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WOMEN IN THE PROFESSION

Move to the 'mommy train'

Maxine H. Neuhauser / Special to The National Law Journal
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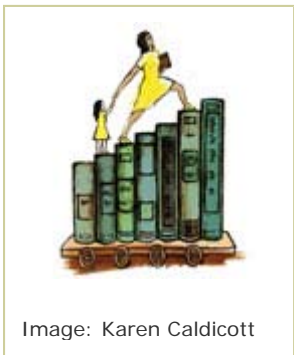


Image: Karen Caldicott

As was recently reported in *The National Law Journal*, women have been increasingly leaving large law firms and "opting different": accepting contract positions or moving to smaller firms, in-house jobs, government posts and legal aid careers so that they can reclaim more control of their careers and family lives. ["Exit Women," NLJ, June 18.] It doesn't have to be this way.

We know that the 10-year time period that leads a motivated nonparent from associate to partner frequently finds women lawyers with children

hurrying from work to homework. There is little room in a demanding workday to also fit in lunches with clients, nonbillable presentations or golf. Client dinners, after-hours meetings and travel are nearly impossible. Despite the anecdotes about families sharing household duties, experience shows that moms generally shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that daycare is wired together, the housekeeper shows and someone is picking up, if not cooking, dinner.

But by the time many women are at, say, age 50, they are often in a different place. Even for women who have put off child-bearing until their late 30s, there remains more than half of a career life left. With children more independent, women professionals become able to attend client dinners, chair a firm committee and focus on the aspects of career that go beyond merely doing a good job. After 15 to 20 years of practice, these women have substantive expertise and institutional knowledge of their fields, their clients and their firms.

More law firms should realize that women who are allowed to stay in the game will not only develop a firm's trust over the years but also demonstrate loyalty, commitment and maturity.

True, many law firms — large, midsize and small — have in recent years made sincere efforts and even effective policy changes to, for instance, allow for increased schedule flexibility for their women lawyers. But clearly there is a long way to go: Many law firms have yet to fully embrace new policies that would encourage the feasibility of careers of their women lawyers. Certainly, a great deal of this inertia is a result of pervasive "bottom-line" thinking; however, I would suggest that this is short-term thinking, and that it would "pay" in the long term for these firms to also "opt different."

A new career paradigm

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How often have we mothers who work at law firms heard, read or complained about the so-called "mommy track"? Motherhood thus becomes a switching station, where women move from "partnership track," "executive track" or "tenure track" to the "mommy track." Often, this is a track leading out the law firm door — with the loss of valuable investment on both sides.

It's time more law firms allow for the new paradigm to the mommy track, which might be called "the mommy train." The mommy train may travel a bit more slowly than conventional career trains, and make more stops, but it eventually leads to the same professional destination of career success and fulfillment. It would be wise for law firms to realize they will more likely retain talented women by allowing them to ride the mommy train — giving them scheduling flexibility, for instance — than by forcing them to "opt different" or to take the mommy track and opt out altogether. After many years of articles, discussions and publicity about women's obstacles in the legal field, more law firms should by now be willing to embrace a new career shape for women lawyers.

My own law firm is an example of how embracing the mommy-train paradigm has paid off all around: Seventeen years ago, when I gave my senior partner the news of my second pregnancy, he responded first with congratulations. He followed it with an offer of a part-time schedule after the baby's birth, while at the same time assuring me that I should not worry about partnership because I was headed in that direction.

Two years after the birth of my son, (including four months maternity leave and eight months part-time), I became an equity partner. With assistance of senior partners, I have established a base of both firm clients and some of my own. I have litigated, lectured, made connections and built areas of expertise. Luckily, I have a supportive spouse and had the blessing of reliable daycare.

Today, my children are solidly in, and on their way, to college. While I am happy to report that my children still need me, the demands are reduced. I have new time to increase my practice, to meet with prospective clients and even to try golfing — that greatest of networking activities. At 50-plus, I find my career on a definite upswing. And my firm has also reaped the benefits of our long-term relationship.

Women who are both career and family-minded must stay on the train. Law firms need to recognize the value of women professionals as a long-term investment. On the mommy track, women get run-out. On the mommy train, they find career recognition and rewards on a longer, and often ultimately more satisfying, ride to the top.

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