [Post, Polak, Goodsell, MacNeill & Strauchler](#) and former president of the [National Association of Women Lawyers](#). "The single most important thing is that the firm leadership needs to measure results and see positive changes each year."