

Law Firms Opening Up to the Idea of Attorney Re-Entry

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Shari Solomon was going on her fourth year as an associate in the commercial real estate department of [Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen](#) in 1995, when she had her third child. While she was already accustomed to juggling life as a mother and a lawyer, her newborn required extra medical attention -- so much so that she couldn't imagine working again any time soon.

But 10 years later, with all of her children in good health, Solomon was ready to return. The problem was, she didn't know if the law firm world was ready to take her back.

"I did not presume that I would be returning to my practice after that many years out," she says. "It's not that I didn't consider it. But I couldn't imagine that after that many years out, it would be an option."

She was wrong about that. When she started searching for a job, Solomon invited a WolfBlock partner she had remained friendly with to lunch. The meeting resulted in an offer to take up where she had left off a decade before, as an associate in the Philadelphia office of the firm.

But it's not as easy for everyone to come back as it was for Solomon.

While most law firms offer some form of maternity leave, it's the rare firm that guarantees jobs for more than one year. The [New York City Bar Association's Committee on Women in the Profession](#) recently surveyed 43 legal employers on parental leave and found that almost all grant some form of maternity leave, with the majority of surveyed law firms providing 12 weeks' paid leave. Many firms also offered additional unpaid time off.

By and large, however, women who want to take off more than one year often sacrifice whatever job security they have to do so. When they want to return, they face a host of formidable challenges, say industry observers.

The most significant is simply convincing a law firm to hire them even though they veered off the conventional linear law firm up-or-out path. In addition, many who left before the technological revolution worry about their computer skills. Further, re-entering lawyers also must come to grips with psycho-social factors, most significantly the fact that they're older than their fellow associates while their contemporaries are their bosses.

The ranks of women seeking to re-enter the practice of law have grown large enough that law schools and other groups are now addressing the issue. [Pace Law School](#) and [University of California, Hastings College of the Law](#), have started programs aimed at helping attorneys return to practice after lengthy absences. Additionally, the New York City Bar recently kicked off a re-entry initiative aimed at assisting people who left the profession and are considering returning.

For firms looking to increase the ranks of women partners, reaching out to former employees is seen as one way of potentially recruiting experienced female lawyers. Some law firms have been mulling programs aimed at connecting with ex-employees since at least 2005, when a *Harvard Business Review* article about women in the workplace suggested that [companies should maintain ties with off-ramped employees](#) through alumni programs.

[Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom](#) recently started a program, [Sidebar](#), which allows attorneys to temporarily leave the firm for three years. During that time, they're still welcome at continuing legal education classes and other firm-sponsored events on the premises.

MAKING YOUR MOVE

When returning to a former firm isn't an option, convincing a new firm to hire you poses significant challenges, says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of the consultancy [Flex-Time Lawyers](#). One key problem is that law firms tend to be "so linear and so traditional and so conventional" that they don't know how to view people who don't fit neatly into a lockstep classification based on year of law school graduation, Henry says.

She advises women in this group to figure out where they see themselves and then make that clear in their cover letters. "The first sentence of the letter should say, 'I'm interested in seeking a position as a midlevel associate in your labor and employment group,'" she counsels.

Henry also tells women looking to re-enter to account for time spent out of the work force on their résumés, even if it's with a description like "primary caretaker."

Linda Marks, director of training and consulting at the [Center for WorkLife Law](#) at Hastings, adds that women who have served as presidents of various nonprofits or have done fundraising for their children's schools should include that information in their résumés.

Marks also tells women to reach out to their contacts and tell as many as possible what they're looking for. "People want to help other people," Marks says. "People love to feel that they made a difference in somebody's lives."

She also advises women who want to work at specific law firms to propose working as an independent contractor on a short-term basis. "Once they get to know you, they feel comfortable hiring you," she says.

On top of the hurdles of finding a job, many people who've been out of the working world for a while lack confidence in their technological skills, says Brande Stelling, who heads the New York City Bar's Committee on Women in the Profession.

Solomon, for one, says that was the case in her situation. While she wasn't anxious about the substantive law, she worried about adapting to the new technology now commonplace. "Technology had just changed the nature of law practice so dramatically, in a way I was unfamiliar with, and changed the nature of my practice specifically, because so much more is done remotely," she says.

Another challenge for Solomon was that her 10-year leave of absence made her feel like she had a lot to accomplish in a short period of time if she wanted to get ahead.

"I'm older. I want to get to a certain place. I don't want to leave it to chance," she says. So Solomon made a point of filling gaps in her experience by approaching a partner with a request to handle specific types of cases. For instance, while she had been involved in many acquisitions and sales, she hadn't done legal work for leaseholdings, so she made it a priority to pick up some of those cases.

"It wasn't something I negotiated before I came back, but was a conversation I had almost as soon as I came back," she says.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Whether they're gone for months or years, women lawyers say that maintaining contact with colleagues is crucial. "Even if it's just on an informal basis, you need to keep in touch with people," says Janice Mac Avoy, who took off five months from her position as a partner in the litigation department of [Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson](#) after her second child was born in 2001. "They don't mean to, but they could forget about you."

My Chi To, who was elected to the partnership at [Debevoise & Plimpton](#) while on maternity leave three years ago, kept in close contact with friends from the office during her six-month absence. "I was certainly in touch with some of my colleagues who are also friends, probably every week."

She also attended some firm events, including a dinner for all women partners and a party for clients. And even while focused on new baby, she kept up on at least some correspondence. "Every week, my secretary sent me all of my mail at home."

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