

Flex Timings and Reduced Hours: Too Good to be True?

Question

My firm offers flex time and reduced hours options and, since the long hours have been driving me insane, I am somewhat intrigued. How legit are these plans in general and what will it mean if I actually take my firm up on the offer?

Answer

The struggle to balance career and family is not a new problem, but one that many employers have recently started to address and implement policies about. These changes are no longer an administrative annoyance, but are being recognized as actually adding value to firms and giving them an edge in a competitive environment. Obviously, having two working parents in a household is not uncommon, nor is single parent support of the family -- it is becoming the norm. Individuals need to find time for responsibilities outside of work. Therefore, it is important that firms address their level of commitment to institutionalizing and publicizing support for alternative work schedules.

Increasingly, firm policy on alternative work arrangements has become a hot button issue. Even attorneys who do not necessarily have children, or even expect to have any, find it an important indicator of a firm's culture. Today's attorneys are looking to join a progressive firm that values the importance of family and community. As you research different firms during your [job search](#), it is important to find out as much information as possible regarding their policies on alternative work arrangements and gauge how important their views on the issue are to you.

Overcoming the Stigmas of Alternative Work Arrangements

Many attorneys refuse to approach firm management about reducing their time in the office. Unfortunately, many feel it would be detrimental to their careers to even mention the possibility of cutting back. The impression of most law firms is that billing long, horrific numbers of hours is the only way to succeed. In fact, a study by the National Association of Law Placement found that although 96 percent of law firms surveyed offered part-time positions, only 4.1 percent of [attorneys](#) actually took advantage. Listed below are some common stigmas about going part-time, as well as information as to why they no longer hold true:

"I am afraid of receiving marginal work."

Firms are always looking for rainmakers and value attorneys who have excellent client relationships. If you prove that you are an expert in your area, enjoy the practice of law and simply want to balance your lifestyle, firms will continue to provide you with challenging work. There are plenty of unproductive associates spending longer hours in the office, but not producing quality work. Attorneys who know your value and ability to handle sophisticated work will continue to bring you interesting and complex projects.

"If I am part-time, I will blow my chances of one day becoming partner."

Part-time partners or part-time attorneys on a partner track may be a rarity, but it's not necessarily because the firm won't allow it, but that many choose not to pursue it. With today's technology, firms realize attorneys don't have to be sitting behind their desk to be working. It is important to seek out firms that will be flexible, as long as you are also willing to be accommodating. In addition, firms recognize that a fair majority of attorneys requesting part-time positions are women. Most are focused on increasing their number of female partners and will work with them in an effort to keep them on track.

"Part-timers don't seem committed to the firm. I'd be the first to go if there were cutbacks."

More and more firms tout themselves as "[lifestyle firms](#)." This catch phrase is often used as a response to the "What makes you different?" question. This all comes from the recognition of the fact that caring about life outside of work does not indicate a lack of dedication to the practice of law.

"Why should they keep me around if I'm not billing the hours? They'll say I'm costing them money as opposed to making them profitable."

Of course, a firm's main concern must be the bottom line, as it has to generate a profit in order to survive. Ultimately, you may not earn as much as some full-timers but that doesn't mean you're costing the firm money. All firms recognize the value of a long-term investment and how much money is spent training attorneys, only to have them leave and have another firm benefit. Again, client relationships, quality of work and your mental health are more important than cutting back some hours during the week. Because longevity reaps many rewards, firms want to keep their attorneys happy and will bend to accommodate their needs.

"The clients won't want to work with me, they'll be afraid I won't be around for them."

Clients increasingly have diversity requirements when it comes to selecting their counsel. As for the male/female ratio, clients recognize that flexibility equals higher morale which ultimately equals higher retention. Clients appreciate the "institutional knowledge" of their counsel and have no desire to continuously train new attorneys. In addition, many are supportive of reduced-hours or flex-time because, quite honestly, they notice little difference in the availability of their attorney. They realize attorneys are competent professionals who have no desire to ignore their client.

"The firm says they support alternative schedules, but they don't even have a policy in place and I've never heard anyone in management mention the possibility."

Many firms will say they have alternative schedules, but do not have a written policy, which may reflect a lack of dedication on the part of the firm. Firms should have a specific written policy stating fair and steadfast guidelines that are available and more importantly, publicized, to all attorneys. If a policy is not addressed, attorneys will more than likely assume it is discouraged. It is important to ensure a policy is in place, rather than discovering options through informal networks, such as word-of-mouth.

"Other associates in the group will resent me, they'll say I'm the reason they have to put more hours in and don't have enough time for their own families."

Resentment and isolation by their colleagues is a legitimate concern for attorneys who decide to work an alternative schedule. Aside from proving that you are still making a valuable contribution to the practice, it is really up to the firm itself to publicize its support and make it known that it is a viable option for everyone, not just a chosen few. For this reason, it is important that you are aware of your firm's commitment to this practice and ensure their support, from management on down.

"I am sure no male attorneys ever ask for part-time, they'll laugh at me."

Most people are aware that flexible scheduling is no longer only an issue with women, particularly in the field of law. Women are the growing majority in law firms and they may place just as much of an emphasis, if not more, on their careers. This allows men the opportunity to spend more time with their families, while not sacrificing the overall level of income the household receives. Men can be just as conflicted about their time away from home, they just tend to be less vocal about it.

Firms are changing policy daily to accommodate and attract new attorneys. They recognize that although people still have a loyalty and commitment to their firm, they have an equal dedication to quality of life outside of work. Of course, some or all of the concerns listed above still exist in some firm cultures. Therefore, it is essential to ask the questions and do your research before taking the next step in your career. If the issues above are important to you, you need to be sure that they are important to the firm as well. After all, a [happy lawyer](#) is a productive lawyer.

[Answered by Jenny Wallace]

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