

HAVING IT ALL

Firms and their employees need to work together to make the lifestyle of a modern lawyer compatible with the lifestyle of a modern parent. *By Delia K. Swan, Esq.*

Daily Journal Extra
October 20, 2003

Times have changed. The 1950s family model of a father working full time, and a mother staying at home to raise the children is becoming increasingly rare.

Now, a growing number of people are facing the difficult reality of balancing work and parenthood in single-parent families or in families where both parents work. The time constraints placed on most lawyers are unbelievably high, and schedules are historically inflexible.

Yet the conflict is inherent, as more than half of graduates from law schools are women, and most are in their childbearing years. It would seem logical, therefore, that firms would recognize this reality and take action to accommodate the difficulties of working and raising a family.

A few California law firms have stepped up to the plate and made the necessary accommodations. For example, some firms offer nursing mothers lactation rooms and a “mommy partnership” track. Different practice areas, of course, are more amenable to parenthood than others.

But men also are feeling the pain of high demands at home and in the office. Fathers also want to be a part of their children’s lives, and many are involved in taking on household responsibilities. Many families, therefore, have benefited from firms that offer increased paternity and maternity leaves.

The 21st century workplace has changed to accommodate parenthood. One form of flexible scheduling is the option to work part time. However, with the expectation for lawyers to work upwards of 60 hours a week, many lawyers with children have a hard time finding a firm that will allow a part-time schedule.

The most common example of flexible scheduling within a firm is flextime. Most often, flextime means that work doesn’t start or end at a fixed time.

Offering flextime to attorneys helps increase the involvement that a parent can have in a child’s life. For example, many parents like to coach athletic teams or catch

their child's game. Often these events take place during traditional work hours.

With flextime, participation in these priceless activities is possible. And as long as these hours are made up sometime during the week, everyone from the firm to the employee to the family wins.

Nixon Peabody, which recently opened an office in Irvine, understands the pull of life on its lawyers and accommodates them with flexible hours.

Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp allows at least two partners with young children to work flexible hours.

Morrison & Foerster has a well-earned reputation as one of the country's most family friendly legal practices. Attorneys at the firm have the ability to have flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting on an ad-hoc basis.

Morrison & Foerster also provides services that help its attorneys in time of need, including 50 hours a year of in-home emergency child care in California at a cost of a dollar an hour. The firm also offers subsidized, backup childcare that only costs employees \$10 a day. And employees at all 13 offices nationwide have access to lactation programs as well as resource and referral services.

More firms, however, should accommodate their working parents. Many excellent lawyers seek family-friendly firms. Moreover, lawyers with families are more effective at work when they know that their responsibilities to their children and families are being met.

In order the help those attorneys care for their families, California firms should develop programs aimed at making life a little easier for attorneys.

One good example of such a program would be a firm concierge focused on dispensing information relative to the needs of working parents. Setup costs would be minimal, and such a program would save invaluable time (which could be spent billing clients) and would provide necessary support.

The concierge would be a resource bank that would collect information on tried-and-true housecleaning services, pediatricians, pediatric dentists, baby-sitters, birthday party services, tutors, therapists, drivers and classes from dance to karate. It would serve as an in-house connection facility and a parents' help line. It also could conduct monthly meetings at which parent-attorneys could meet, share their parenting strategies and discuss which services have proved most effective.

Parents of young children would benefit tremendously from these services. Knowing what services are available is half the battle. Reliable care is a concern for every parent, and knowing where to find it would be an invaluable resource.

The firm concierge would not only help the parents of younger children – children in their preteen and teenage years also have special needs.

A firm concierge could help parents find older children’s after-school activities and programs, and reliable drivers needed to get them there safely.

The Wachovia Corp., for example, has developed a concierge service that incorporates not only a phone help line but also seminars and life-planning help. The service, titled LifeWorks, helps employees find child and elder care, and dispenses information on parenting, adoption, school needs, college planning and services that care for people with disabilities.

The service also saves employees money by offering discounts to the businesses they refer. According to Wachovia, thousands of their employees have taken advantage of the service.

Wachovia’s efforts have not gone unnoticed. Working Mother magazine named Wachovia one of America’s 10 best

companies for working mothers and “Best in Class” for having family friendly corporate culture.

More firms must realize that services like these work and that despite having a demanding job, successful parenting is possible. Like Wachovia, firms should create a work culture that allows a balance.

Lawyers can successfully blend their roles as parent, spouse and associate when building a career. Firms should recognize that the partnership track is hampered by other essential elements of life, including parenting, romance, religion and the social aspects of life. For many talented lawyers, being able to successfully balance all of these areas at the same time is a key to a successful career and life.

Firm and their employees need to work together to make the lifestyle of a modern lawyer compatible with the lifestyle of a modern parent. By helping staff, associates and partners find available services that could ease the difficult balance of work and parenting, firms could help them be the best parents and the best attorneys possible.

A firm concierge, flextime and part-time work are some pieces of the puzzle that would allow associates and partners to be effective at home as well as work.