

BALANCING ACTS

Firm support for the family

Lawyers get help from their employers handling demands of home life

By Maggie Jackson | August 24, 2008

When Beth Reilly returned to work this spring from nearly nine months of maternity leave, her husband, Patrick Callahan, began a summer at home in Needham tending full time to their son, Ryan. Next month, they'll get a nanny. But the couple was thrilled to share care for their son's first year of life.

Their story isn't all that surprising, except when you consider that Reilly and Callahan are high-flying litigators at the prestigious Boston firm WilmerHale. Traditionally known for long hours and workplace rigidity, the field of law is shifting, as firms try to retain talented lawyers - especially women - who seek better balance.

Consider that for years nearly half of law students nationwide have been women, yet just about 16 percent of top-tier partners with an equity stake in Massachusetts' 25 largest firms are women. Women leave the field at a higher rate than men, frustrated by workplaces that have offered little flexibility. Yet firms are expanding parental leaves and doing more to ensure that part timers are not stigmatized.

"The industry as a whole is at a tipping point," says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and head of Flex-Time Lawyers, a consulting firm. "I'm heartened by the fact that the industry is moving toward change, but there's a lot more work to be done."

Reilly calls the shifting climate "a new enlightenment," and says she's at a point in her career where she can both benefit from the changes and help make them happen. She is a member of WilmerHale's Work-Life Balance Committee, a group of 49 employees that implements the firm's work-life policies and advises management on ways to help employees gain better balance. And she will be considered for partner next year.

"It's smart business," said Reilly about firms that are offering better work-life benefits.

This past spring, WilmerHale expanded paid parental leave for primary caregivers from 12 to 18 weeks and for secondary caregivers, usually men, from three to four weeks. Reilly and Callahan augmented their leaves with vacation and unpaid time off.

Other firms are taking similar steps. Employers on this year's Working Mother magazine's list of the 50 best law firms for women offer an average of 14 weeks maternity leave, up from 12 weeks last year. The winning firms offer 5.7 weeks paternity leave, up from 4.6 weeks on average last year. Released earlier this month, the list is compiled with Flex-Time Lawyers. The Boston firms that made this year's list are WilmerHale, Bingham McCutchen LLP, and Foley Hoag LLP.

But policies are only part of the solution, emphasizes Lauren Stiller Rikleen, a partner at Bowditch & Dewey who directs the firm's Bowditch Institute for Women's Success.

"If the culture of the firm does not back up its written policies, then the policies don't matter," says Rikleen, author of "Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women's Success in the Law." In particular, working reduced hours carries a stigma at many firms, with part timers being sidelined onto less important cases.

That's why some firms have begun designating senior staff to serve as work-life advisers, working especially closely with lawyers who are on leave, working part time, or regularly telecommute. Last year, WilmerHale named more than 20 partners to this role in the firm's offices nationwide. The firm has 1,060 lawyers, 8 percent of whom work reduced hours.

"We make a big effort to make sure we work with people to ensure they are getting the right assignments and not sidelined," says Lisa Pirozzolo, a WilmerHale equity partner and mother of two who coleads the new adviser program.

The smaller firm Foley Hoag - which has 6 percent of its 234 lawyers on reduced hours - has one part-time partner who advises lawyers working reduced hours on how to carve out the right schedule, find child care, or stay in touch with work when needed. At Bingham, where 7 percent of its 800 lawyers are on reduced hours, the work of the firm's five attorney development managers includes helping part timers keep their careers on track.

Bingham's Boston office is piloting a working group for part timers, overseen by two partners, to "add another layer of attention" to part timers' needs, says Dan Jackson, director of attorney development. A key to helping part timers stay on track in a client services firm is offering "multiple avenues for mentoring, advice, resources," says Jackson.

Siobhan Mee, a Bingham part-time partner who coheads the new working group, won a promotion to counsel while on leave with her first child, now age 3, and made partner last year while on leave with her youngest, now almost 2. She takes off Fridays, but tucks in work on weekends as needed.

"It's not like I leave the office on Thursdays and don't think about work until Monday. That would mean I'm not looking at the kind of cases and the kind of clients who have high-stake demands," says Mee. "I do core parenting things like give them baths, feed them dinner, and sit in the hallway and guard against monsters when they're falling asleep, and to do that I'm happy to fit in work even if it's odd hours on the weekends. It really balances out."

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