Not willing to sacrifice family life for the firm, some female lawyers are ditching their legal careers, despite the outrageous salaries. But others are tracking down innovative law firms that make work/life balance a priority. Here, a look at the intriguing policies that could benefit any industry.

Attorney Megan’s choice was a no-brainer. Offered a coveted spot at a big New York City firm, she opted instead to join Gibbons, a regional firm in Newark, NJ. “I was thinking about having a family, and I saw Gibbons as a place where I could have a long-term career,” says the 30-year-old employment lawyer, who married right after earning her JD in 2005. Megan wanted a firm that wouldn’t make her someday choose between after-hours client meetings and her kid’s karate class. Maybe it’s a generational thing, she says. She wanted to work hard, really hard, but she wasn’t willing to make the same sacrifices she knew older women lawyers had made. “We X-ers expect to be valued,” she says. “I’m just not willing to sacrifice time with my family for a job.”

Megan’s priorities reflect an attitude prevalent among Gen X and Gen Y law school grads. They’re determined to find employers that don’t drain their lawyers of a life. You could say they’re looking for a new kind of legal lifestyle—one that acknowledges that things like family, yoga and volunteering should be as much a part of the good life as working hard and taking home a nice paycheck. And if they don’t find what they’re looking for, they leave the firm—or the profession.

The number of young female associates leaving law firms hit a record high over the past five years—with
“In prepping for interviews while in law school, we were cautioned not to bring up any indication we might have kids someday.”

—Elizabeth Arias, 33, Womble Carlyle

recalls Megan’s 46-year-old colleague Christine Amalfi, who wanted to have her first child until after making partner at Gibbons. So she began lobbying to get part-time options in her associates and cofounded Gibbons’s Women’s Initiative. With a mere 6 percent annual attrition rate for its female associates, Gibbons is clearly doing something right, as are other high-retention firms on our 2007 Working Mother & Flex-Time Lawyers Best Law Firms for Women list. Among the standouts, with attrition rates below the national average have all the tech backup they need, which at Womble Carlyle can include a tree and laptop, plus having an IT staffer make a house call to test a wireless connection. Gibbons even offers access to nurses, Nannies, and voicemails from anywhere, all routed to an online mailbox.

Top firms also make sure backup or full-time child care is covered when employees put in extra hours. Covington has its own child care center across the street and contracts with the nationwide Work Options Group (based in Colorado) to send a certified caregiver when needed, at a cost of just $5 per hour. “When my youngest was still breastfeeding, I brought the baby on a business trip and they found someone to come to my hotel,” says litigator Emily Johnson Henn, 34. Gibbons gave Debra Clif for the time she needed for her twins, born prematurely, who required therapy treatments. When they were 14 months old and Debra needed to be at trial in the following months, Gibbons paid to have female therapists and their nanny accompany her. “The support here is unbelievable,” she says. “Otherwise, I would have had to quit.”

**Penalty-free zone**

Putting work/life balance policies on the books is one thing. Not penalizing the career of those who use them is another — a distinction our winning firms understand. “We don’t want lawyers to be concerned that they’re being put on a mommy track by using these benefits,” says Covington partner Kerel Teel. They still work challenging cases; promotions and penalties are never taken off the table. “Our firm rewards good work, and that’s all you have to do to get ahead,” says Emily, a mom of three young children, who will be up for partner soon. At Gibbons, associates who work, for example, a four-fifths schedule for five years are up for advancement 16 months later than if they had remained full-time. Morrison & Foerster and Womble Carlyle create networking opportunities. More female associates choose their law firm based on its work/life balance (45%) than its reputation (33%).

—Catalyst

**Beyond billables**

On top of a progressive work/life culture, Gen X and Y associate want careers that offer the chance to give back. So forward-thinking firms are lining up community service opportunities and pro bono cases. After the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, for example, Womble sent teams to New Orleans to help victims retain property rights. Such “noobials” also drew Tritia Murata, 28, to Morrison & Foerster. Now a third-year associate in the firm’s Los Angeles branch, Tritia had heard of Morrison & Foerster’s commitment to public service while attending UCLA Law School. She was especially impressed by how the firm embraced diversity. “I’m a Japanese American, and they have a diversity of multi culturalism. The firm really wants you to have a full life.” Her immediate past president of the National Association of Women Lawyers and a partner at Nixon Peabody in New York City.

“Give women lawyers all the tools they need: skills for marketing, developing business and being in governance roles. Provide an environment where they can succeed. Make sure the compensation systems are fair.” That’s the recipe for successfully cutting attrition rates, she says, adding, “Happy women will attract other happy women.”