

Law Firm Perk of the Moment: Flextime

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It's 3:30 p.m., and [Baker Botts](#) partner Robert Murray, Jr., is not in his New York office. He's on his way to coach his kids' little league team. "I worked like a dog as an associate, and continued to put in those hours as a partner," he says, "but I realized that I need to spend time with my kids." Not only don't his clients mind, says Murray, but they'll call "to remind me to go home," because some have similar schedules.

Murray is typical of a growing number of lawyers for whom time in the office is no longer de rigueur. BlackBerrys, laptops and other gizmos have liberated them, allowing more control over how they blend their personal and professional lives. "Face time is a dying phenomenon," says Joshua Levy, a partner at [Ropes & Gray](#). "When I was a young associate [in the early nineties], I had to be there for document reviews; now everything is online." His firm just revamped its policies to allow associates greater flexibility, he says, "because we had talented people that left."

To stem those defections and attract recruits, flextime has become the perk of the moment. Plenty of firms will gladly equip you with a snazzy laptop and connect you to the mother ship. Decorating the home office is still a matter for negotiation.

Even in a bad economy, the concept of work flexibility has staying power. For starters, it doesn't cost anything. Unlike reduced time or job sharing, lawyers on flexible schedules aren't typically looking to cut down their workload or billable hours. Many are happy to work like maniacs -- provided they do it their way, at home or on schedules that deviate from normal office hours.

Flextime started as an accommodation to working mothers, but it's now popular with both sexes. Ironically, young male lawyers might have boosted flextime's acceptability, because they are bolder about working away from the office. "They just do it," says Jennifer Halliday, the head of human resources at [Arent Fox](#), while women tend to ask for permission. Men can afford to be brazen, says Deborah Epstein Henry, the founder of [Flex-Time Lawyers LLC](#). If they are out of the office, the assumption is that "they are at a client meeting," says Henry, "while for women, people think they must be picking up their kids."

Officially sanctioned or not, "our attitude is that as long as you get the work done, it doesn't matter where you do it," says Murray. Fact is, lawyers rely so much on e-mail that few are aware -- or care -- who is in the office or who is not. "Sometimes I'm shocked when I actually bump into somebody at the office that I've been e-mailing," says a [Greenberg Traurig](#) lawyer.

But face time isn't likely to ever die completely. People still choose to go to the office most of the time, says Jonathan Green, the head of leveraged finance at [Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCoy](#), because "it's easier, and New York apartments are too small." And, at many firms, absence does not make hearts grow fonder. Taisa Markus, Milbank's hiring partner, says it's fine to work from home one or two days a week as a midlevel associate, but that "it can be a bad career choice for junior associates; you'll miss out on training, mentoring and client meetings."

While [Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton](#) also limits flextime for junior associates, it gives third-year or more senior associates the latitude to design their own flextime or telecommuting schedules. "We are willing to consider any proposal ... and you can do it for any reason," says Cleary partner Jeffrey Lewis, who chairs the associate life committee. Though only about a dozen associates have signed on to the new program, Lewis says the policy has been a big hit: "It provides a feeling that the work environment is responsive, and it relieves anxiety about the future."

That feel-good effect may be the best argument for flexibility. Even [Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.](#), hardly a new-age institution, now offers its legal team a progressive program. Thomas Mars, Wal-Mart's general counsel, says he was hostile to the idea of flexibility just a few years ago: "I'm embarrassed to say that I was your typical white male lawyer. My reaction was shallow and uninformed." In 2006

he attended a [National Association for Women Lawyers](#) meeting and heard a barrage of stories about juggling work and home. He went back to Wal-Mart a changed man. Five weeks later, Wal-Mart launched a program offering flextime and remote work. The result: "A crew of motivated lawyers like you've never seen," says Mars. Nothing has had more impact on morale or retention."

What's more, Mars even preaches flextime to his outside lawyers. The idea of lawyers waiting at their desk for his phone call is ludicrous, he says: "We're not running a fire department, we're running a legal department."