



Local attorneys: Women can find work-life balance in today's legal industry

Firms now try to accommodate lawyers' personal lives

By Tierney Plumb, The Daily Transcript
Wednesday, July 25, 2012



With the dawn of flexible hours and technological advances, it's a new age to be a female lawyer, according to a panel of female attorneys recently hosted by The Daily Transcript and sponsored by Union Bank.

"Firms are not adding staff as they had in the past. They are trying to do more with less staff," said Carlee Harmonson, senior vice president and regional director, personal trust at Union Bank. "I think that impacts women even more."

Such pressures are causing already-busy female attorneys — especially those who are moms — to carry packed calendars. The Mother Attorneys Mentoring Association of San Diego (MAMAS) is a group that allows working mothers to relate to other women who are trying to balance a law career with having a family.

"It's been a real supportive network," said Danielle Humphries, attorney at Marks Finch Thornton & Baird LLP, and president of the organization. "You bring your

child, and so does everyone else. They are throwing up or having a meltdown in front of peers, and everyone gets it.”

Wendy Patrick, a deputy district attorney in San Diego County who teaches business ethics at San Diego State University on the side, said many firms opt to call themselves “employee friendly” over “family friendly” to please those who don’t have kids.

“It’s almost a tougher job to be management these days and finesse the issue for folks who have chosen to have kids and be fair to those who haven’t so they don’t have to pick up the slack,” she said.

As a result, more firms are accommodating lawyers’ personal lives.

“My environment respects personal priorities. I don’t feel singled out because I am a mother,” said Jonah Toleno, partner at Shustak Frost.

More law firms are also letting lawyers telecommute from home, but there’s a growing push to have accountability on both sides.

“The privilege can be revoked if it’s abused and not used exactly or as intended,” Patrick said.

If stay-at-home lawyers cannot be reached while working remotely, for example, employers are revoking the privilege.

Clients also expect their lawyers to always be on call these days.

“It’s no longer adequate to be providing just a business number,” Humphries said. “Most clients have my cell number. They want a really quick turnaround. It’s added to the pressures of everyone’s life.”

Gayle Blatt, partner at Casey Gerry Schenk Francavilla Blatt & Penfield LLP, admitted it’s hard to set boundaries and escape from the 24/7 demands of work-related emails and texts.

“The new generation of lawyers are opting for lifestyle over a partnership track and a career. They are clear on boundaries,” Blatt said.

Julie Mebane, partner at Duane Morris, thinks her attorney peers should feel lucky they don’t have to be a slave to a 9-to-5 job.

“You can come in late and leave early. No one cares where you are or what you are doing, if the clients are happy and the work is getting done,” she said. “I think we are all fortunate in that regard.”

There's also an emerging crop of semi-retired lawyers, which ease into part-time work instead of leaving the field cold turkey.

"That possibility doesn't exist in every profession," Mebane said.

Female lawyers should also feel fortunate with how well they have weathered the recession, which generally hit men harder than women.

"Women were faring better throughout the downturn and their husbands got laid off or were transferred," said **Lisa Martens**, principal at **Fish & Richardson PC**.

That statistic caused her 35-person San Diego office to lose three skilled female attorneys over the past three years.

"We were at 10 [women] and now we are at seven. You feel that impact, definitely," Martens said.

Female attorneys are picking up tips on how to do more with less.

Leslie Devaney, shareholder at Stutz Artiano Shinoff & Holtz, says she's learned to delegate so that she's not the only one at the firm who can respond to a client's phone call.

"I consider myself valuable, but I also have a team around me," said Devaney, city attorney of Del Mar and Murrieta. "If I am on vacation or away, I want to know my client will keep going. Life doesn't end with me. At the end of day, us women have to make a balanced life."

Devaney's trick works well in mid-to-large firms, but smaller firms don't have the luxury of spreading out tasks. Julie Jones is managing partner at estate planning firm Brierton Jones & Jones LLP, and scheduling is the toughest part of the day.

"Things you plan to do [that day] sometimes never get touched," she said. "I think women are more compulsive, while men can compartmentalize. Sometimes I have a hard time choosing what is the most important thing."

Carlee Harmonson, senior vice president and regional director of personal trust at Union Bank, said personal and professional lives have merged into one. As a result, she maps out all her day-to-day responsibilities on one condensed calendar.

"The dynamic of what a work day looks like has changed," Harmonson said, adding that taking a long lunch can mean working until 11 p.m. "Young people want things on their own terms. That is interesting to learn from them."

One negative trait circling around many young law school grads is a sense of entitlement, whether it's with salary expectations or erroneously assuming there's a shortcut to becoming a partner.

"Whether it's bad times or good, you have to network," Devaney said. She tells young associates: "You have to bring in clients and work hard."

That laziness worries law firms, which are training the next generation to fill shoes. Harmonson estimated that a quarter of her work force will retire in the next five years.

"How do we adequately train people to come in behind them? There's a huge chasm of lack of knowledge and training, just by pure age group of people," Harmonson said.

There is one rising similarity between all age groups at law firms, however: workloads. The days of senior partners getting to sit back and not clock as many billable hours as fresh-faced associates are long gone, according to Harmonson.

"It's evened the playing field. People at the senior of the firm to the junior of the firm are equally working as hard," she said.

The hiring sense is cautious for Fish & Richardson, said Martens, whose practice area is trademark law.

"It seems you have to clamor for months to say I really need someone before they say, 'Maybe we can give you one person,'" she said.

Her company's summer program has been much slower than in years past, and employees are anxiously awaiting a new crop of employees this fall. Client business is picking up on the trademark side, and hiring the lawyers to handle the workloads will grow in the long-term.

"Everyone is so gun-shy, no one wants to bring that one extra person that causes to play off one extra person," she said.

Candace Carroll, of counsel at Sullivan Hill Lewin Rez & Engel, runs an appellate clinic at the University of San Diego and has seen how tough it is for young attorneys to find positions in an already-crowded job market.

"I've tried to help the best students get jobs, but there are no jobs," Carroll said. "There is nothing for people coming out of school. It's sad to see."

Jones explained that it's an investment for a firm to take on a brand new lawyer at a practice like hers, which has a five-year learning curve. Putting in time is essential,

and the right job candidates are those who are committed to staying in the field, and don't have an ego about learning the basics.

"So it's a big investment and I understand why employers are reluctant to take that on," Jones said.

New associates and law graduates need to view jobs — if they are lucky enough to get one — as opportunities for professional development.

"I feel there is a disconnect from these young attorneys starting out," Humphries said. "They don't realize the networking, non-billable time and reading on their down time is part of investing in their long-term growth."

Despite the rising costs of tuition and a competitive job market for law school grads, Patrick encourages the younger generation to attend law school.

"It's an opportunity to be able to do good in this world," she said. "I'd say get your application ready."

Mebane said a law degree can open doorways for various career paths, like in government or politics. Blatt's advice would be to consider law school with eyes wide open.

"If you want a career versus a job, it can be challenging, fabulous and exciting, but if it's not what you want, don't do it because it's not worth it," Blatt said. "If you want children, more time off and don't want to balance pressures, there are more opportunities out there."

Humphries suggested seeking out mentors to get an inside look at what it's like to work at a big or small law firm.

Technological advances allow jobless grads to jumpstart their own law firms — which can be the wrong path to take.

"Just because you graduated law school doesn't mean you know anything," Humphries said. "These people need to be made aware of the economic realities and also the malpractice liability if they are operating on their own without appropriate mentorship."

Roundtable Participants

Gayle Blatt, Partner, Casey Gerry Schenk Francavilla Blatt & Penfield, LLP

Candace Carroll, Of Counsel, Sullivan Hill Lewin Rez & Engel

Leslie Devaney, Shareholder, Stutz Artiano Shinoff & Holtz

Carlee Harmonson, Senior Vice President & Regional Director, Personal Trust, Union Bank (sponsor)

Danielle Humphries, Attorney, Marks Finch Thornton & Baird, LLP

Julie Jones, Managing Partner, Brierton Jones & Jones LLP

Lisa Martens, Principal, Fish & Richardson PC

Julie Mebane, Partner, Duane Morris

Wendy Patrick, Deputy District Attorney, San Diego County District Attorney

Whitney Price, Vice President, Union Bank (sponsor)

Jonah Toleno, Partner, Shustak Frost