

2015
50

BEST LAW FIRMS
FOR WOMEN



Why Women Quit

Two thirds of female associates leave a new law firm job within five years. But it doesn't have to be that way. Here, the Best Law Firms share strategies for keeping attorneys engaged and advancing through their careers.

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS



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Susan Nash remembers the moment in 1990 that prompted her to quit her high-pressure law firm gig.

She had a court filing due on her day off, and her 18-month-old son had refused to take his usual afternoon nap. The already stressful day culminated in her wakeful toddler using his little broom, a favorite toy, to vigorously and repeatedly whack the fax machine she was using to send drafts of the brief back to the office. Susan immediately saw the sign her son was so artfully painting for her—“I thought, *This isn’t working for me.*” She soon left her job to work from home in a criminal appellate practice while raising her two sons.

Fast-forward 25 years, and most working-mom lawyers will tell you that little has changed for them. While at least 40 percent of law school students are women (and have been for three decades), female attorneys still aren’t advancing to the top in like numbers—and worse yet, they continue to leave firms in droves. What’s more, two thirds of new female associates depart within five years of their hiring, according to the National Association for Law Placement’s (NALP) Foundation for Law Career Research and Education, a research and education nonprofit. And that attrition rate hasn’t budged in years.

The reasons why are pretty plain, say experts, especially when working motherhood crosses paths with an industry driven by a never-ending need for billable hours. “Often women have a child and they stop getting good work, or they start working

flexible or reduced hours and become stigmatized,” notes Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers and co-author of *Finding Bliss: Innovative Legal Models for Happy Clients & Happy Lawyers*. “They find they’re not only missing the time with their children, they’re also not even engaged in their work. They’re not able to manage the overwhelming demands that are being made on them.”

It’s little wonder, then, that while women make up 45 percent of the associates in private practice, they represent only 20 percent of partners and an even more meager 17 percent of equity partners (those who share in a firm’s profits), according to statistics compiled by the American Bar Association (ABA).

“Women don’t sit on the management committees in any significant numbers, and they’re not on the compensation committees,” notes Michele Coleman Mayes, the chair of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession. “There are some firms that are doing better, but certainly not enough of them.”

A dearth of women lawyers at the very top also helps fuel the losses, adds Tammy Patterson, president and CEO of the NALP Foundation. The ABA reports that only 4 percent of the 200 largest law firms are led by women. “There aren’t enough role models for women to really see and learn from, women who are successful in a law firm and who devote the hours required and still spend time with their children. To keep people long-term, you’re going to have to provide them with opportunities and flexibility to figure out what works best,” says Patterson.

That’s where the Working Mother and Flex-Time Lawyers Best Law Firms for Women come in, focusing on the effective workplace policies and programs needed to support and advance working-mom lawyers. Susan Nash, for example, has benefited from these efforts, having returned in 2008 to the very law firm she left 18 years before—Munger, Tolles & Olson, a Best Law Firms for Women winner this year for the third time. She

rejoined the partnership there last year. “The world has changed,” she says now. “Munger is committed to helping working parents. We have seven women who are on reduced schedules. We have four men who took paternity leave last year. In the last five years, more than half of our new partners have been working mothers.”

It’s a good tale not only for working mothers, but for working fathers as well, notes Susan, whose sons, Mike and Dan, are now 26 and 23. “This is an issue that affects everybody. We’re not just trying to keep our young women—we’re trying to keep our young men, too,” she adds.

Los Angeles-based Munger and its fellow Best Law Firms for Women are pointing the way to solutions that the legal industry at large has yet to fully embrace, but that are vital to retaining half its workforce, says Henry, including appropriate use of technology, support for flexibility, opportunities for mentoring and business development, pipelines for leadership and, importantly, a critical mass of successful leaders who face the same challenges as the rank and file. “When you see the dialogue that’s going on,” she says, “certainly it’s a much more open discussion than when I got into these issues nearly 20 years ago.”

Here, the Best Law Firms make the case for doing what it takes to keep female attorneys and promote them to the pinnacle of power for their profession: equity partnership.

Got Flex?

Firms with higher numbers of women at the top typically boast a culture where flexible work policies are used without backlash or penalty. And more importantly, these benefits are enjoyed by a wide range of lawyers, not just women for reasons related to children.

“They can set up all these policies, but then it actually needs to be okay when a senior associate wants to take a four-month maternity leave,” says Terri Seligman, a partner and co-chair of the advertising, marketing and public relations group at Frankfurt

Kurnit Klein & Selz, a New York City-based firm. “She must come back and still be on the path to partnership and be able to be on all the sexy good cases.”

At Frankfurt Kurnit, a third of equity partners are female, about double the national average. And the firm’s managing partner, Jeffrey Greenbaum, took a three-month paternity leave when he adopted a child (nine years ago, before he became the firm’s leader in 2010). For many firms, a top lawyer taking paternity leave simply isn’t done. “It’s common here,” says Terri, mom of Sophie, 27, Brooklyn, 24, and Lola, 14. “And it helps create a ‘we’re all in this together’ kind of a feeling.”

At Epstein Becker Green, a New York City-based firm where all three lawyers promoted to equity partner last year were women, attorneys use flex for everything from family time to band practice, while others work remotely full-time, says Susan Gross Sholinsky, a member of the firm’s labor and employment practice. “Before it was popular to do so, the firm became really flexible and invested in the attorneys,” adds the mom of Stephanie, 5, and Ryan, 6.

Safety in Numbers

It can be very hard to believe you can succeed at a legal career unless you see a critical mass of working moms doing the same thing, says Mary Ranum, who built her career at Fredrikson & Byron, a Minneapolis-based firm where 35 percent of the equity partners are women. She now serves as board chair.

While she may be a working-mom role model for some, Mary, who raised daughters Ruth, 26, and Emma, 24, believes it’s more important for new associates to see women and men just five or 10 years ahead of them succeeding professionally while also nurturing young families. “A law firm that has a few successful women sprinkled throughout the firm may not have enough of those relatable role models, people that a young person could say, ‘If she can do that, then so can I,’” she says.



“It’s a much more open discussion now than when I got into these issues nearly 20 years ago,” notes Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers.

At Davis Wright Tremaine, based in Seattle, where the majority of lawyers promoted to equity partner in 2014 were women, everyone looks out for one another, says equity partner Sheehan Sullivan Weiss, mom of Faye, 7, and Liam, 3. One colleague in particular has children the same age as hers, and the two lawyer-moms advocate for each other regularly. “When I covered her clients during her leave, they all went back to her when she got back,” says Sheehan. “I don’t step on her turf

and she doesn’t step on mine. And whenever there’s an opportunity to bring the other in on a project or talk the other one up to a client, we do that.”

That network of support can also help with client development. At Epstein Becker Green, for example, a women’s initiative holds both internal and external programs on a variety of topics, including how to become a rainmaker and giving back to the community. “Externally,” says Susan Sholinsky, “we have a lot of opportunities to meet our clients, or meet potential clients.”

Beyond Billable Hours

Firms that judge success on measures other than billable hours are more likely to be hospitable to parents working flexibly. “Psychologically, one of the biggest killers for people working a reduced schedule is they don’t feel they are contributing at the same level as their peers,” suggests Sheehan.

Despite working a reduced-hour schedule, Sheehan herself serves on committees and volunteers whenever her practice group chair or managing partner asks for assistance. For her, it’s a way to keep her profile high: “Even though I don’t bill as many hours as a lot of my colleagues do, they view me as being invested at a higher level because I do so much outside of billing time that is contributing to firm management and culture and being a colleague.”

For Sandra Rappaport, making equity partner while working reduced hours at San Francisco-based Hanson Bridgett, where she’s among the 31 percent of equity partners at the firm who are women, has actually simplified the working-mom equation. “I’m a partner with a book of business,” says the mom of Robin, 14, and Hunter, 12. “The more business that I generate, the better I do financially no matter how many hours I work.”

To that end, Sandra shares this message for other working-mom lawyers, especially in the five- to 10-year period when young children and a budding career coincide: If you can, stick it out and don’t give up. “It just gets easier and easier.” ■