

The Washington Times

September 14, 2008 Sunday

Mother of all incentives; Law firms offer care for children to attract, retain working moms

BYLINE: By Ann Geracimos, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Women bear the greater burden when it comes to balancing work and life issues, a reality crystallized for many women by the rise of the Republican vice-presidential nominee and a mother of five, Sarah Palin. Nowhere, perhaps, is this dilemma more acute than in the legal profession.

Nearly 50 percent of students in law schools are women, and the rise in their numbers at prestigious firms is impressive. Yet, nearly half of female lawyers are leaving the profession at some point in their careers, according to the Aug. 15 issue of the weekly ABA Journal.

In this hypercompetitive profession, law firms are now vying with each other to offer incentives and working environments designed to attract and retain the best female lawyers. The August/September issue of *Working Mother* made waves with its second annual list of 50 best law firms for women - presumably women who are mothers.

Supporting women raising families is a good way to attract and help keep top-notch talent, firms say. It also helps explain why Perkins Coie, new to *Working Mother's* list, last year created a new position - a director of diversity and professional development - now held by Theresa Cropper.

"Some of this for us is driven by clients, who are increasingly diverse, including women who want to know how we do on these issues," says Perkins Coie partner Guy R. Martin of Washington. "The reality is this generation will be the one to make adjustments in law firms and will help move the needle," Ms. Cropper says. "The new secret is the men are very interested in a balanced life, too." Mary Rose Hughes, 57, a litigator and partner in Perkins Coie's Washington office - where, coincidentally, Michelle Fenty, wife of D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty is employed, remembers starting out in the Seattle office when, she says, there was no maternity-leave policy. "I was one of the first to have a baby. The firm didn't know what to do with me. We made it up as we went along," she says.

She took some paid time off and went on to have three more children - one of them while working briefly at the U.S. State Department. A supportive husband and live-in in-laws helped make it possible, she says.

Women and men now can be on the partnership track while working part time, she points out, in part due to advances in technology that also allow for flex-time arrangements.

"I think people who have balanced lives are better professionals," she notes. "Litigators who have balanced lives tend to be in touch with the community and what people think and how people act. I think they can connect better with judges and juries."

"Diversity is an increasingly important point for law firms and their clients," agrees Keith Teel, a partner and member of the management committee of Covington Burling, where he has spent 27 years. "They are interested in a work force that looks like America."

Keeping female lawyers happy benefits the firm in other ways, too; retaining people with specialized knowledge is increasingly critical in times when firms face more competition than ever with clients needing more sophisticated services.

Covington Burling - on the magazine's list for the second time - has 270 women among 700 lawyers and has 43 female partners, four of whom became a partner while working part time. Three years ago, the firm opened a state-of-the-art day care facility called Covington Kids 1 1/2 blocks from its Washington office. It offers emergency back-up care in major cities in addition to providing 18 weeks of paid leave after a child is born. Non-primary caregivers, as the firm calls them, get six weeks off within four months of the birth or adoption of a child.

Ownership of a day care center, Mr. Teel says, is "a little unusual but not unheard of" and even "increasingly the norm that firms offer some help." As the father of a 7-year-old and an 8-year-old, he says the center opened two years too late for his personal needs. The Covington center only takes infants and toddlers and accommodates children outside the firm's own families if space becomes available.

One of those grateful for the service is Jennifer Johnson, the mother of boys age 1 1/2 and 3 1/2. Now 39 and a partner and head of the Covington Burling group dealing with communications and media matters, she says she doesn't have to travel more than seven or eight times a year.

"Not like litigation where I would have to go off to trial. I picked it because of the subject matter and the kind of practice I like," she says.

She became partner six years ago, before having children, but says her choices are motivated entirely on her own sense of well-being.

"I'm still here because I love what I do. I'm a Washington native and came back to be close to my family," she says.

Having family nearby is a definite asset as a **working mother**, she says. That and having a supportive husband. The owner of a landscaping business in Virginia, he is the cook in the house who makes breakfast for the family every morning. The couple never has had to hire a live-in helper, she says.

Discipline and a sense of perspective also are key.

On weekdays, she drives both children with her from their home in Chevy Chase, arriving around 9 a.m., returning home after 6 p.m., which gives her "time with the kids in the car." The center is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

"Each child has a 10-hour block. Ours is 8:30 to 6:30," she says.

She had four months of paid leave after each of her children was born.

"When I came back and both kids were nursing I would go to day care during the day," she says.

Fees for the service are taken out of her paycheck and are scaled based on salary, although it's more expensive for younger children because of the higher ratio of caregivers needed.

"I've always worked full time; there is no reason not to," she says. "My practice involves a lot of juggling and different clients. I think when I was in law school and college I always felt pressure because something was always over my head. Since practicing I kind of realized there is always something that has to be done."

The **Working Mother** list - and the 100-plus page application to be considered for inclusion - was developed by the magazine in partnership with Flex-Time Lawyers LLC, a national consulting firm headed by Deborah Epstein Henry, a lawyer in Philadelphia.

"Every participating firm receives a confidential score card, which ranks them on key questions, so it becomes a snapshot of how they are doing," she says. "My goal is to make work/life balance and women's issues a basis of competition as historically has been the case for salaries. Law firms are so similar in hierarchy and structure so it is easy to create that profile."

One hundred fifteen firms - an increase of 29 percent - applied this year; any law firm with 50 or more employees was eligible. The winning 50 will be honored tomorrow at a luncheon at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York.