

Lawyers, Pros Say Flex Schedule's Time Has Come

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Lawyers won't have to be slaves to the billable hour for much longer, according to the panel of experts participating in "Flexing the Workplace," a roundtable discussion held in the New York offices of [Davis Polk & Wardwell](#) and sponsored by the [National Association of Women Lawyers](#).

Timed to coincide with NAWL's annual awards luncheon and the release of its study "Actions for Advancing Women Into Law Firm Leadership," the panelists emphasized that now, more than ever, law firms must begin offering more flexible work schedules to its lawyers. If not, they risk losing the young crop of talent needed to secure a successful future.

Why the urgency? According to [Patricia Gillette](#), a San Francisco partner in employment law at Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, waves of baby boomers soon will be retiring from partnership positions, and when that happens, law firms will be hard-pressed to replace those lawyers.

"Law firms are going to feel the push from Generation X and Generation Y lawyers who want a different life," says Gillette, the mother of two. She expects law firms, eventually, will follow the lead of the technology industry and provide alternative work schedules -- including more telecommuting arrangements, job shares and part-time schedules.

"We are driving change through competition," says Deborah Epstein Henry, the founder and president of [Flex-Time Lawyers](#).

Henry, a former associate at [Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler](#) in New York and [Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis](#) in Philadelphia, consults with law firms on developing new policies. She also coordinates *Working Mother Magazine's* [annual survey](#) of the top law firms for female lawyers.

"Firms know if they want to recruit talent, they may need to change," Henry says. And women lawyers aren't the only professionals demanding this change, she notes, pointing to the Stanford Law School group [Building a Better Legal Profession](#), which demands firms cut billable-hour requirements to improve associates' lifestyle -- and was founded by men.

"These issues apply to anybody," says Bryan Townsend, a summer associate at Davis Polk and third-year student at [Yale Law School](#). Townsend -- engaged and planning to start a family in the next few years -- came to watch the panel because he says work-life balance will figure into his choice of employers.

But others were skeptical that there could be drastic changes in the culture at law firms, where overtime is a way of life.

"You have to be willing to sleep on the floor of your office to get the good cases," lamented Marsha Redmon, who worked for six years at both a major law firm and small boutique practice. She now runs [MGroup Communications](#) to help lawyers and business professionals develop media skills.

If firms want to hold on to lawyers like Redmon, they need to market more to flexible scheduling, said Anne Weisberg -- a lawyer, mother of three and senior adviser to Deloitte Women's Initiative -- who spoke on the panel.

"The fact that there is such high turnover in women lawyers is costing firms millions of dollars," said Weisberg, highlighting research compiled by Deloitte on the cost of recruiting and training new lawyers. In order to keep talented women on the job, Weisberg said firms must offer them the chance to customize pace, workload, location and schedule.

Some firms already are catching on, trying to improve firm life and tempt young lawyers who are demanding flexibility on the job.

"There is a pool of talented people who might never look at a law firm but will look at you if you offer these programs," said [Michael Nannes](#), a chairman and managing partner at [Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky](#) and the father of two.

Dickstein Shapiro tweaked its policies in 1998, appointing one partner in each group to confidentially advise lawyers about part-time options and allowing attorneys who work at least 50 percent of a full schedule to stay on the partnership track. Today, Dickstein's New York and Los Angeles offices are led by women partners, and the firm has won nods for its efforts from the Washington, D.C., Women's Bar Association and NAWL.