

Lawyers USA

Flex-time catches up with legal profession

by Nora Toohar

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Patricia Mundy, an associate in Sullivan & Worcester's Boston office, works a reduced schedule that includes one day a week at home, and Fridays off.

"With the technology we have today, it's kind of a no-brainer," said Mundy, who has four children under the age of 6.

"The day [working] at home is huge for me," said Mundy. "It's morning hours I can spend with my kids, get them up and eat breakfast with them and still be working by 8:30."

Her three days in the office are long - usually 8:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., and sometimes later when her workload increases.

But it's worth it, she said, for the Fridays she has with her family.

With an increasing number of attorneys seeking more time for their families and themselves, flexible and part-time schedules are becoming more acceptable, according to several experts.

And it's not just mothers with young children opting for flexible schedules and reduced hours. Although the vast majority of attorneys on flextime are women, there is growing interest among lawyers of both genders, as well as a wide range of ages, in flexible schedules.

Michael R. Humphrey, 40, of counsel in Bryan Cave's Kansas City, Mo. office, was recruited from the title insurance industry about 11 years ago.

"I was familiar with the typical large firm associate-to-partnership track, and frankly, because of personal priorities in my life I knew I was not the guy that was going to fit into that track," he said.

Humphrey, whose practice area is focused on commercial real estate and banking, usually works from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. He is considered 90 percent full time.

Although he and his wife do not have children, they have aging parents with health issues. And Humphrey is deeply involved with his church.

"My personal priorities in a nutshell are God, family, church and work," he said.

"The entire profession is facing these challenges on work-life issues, and the profession as a whole is seeking more flexibility," said Deborah Epstein Henry, head of Flex-Time Lawyers, a national work-life balance consulting firm with offices in Philadelphia and New York.

Ellen Ostrow, head of Lawyers Life Coach, a Silver Spring, Md. coaching firm, agreed: "I think lawyers, like every other group of employees studied, are looking for flexibility in the workplace more than anything else. Certainly, in firms that are offering billable hour tiers with associated compensation tiers, you see people choosing fewer hours for less money."

The biggest remaining obstacle, several experts said, is attorneys' fears that their career prospects will be damaged by working less than full time.

Henry explained: "Part time historically has been stigmatized as just sort of an exception for working moms. Until there is a wholesale buy-in that flexibility is something that all lawyers need, I really don't think there will be a way to get rid of that stigma."

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