

Elizabeth Hajar

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Spotlight on Women

Mothers-to-be find work-life balance

Lately, much attention has been paid to the issue of work-life balance for professional women, especially working mothers. Some of the focus has been on professional women who leave their jobs to become stay-at-home moms, because they feel that they cannot or will not handle both a demanding job and the demands of motherhood.

Many professional women (and men) criticize these women for deciding to stay home. "What a waste of an education," they say. Personally, I do not blame these women. I sometimes wonder if mothers who manage to successfully hold full-time, demanding jobs have superpowers (e.g., the power to thrive without sleep) or personal assistants.

Since most successful working mothers don't actually have superpowers or personal assistants, having an understanding employer that recognizes the demands of parenthood and work-life balance certainly helps. Many of the professional women who have chosen to become stay-at-home moms have said they probably would not have made the same decision if only their employers would have allowed for flexible or reduced hours.

Unfortunately, many employers (particularly law firms) have not gotten the message that providing flexibility to working parents makes good business sense. Several studies have shown that allowing for flexible or reduced hours is financially more advanta-

geous than losing an experienced employee and hiring a replacement.

In a few months, I will join the ranks of working moms, as my first child is due in November. I know that I will not suddenly possess superpowers, and I know that I cannot afford a personal assistant. I question how my husband and I will manage raising a child and having successful careers. I have only had to think of taking care of myself my whole life, and soon enough, I will have to think of the needs of a helpless baby who will depend on me to provide him or her with everything. (Taking care of my dog and two cats already puts me at my wits end.)

I look at other working mothers; all of their situations are so different. Some have nannies or au pairs. Others have husbands who have flexible jobs or stay at home. Others rely on their extended family for help. I do not know what model will work for me financially or emotionally. My husband has a demanding job as well, and our extended family is out of state. Thus, certain options are already ruled out.

Luckily, my law firm is one of those employers that understand the demands of working parents, not to mention other unique situations that require working less than full-time, such as caring for a sick parent. Through its flex-time policy that allows attorneys to have a flexible schedule and/or to work reduced hours, Thompson Hine works with its lawyers to develop arrangements that work for the lawyer, the firm and our clients. Our policy also permits telecommuting. Further, Thompson Hine has a generous maternity leave policy (of which I plan to take full advantage).

This year, Thompson Hine also started a voluntary mother-to-be mentoring program. The idea behind the program is to pair an associate who is a mother-to-be with a more senior female attorney who has already

taken maternity leave. The senior attorney is qualified to mentor, as she has navigated the demands and issues presented when a women returns from maternity leave.

I was one of the first associates to sign up for this program, and so far, it has been a very positive experience. My mentor has provided me with great advice that has helped put my mind at ease. Further, she definitely has the requisite experience to be a mentor. She is a successful partner with three children who has worked a reduced schedule in the past. I am sure I will rely on her for guidance throughout my pregnancy and afterward.

In addition to having these family-friendly policies, Thompson Hine "walks the walk." When I told my practice group leader that I was expecting a baby, he was very happy for me and assured me that he was amenable to me returning to work in a full-time or reduced capacity. I don't believe many of my friends in other law firms have had similar experiences.

It is anyone's guess how I will feel about working full-time after I have my baby. My plan is to return in a full-time capacity, but I am happy to know that I work at place that does not penalize its lawyers who ask for flexibility. In fact, Thompson Hine has found an alternative to the superwoman with a personal assistant. The firm has simply created an environment that allows for flexible arrangements to flourish. **K**

Elizabeth Hajar is an associate in the employee benefits and executive compensation and labor and employment groups at Thompson Hine. For more information on Thompson Hine's women's initiative, Spotlight on Women, visit the firm's Web site at www.ThompsonHine.com. April Miller Boise is the chair, and Heidi Goldstein is the vice chair, of Spotlight on Women.