

Flex-, Reduced-Time Workers Deserve Support from Female Attorneys

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Women lawyers today have more employment options than their female counterparts in years past. Some of today's female attorneys choose to work flexible or reduced schedules to accommodate family needs or other demands in their lives.

Historically, some women attorneys felt it was not in women's best interest to support flex-timers and reduced-timers, thinking women lawyers needed to work more than their fair share to advance and prove their equality. Others wanted to lend their support but may not have had the power to do so or were not socialized to mentor their female colleagues as men seemingly had been groomed to do.

Still others have seen the benefits of supporting alternative work arrangements from the outset. This article argues why women should support flex-timers and reduced-timers, and why it is in the best interest of all women to do so.

What is meant by "support" in this context? It means to mentor, network, encourage, guide and endorse.

Here are several reasons why supporting flex-timers and reduced-timers benefits all women.

- Women who work a flexible or reduced schedule should be supported because women lawyers have fought hard to gain diversity in the work force and should embrace diversity within themselves.

Women have struggled to gain a presence and power in the legal profession. Just as most women have faced barriers and misunderstanding in the past, so do flex- and reduced-timers today.

For example, some lawyers have difficulty appreciating how someone who is not in the office all the time can be a committed lawyer with the pressing, and often immediate, demands of practicing law.

However, with today's home computers, faxes, voicemail and cell phones — all made more powerful by the Internet — flexible and reduced schedule lawyers can be responsive outside the office.

In fact, flex- and reduced-timers are no different at these times from full-time attorneys responding to pressing needs when they are out of the office due to court appearances, closings, meetings, depositions, travel, etc.

- Flex- and reduced-time lawyers should be supported to retain productive women in the legal work force who may not want to advance immediately but who may one day be back on the partnership or advancement track.

Not all flex- and reduced-time women want to advance in their careers, but they should be supported by other women lawyers nonetheless.

Some women working flex- or reduced-time schedules do not want to advance and are content to work hard and stay at their current levels in their places of employment.

Why should they be supported? Because it makes good economic sense to retain and accommodate them. It is more profitable for employers to have a quality lawyer at a reduced percentage than not at all.

Additionally, lawyers who request flex- and reduced-work arrangements are often more senior and therefore more expensive to replace with attorneys with similar skills.

In the current legal environment, where associate retention is an acute problem, senior attorney retention is particularly important. And, even if these lawyers may not be "on track" for a period of time, many will return to "the track" and be significant contributors to their places of employment after years of engendered loyalty.

Some talented flex- and reduced-time lawyers want to advance, and they should be supported in order for women to gain equal representation in the senior ranks and positions of power in places of legal employment.

Flex- and reduced-timers who want to advance to partnership and other senior ranks, if their work is top-notch, should be able to advance under the same criteria as lawyers who work a full-time schedule.

This may involve a delayed partnership consideration so that the lawyer working a reduced schedule fulfills the same requisite number of hours as a full-time associate — but a less-than-full-time schedule should not preclude partnership or advancement altogether.

In most places of legal employment, there is only a representative sampling of female partners or women in senior government and in-house positions.

If the flex- and reduced-time lawyers who are committed and talented are left out of the mix of consideration for advancement, a certain segment of the female pool will be lost.

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Assuming that the pool of talented female candidates has already shrunk due to attrition from child-bearing and other reasons, women cannot afford to also lose another group of potential women in positions of power.

It is important for all women to have equal representation in the senior ranks in places of legal employment. While the number of women in senior positions has increased, there is still significant room to grow. Women's voices will be more likely to be heard when every other face in the room is one of their own.

Female support is certainly not a panacea for the challenges that women face in the legal

world today. And improved female support is only one of many ways to help flex- and reduced-timers become an integral, productive part of the legal work force.

Support of these women should not, of course, come at the expense of support for women working a full-time schedule. Moreover, the need for more female support does not diminish the critical role that men should play to ensure fair, merit-based representation of women in places of legal employment, including within the senior ranks.

But support from all women lawyers will help to embrace the diversity in the women's legal community, increase the number of women in places of legal employment and strengthen women's power in the senior ranks.



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