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Sidebar

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STATE FIRMS VIED TO MAKE IT ONTO WORKING MOTHER'S LIST

Monday morning last week didn't turn out the way Sonja Weissman planned.

The managing partner of Reed Smith's Oakland office found herself running around at home, serving ginger ale and chicken soup to her ailing 10-year-old son, Zane. Instead of going to the office, Weissman logged onto her work desktop from home.

"I was able to work on documents and e-mail with clients and keep the ball rolling forward despite the fact that I was unexpectedly working from home for the day," she said. Reed Smith's policies don't require "face time" so common at many firms, Weissman said, making it easy for her to telecommute if circumstance calls for it. "The firm has really facilitated people's ability to work from home with this really up-to-date remote connectivity," Weissman said.

The 1,500-lawyer Reed Smith was one of 50 U.S. law firms to make a list of women-friendly firms published by Working Mother magazine and consultants at Flex-Time Lawyers last week. The list included six San Francisco-based firms — Farella Braun & Martel; Folger Levin & Kahn; Heller Ehrman; Morrison & Foerster; Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; and Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman — plus Los Angeles-based Manatt, Phelps & Phillips. Three other Cal Law 25 firms, Reed Smith, Bingham McCutchen, and DLA Piper, also made the list.

The results are based on information the firms volunteered. Flex-Time Lawyers president Deborah Epstein Henry said that more than 200 firms registered last fall to participate. Ninety of those opted to fill out a questionnaire, from which a Top 50 list was drawn. The questions focused on things like the makeup of the firm's leaders and gender balance, as well as benefits and compensation, child care and advancement policies.

"We didn't just want to recognize firms that had good policies in place," Henry said. "We wanted to highlight statistical representation as well." Thus, firms were asked to divulge how many of their equity partners were women, and how many females sit on compensation and executive committees. There was even an effort made to substantiate the claims to female leadership, with firms asked to submit the names and contact information of female managing partners and chairwomen.

"The firms that made the list are showing that they are prioritizing these issues," Henry said. To add weight, Flex-Time sent the results to the deans and career services professionals at the nation's top 100 law schools to help graduating students weigh potential employers. The names of the 40 firms that did not make the list remains confidential, Henry added.

Of Reed Smith's 66 Oakland lawyers, 42 are parents, according to the firm. About half of the 24 women lawyers are mothers. New parents will enjoy an upgrade in some policies next year,

according to the firm. Maternity leave will be extended from 10 weeks to 12 weeks and paid adoption leave will be boosted from four weeks to six weeks for the primary caregiver.

But there are other, less obvious areas that could use a little thought, Weissman said. "I wish we had a better way to allocate work among associates, because sometimes a single person will get overloaded for a couple of weeks because their cases get busy," she said. "Unless a case is really mushrooming and you can add people, it's kind of difficult to relieve the pressure for that individual."

— *Petra Pasternak*