

Smoothing re-entry for lawyers

Firms offer programs for those on hiatus, but status never totally returns.

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Attorney Cynthia Wells recalls that after leaving law firm Brown & Wood to care for her newborn twins and a toddler, "I always held out the thought that at some point I would go back."

That point finally came in July 2010—nearly 21 years later.

"I had those 20 years with my family, and now I have the opportunity to pick up my career," said Ms. Wells, who works at the now-merged firm Sidley Austin with the same two dozen teammates she did two decades ago.

Ms. Wells' hiatus was definitely on the long side, but firms are increasingly eager to welcome back colleagues who have taken several years off.

When consultant Deborah Epstein Henry helped compile the list of Best Law Firms for Women for *Working Mother* magazine four years ago, just 16% of the top 50 firms had what are known as re-entry programs; by this year, that figure had risen to 80%.

The re-entry trend provides a second chance for both firms and lawyers, said Ms. Henry, who is also a lawyer and founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, a nationwide consultancy whose largest practice is in New York. "This is a lost talent stream."

Re-entrants must be realistic, however. Though they have become more welcome, most are unlikely to regain the pay and potential they relinquished. What's more, the tough economy means those returning to the workplace must be open to nontraditional arrangements.

Keep in touch

Outreach typically begins long before lawyers are ready to return. For example, through Sidebar, a program started in 2006, Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom assigns a liaison to maintain contact with lawyers on leave. Skadden Arps pays their bar association dues, invites them to departmental meetings and sends updates on their specialty, according to Jodie Garfinkel, Skadden Arps' director of professional personnel and attorney development.

Other efforts include paying for continuing education courses and keeping the absent professional on the office email routing list.

Lawyers who participate in re-entry programs are gone an average of 2.7 years, Ms. Henry said, and most programs last up to three years.

Some also maintain social contact. Although her firm doesn't have an official re-entry process, Ms. Wells sent holiday cards to about a dozen former colleagues and got together with them several times. Luckily, just when she was looking to go back to work, her firm "had a real need in our adviser-regulatory practice" for work on the Dodd-Frank act, said Laurin Blumenthal Kleiman, co-chairman of Sidley Austin's committee on retention and promotion of women.

Keeping in touch isn't a requirement, however, nor is previously working for a firm. Skadden Arps and other firms have hired women coming off hiatus who never worked for them.

Undeniably, taking years off changes a career trajectory. Returnees are typically hired as staff attorneys—as Ms. Wells was—or part-time, and have little hope of making partner. They can expect to earn approximately 16% less if they have been absent up to three years and "considerably more" if longer, Ms. Henry said.

Re-entrants must now compete with laid-off lawyers who never left the 60-hour-a-week grind. To do so successfully, they must make a compelling case to their target law firm.

"They have to sell their flexibility—that they're willing to expand or construct their hours based upon the employer's needs," Ms. Henry said.

Returning lawyers can also turn their lower pay expectations into a marketing advantage.

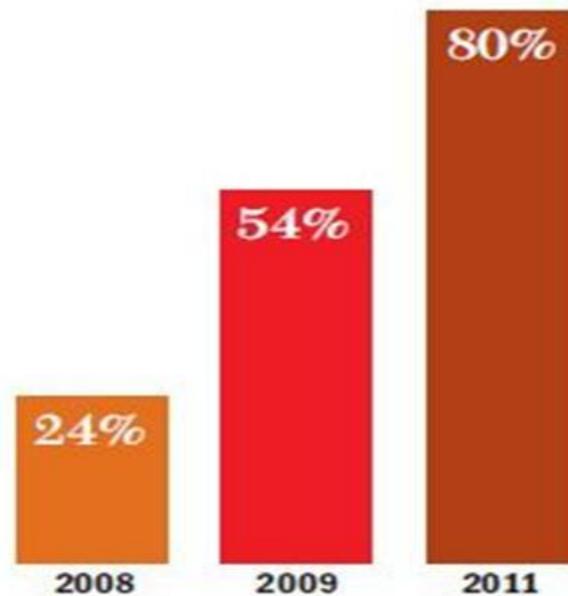
A firm can "get that level of maturity at a lower billing rate than you would get from someone who had stayed," said Ms. Kleiman of Sidley Austin.

But returning with limited goals is just fine by some lawyers. Many alumni of New Directions for Attorneys, a retraining program at Pace University Law School, are not interested in resuming high-pressure careers, according to program Director Amy Gewirtz.

No regrets

KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

A growing percentage of leading law firms considered the most women-friendly have programs designed to stay connected with, identify and hire re-entrant lawyers who are moms.



Source: *Working Mother* magazine & Flex-Time Lawyers' "50 Best Law Firms for Women" survey

Debra Stewart left a job with partner-track potential at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton nine years ago, when her first child was a toddler. She went through New Directions and is now of counsel at a much smaller firm, Schoeman Updike & Kaufman, at what she called "significantly" lower pay, working two days a week from home.

"I have absolutely no regrets," Ms. Stewart said.

By contrast, Ms. Garfinkel said, lawyers who return to Skadden Arps have not lost momentum because Sidebar keeps them up-to-date. "They pick up where they left off" in terms of career track and compensation, she said.

Still, only about 2% of the approximately 1,100 eligible lawyers at Skadden Arps have taken advantage of the program. "The people we hire know what it's like to have a career here," Ms. Garfinkel said.