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Law Firms: Upping the Flex Factor

Flexibility for all?

When attorney Janet Herman was pregnant with her first child in 1989, her firm was unsure how to arrange for her maternity leave. No one working there as an attorney had ever taken time off to give birth before, so Ms. Herman had to call other law firms to find out what was standard at the time.

The profession has undoubtedly made strides in maternity practices since Ms. Herman, now director of professional development at Morrison & Foerster in San Francisco, started in the industry, but there is still much to be done to meet the needs of working women — particularly those with families — in the legal field.

Nearly half of female lawyers leave the profession during their careers, and 78% of associates leave law firms by their fifth year, according to a report released today in Working Mother magazine that recognizes the [2008 50 Best Law Firms for Women](#). (The magazine partnered with Flex-Time Lawyers to compile the list in an effort to encourage firms to make themselves more attractive to potential female employees.)

However, all of the female attorneys interviewed for this piece say they believe the industry has made progress since they entered. Law firms are now offering programs like female networking, backup childcare services, private rooms for nursing mothers and increased flexibility, with part-time opportunities, including the option to make partner part-time and a de-emphasis on worth being judged by billable hours booked.

Ice Miller of Indianapolis offers a dry-cleaning drop-off service in-house and is in the process of renewing a program that allows employees to have frozen foods delivered to the office so they can simply go home and pop dinner in the oven. Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom of New York now offers its employees the chance to take a sabbatical from the firm through a program called Sidebar, which allows lawyers in good standing to take a leave for up to three years.

Kayalyn Marafioti, a partner at Skadden, says this gives some lawyers a chance to return to the workforce after caring for a child or older family members.

“When people do return to the workplace, they think of [the firm] rather than just thinking they can’t go home again,” she said.

Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers, says firms must stay attuned to the needs of women and men if they want to continue to thrive.

“The profession is really on a precipice for change,” she said. “With Gen Y and men voicing work/life concerns [nearly as often as] women, it’s really changing the complexion of law firms. It’s not just small group of working moms to wrestle with any more.”

Catherine Ballard, a partner at Bricker & Eckler in Columbus, Ohio, says firms must accommodate women with families or risk losing them altogether.

“Women are realizing they’re missing out on their families. And they say, ‘I don’t want to make this my entire life. You have to accommodate it or I’m doing something else.’”

Ms. Herman says she believes the profession will retain more lawyers — both male and female — when firms start fully accommodating everyone.

“One partner I worked for had her tubes tied, and she told me that was the decision [a woman] had to make [to succeed at a law firm]. But that’s not the attitude anymore. Men want to spend time with their families as well, and it ceases to be a women’s issue,” she said. “Over time, that’s what’s going to make a difference.”

Readers: Whether or not you’re in a legal field, what measures could your employer take to make your workplace more flexible? How accommodating is your current workplace of employees’ needs? — *Brittany Hite*