

Law Firms Are Learning: Work-Life Balance Isn't Just for Moms

Many men—young and old, with children and without—are opting for legal careers that accommodate their lives outside of the office.



Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

LEIGH MCMULLAN ABRAMSON | SEP 24, 2015

For decades, work-life balance at law firms has been a women's issue—something for working moms to sort out. But there are a growing number of new firms built on flexible schedules that are now attracting men, and slowly shifting the definition of a successful legal career. Though the partner office is still the prototypical legal-career status symbol, the prerequisites of long hours and 24-7 availability are inconsistent with the emphasis many men put on time away from the office.

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“Young men today have different values, different aspirations than their fathers,” says Stewart Friedman, a Wharton practice professor of management and director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project. “They want to be available both psychologically and physically for children.” At some of the most competitive white-collar workplaces, such as [Netflix](#) and [Microsoft](#), these shifts have led to expanded parental-leave policies.

Some major law firms have formal paternity-leave policies on their books, but many of them still lack a culture in which men feel comfortable utilizing those policies. Male lawyers—as well as men in other industries—often receive mixed messages from superiors: They're allotted significantly less parental leave than their female counterparts, they're implicitly discouraged from taking leave at all, and those that do take leave say they feel stigmatized, according to a survey by industry blog [Above the Law](#).

Though [recent lawsuits](#) have demonstrated that men—including men who are lawyers—are willing to stand-up for stigma-free paternity leave, the [well documented](#) benefits of such leave and the logistics of family-life balance in general remain taboo for men at major law firms. Unlike women, who are generally eager to speak with me about work-life issues, male associates feared openly expressing an interest in a more sustainable relationship between work and family.

What's driving this fear? Despite wanting to be present for their families, male lawyers often internalize the message that job flexibility is not really for them. “So much of men’s career psyche is still informed by societal expectations that men are the primary breadwinners,” says Lauren Pearlman, the founder of Pearlman Career Consulting. “It seems to be the assumption that the woman will bend the career to be present for the children, but not the man.”

But workplaces built on this assumption that one parent—usually the mother—will shoulder care-giving responsibilities at the expense of career, “do not fit the realities of our lives,” wrote Anne-Marie Slaughter recently in [The New York Times](#). Simply put, most women work outside the home and couples share in childrearing and household duties.

So instead of pushing for more flexibility at traditional law firms, some men are now leaving Big Law to join alternative firms that embody what Joan Williams and her colleagues at the University of California, Hastings call “New Models of Legal Practice” in a new [report](#). These firms differ from one another in structure, size, and type of work, but they all offer flexibility—a feature that doesn’t appeal only to women.

Custom Counsel, a Maine-based firm that matches lawyers with discrete projects at small to mid-sized law firms, was started to serve female attorneys who

became stay-at-home moms but wanted to continue practicing law. But its combination of high-level work and scheduling flexibility has started drawing many men aboard too. Men want “a means to enjoy a more reasonable pace of work in order to generally enjoy a more balanced life,” says Nicole Bradick, who founded Custom Counsel. She notes, however, that men are more likely than women to use freelancing not as a way to work part-time, but as a compliment to either a solo practice or other business.

Williams, author of the U.C. Hastings report on New Model firms, says that for men, attaining work-life balance often means coming up with a full-time schedule on their own terms, not dropping hours. In the report, Williams notes several firms that allow lawyers to work from home and distribute their hours across the day as they choose—an arrangement she calls “full-time flex.” Men want to be able to tell their families, ‘You can count on me to be home for dinner and take my vacations,’ says Williams.

The large variety of New Model firms also makes it apparent that young men are not the only ones concerned with flexibility. Senior lawyers with many years in practice are also opting out of Big Law. Jon Levitt and Bill Stone, both veteran in-house lawyers, founded Outside GC in 2002 after identifying a market need for part-time, on-demand general counsels. “From the very start, we saw an opportunity to attract really great lawyers by putting them more in control of what they did and how hard they worked,” says Stone. Stone says that many craft schedules around spending time with family, but many also use the time for volunteer work, hobbies, and starting other businesses.

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While some of these firms have been around for more than a decade, it is more recently that they have been drawing significant attention in the industry. According to Debbie Epstein Henry, the founder of the firm Bliss Lawyers, one reason for this is the recession, after which many lawyers, men and women alike, were laid off and grew open to experimenting with alternative work arrangements. Technological developments have also made alternative arrangements more mainstream by reducing the stigma attached to working remotely. “It used to be that working from home was something to hide from clients,” says Epstein Henry. “Now clients are thrilled because they know the lack of overhead means we can charge them less.”

Law firms that place a premium on flexibility are still in their infancy, but they provide hope that eventually the entire legal industry will shift towards a more flexible, family-friendly model. “What we know about workplace practices changing over time is that experiments that work are the forerunners of new traditions,” says Friedman. “It will take decades. But it’s going to happen.” In the coming legal world, the ultimate partner office may be the one that looks a lot like your own living room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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