

FAMILY TIME: Elizabeth Arias of Womble Carlyle never misses 4-year-old Liliana's performances at school.



YOUNG, GIFTED AND LEAVING

Not willing to sacrifice family life for the firm, some female lawyers are ditching their legal careers, despite the outrageous salaries. But others are tracking down innovative law firms that make work/life balance a priority. Here, a look at the intriguing policies that could benefit any industry.

Attorney Megan's choice was a no-brainer. Offered a coveted spot at a big New York City firm, she opted instead to join Gibbons, a regional firm in Newark, NJ. "I was thinking about having a family, and I saw Gibbons as a place where I could have a long-term career," says the 30-year-old employment lawyer, who married right after earning her JD in 2005. Megan wanted a firm that wouldn't make her someday choose between after-hours client meetings and her kid's karate class. Maybe it's a generational thing, she says. She wanted to work hard, really hard, but she wasn't willing to make the same sacrifices she knew older women lawyers had made. "We X-ers expect to be valued," she says. "I'm just not willing to sacrifice time with my family for a job."

Megan's priorities reflect an attitude prevalent among Gen X and Gen Y law school grads. They're determined to find employers that don't drain their lawyers of a life. You could say they're looking for a new kind of legal lifestyle—one that acknowledges that things like family, yoga and volunteering should be as much a part of the good life as working hard and taking home a nice paycheck. And if they don't find what they're looking for, they leave the firm—or the profession.

The number of young female associates leaving law firms hit a record high over the past five years—with

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GEN X MINDSET: Gibbons colleagues Alyce Halchak (center) and Debra Clifford (left) aren't willing to make the sacrifices prior generations made.

recalls Megan's 46-year-old colleague Christine Amalfe, who waited to have her first child until after making partner at Gibbons. So she began lobbying to gain part-time options for associates and cofounded Gibbons's Women's Initiative. With a mere 6 percent annual attrition rate for its female associates, Gibbons is clearly doing something right, as are other high-retention firms on our 2007 Working Mother & Flex-Time Lawyers Best Law Firms for Women list. Among the standouts, with female attrition rates below the national average, are Covington & Burling in Washington, DC, with a 7 percent rate, and Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice of Winston-Salem, NC, with a 16.7 percent rate. How do they attract and hold on to the best and the brightest? By establishing supportive policies—from flex scheduling to work/life mentoring—that offer young female associates the chance to be partners *and* parents.

ADJUSTABLE TIME CLOCK

A flexible work schedule tops the list of benefits that appeal to younger lawyers. "Today, associates would rather be paid less and not have to be here until nine at night," notes trusts and estates attorney Betty Quick, 59, who became Womble Carlyle's first female partner in 1980 and is now the managing partner for the Winston-Salem office. With a reduced focus on traditional billable hours and face time with clients, these firms offer mix-and-match packages that can include flextime, reduced hours, compressed workweeks, sabbaticals and family leaves for adoption, childbirth and elder care. Women take advantage of these options more than 90 percent of the time—and often look to female partners to help navigate off-ramps on the road to partnership.

"I suggest the young associates make sure they truly understand what they want at a given time," says corporate partner Alyce Halchak, 57, who joined Gibbons in 1984. "Many find it easier to step back when their children are younger by moving to part-time work or to a less demanding practice area."

Just as important, the best firms give these work/life benefits more than lip service by making them part of the culture.

"I knew this was the place for me when I saw a male partner leaving every day at three to pick up his kids," says associate Alison Ashe-Card, who began as a contract lawyer at Womble Carlyle after a career with a public-inter-

est agency. "The firm really wants you to have a full life." Her colleague Elizabeth Arias agrees. "I don't feel any pressure to miss family events," says the 33-year-old trusts and estates associate, a mom of two. "I'm comfortable telling my supervisor that I need to leave early to go see my daughter's play."

Increased communication also helps associates with work/life balance. Covington employees have access to online work/family discussion groups (one general group and one women-only) to share tips on everything from pediatric dentists to breastfeeding. A senior attorney is designated to guide scheduling decisions and other issues. "If they're finding it

an average annual attrition rate of 19 percent, according to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) Foundation. Not surprisingly, the higher a law firm's required number of billable hours, the higher its associate attrition rate, according to a 2006 survey by the Bar Association of San Francisco. And many of these departing associates leave for good—some 31 percent, a recent survey by MIT Workplace Center reveals. Beyond bleeding firms of top talent, this loss can affect the bottom line: Each associate who walks takes along about \$300,000 in lost training and recruitment costs. A 15 percent departure rate may siphon off an average of \$12 million each year from a large firm, estimates Paula Patton, CEO and president of the NALP Foundation.

To stem this expensive exodus, progressive law firms are finding ways to enable young, talented women lawyers to have personal lives with fewer penalties to their career. And often it's senior attorneys—Baby Boomer women who themselves made sacrifices at the start of their careers—who are spearheading the change. "I saw my department lose smart, dedicated, driven women who decided, *I can't do this anymore!*"

"In prepping for interviews while in law school, we were cautioned not to bring up any indication we might have kids someday."

—Elizabeth Arias, 33, Womble Carlyle

hard to ramp down, I help them reduce their hours so they won't be cheating themselves," says Caroline Brown, a partner who coordinates part-time arrangements at Covington.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

But what happens when long hours are unavoidable? Smart firms make it easier for working moms to put in the overtime hours or travel time when necessary. For example, they ensure that employees have all the tech backup they need, which at Womble Carlyle can include a Treo and laptop, plus having an IT staffer make a house call to test a wireless connection. Gibbons lawyers can access faxes, emails and voicemails from anywhere, all routed to an online mailbox.

Top firms also make sure backup or full-time child care is covered when employees put in extra hours. Covington has its own child-care center across the street and contracts with the nationwide Work Options Group (based in Colorado) to send a certified caregiver when needed, at a cost of just \$5 per hour.

"When my youngest was still breastfeeding, I brought the baby on a business trip and they found someone to come to my hotel," says litigator Emily Johnson Henn, 34.

Gibbons gave Debra Clifford the time she needed for her twins, born prematurely, who required therapy treatments. When they were 14 months old and Debra needed to be at trial in London for two months, Gibbons paid to have the twins and their nanny accompany her. "The support here is unbelievable," she says. "Otherwise, I would have had to quit."

PENALTY-FREE ZONE

Putting work/life balance policies on the books is one thing. Not penalizing the career of those who use them is another—a distinction our winning firms understand. "We don't want lawyers to be concerned that they're being put on a mommy track by using these benefits," says Covington partner Keith Teel. They still work challenging cases; promotions and bonuses are never taken off the table. "My firm rewards good work, and that's all you have to do to get ahead," says Emily, a mom of three young children, who will be up for partner soon.

At Gibbons, associates who work, for example, a four-fifths schedule for five years are up for advancement 16 months later than if they had remained full-time. Morrison & Foerster litigator Wendy Garbers, 34, extended her leave to eight months after giving birth to her son. Within a month of returning, while on reduced hours, she was elected to partnership.

Investing in their future is another way top firms retain promising young female lawyers. They provide training to improve their business skills and earning power—which, in turn, strengthen the firm's bottom line. Senior-level women as well as men serve as mentors. At Gibbons, female attorneys at all levels meet regularly to discuss the challenges they face in this male-dominated industry. Groups such as WOW (Women of Womble) and the women's forums at Covington

and Morrison & Foerster create networking opportunities. "There's a focus on creating a space where women can exchange ideas," says Jenny Mosier, 28, a fourth-year associate at Covington.

BEYOND BILLABLES

On top of a progressive work/life culture, Gen X and Y associates want careers that offer the chance to give back. So forward-looking firms are lining up community service opportunities and pro bono cases. After the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, for example, Womble sent teams to New Orleans to help victims retain property rights.

Such "nonbillables" also drew Tritia Murata, 28, to Morrison & Foerster. Now a third-year associate in the firm's Los Angeles branch, Tritia had heard of Morrison & Foerster's commitment to public service while attending UCLA Law School. She was especially impressed by how the firm embraced diversity. "I'm a Japanese American, and they have a diversity

workshop to discuss how to be successful as a minority in the firm," says Tritia.

As more firms realize the cost of losing young attorneys, they, too, will embrace change, says Cathy Fleming, immediate past president of

the National Association of Women Lawyers and a partner at Nixon Peabody in New York City.

"Give women lawyers all the tools they need: skills for marketing, developing business and being in governance roles. Provide an environment where they can succeed. Make sure the compensation systems are fair." That's the recipe for successfully cutting attrition rates, she says, adding, "Happy women will attract other happy women." ■

More female associates choose their law firm based on its work/life balance (45%) than its reputation (33%).

—Catalyst



DIVERSITY AT WORK: Tritia Murata was attracted to Morrison & Foerster's support of multiculturalism.

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