

## *Steps to Attract and Retain Female Partners*

It seems as though the number of female partners currently working in law firms is becoming fewer and fewer these days. A lot of female partners are fleeing from firms due to a lack of balance in their work and professional lives, and also because of an absence of support or mentoring. In this article, I am going to discuss some of the ways that firms can attract and retain female partners. As many women in this country opt to pursue law as their professional career, those firms on the forefront of female partner retention efforts will benefit greatly by attracting existing female partner talent and those up and coming women attorneys who represent the next generation of female partner candidates.

### **Flexible Work Schedules**

For some time now, women have often felt that they had to choose between [their careers](#) and their families. In the 1990s, a lot of female law partners were unfairly portrayed as over-worked spinsters who had little interest in having a significant other or children. [Worse yet, in some people's opinion, were those female partners who had families but actively chose to put work far ahead of their personal lives.](#)

Over the past several years, [many forward-thinking law firms have been placing an emphasis on offering female attorneys a better work/life balance. Within these types of firms, female partners do not have to choose between having a successful career and being an active member of their families. Flexible work schedules or flex-time schedules are becoming increasingly more popular with many firms and female partners.](#)

These types of schedules often allow female partners to work from home, set their own hours, and/or work on a reduced billable schedule. This type of flexibility allows many female partners to continue to develop their practice in a meaningful way without having to sacrifice a substantial amount of family or personal time. A lot of female partners are open to taking a salary cut by working part-time if it means that they will be able to have the best of both worlds in regards to work and family life.

### **Training**

Another way that firms can solidify their relationships with their female partners is by offering valuable training to their attorneys. Setting up workshops on business development and leadership issues, specifically geared towards female partners, will help those attorneys stay current on matters that are related to attracting and keeping clients. [In the past, female partners have left firms because they felt that no one at the firm was invested in their development as a rain maker.](#) By offering female partners training on how to create strong working relationships with their clients and how to overcome sexism in different scenarios, firms are aiding in their success and chipping away at the "glass ceiling" and "old boy's network" that many female partners often face in their practice.

Some firms are also adding quality of life seminars to their firm development programs as well, to increase well-being and happiness among the members of their firm. In conducting workshops that deal with issues like stress management and work/family balance, firms are hoping to promote a sense of community for their female partners. Furthermore, offering seminars that relate specifically to women's issues will help many female partners feel as though the different obstacles they face as women attorneys are understood and respected by the firm and their peers.

### **Mentoring**

One of the biggest complaints that female partners have when leaving a firm is the lack of real mentors and mentoring. Feelings of isolation and loneliness also lead many female partners to depart their firms as well.

In trying to address these types of concerns, firms can hold meetings for female partners or create female attorney committees which revolve around the advancement and mentoring of female partners.

Legal employers can also try pairing up more senior female partners with newer and more junior female members of the firm. This type of mentor/mentee program can create strong relationships within the firm, based on encouragement and common experiences. [It is so important for all attorneys in a firm to feel as though they have colleagues who they consider friends and confidantes.](#) Programs that promote these types of relationships among female partners can truly benefit the partners' productivity and the overall culture of the firm. Having a safe place to vent, strategize, and develop their practices will greatly help many female law partners.

Firms may also want to hold seminars that help to train senior female partners to be great mentors to their more junior counterparts. Many of us have heard the stories of female partners who are particularly hard on other female attorneys in their firm. This type of hazing may occur partly because those particular partners had to really struggle to get to their established positions, and they then feel that other women attorneys should have to struggle that much as well. It would be helpful for firms to address and break this cycle of unsupportive behavior and hazing to ensure that all female members of their firm represent a strong and unified group and that attorneys at every level feel valued and respected.

It is really important to not underestimate the significance and positive impact a mentor and advocate can have on a female partner. After all, being a female member of the firm is quite a unique experience in many ways, and thus the different obstacles that female attorneys at this level face must be thoroughly addressed and recognized.

## Maternity Leave

Firms wanting to show a supportive and progressive environment for women can also offer attractive maternity leave policies for their partners and associates. More firms are offering extended periods of both paid and unpaid maternity leave. Some firms are even allowing their female partners to depart from the firm for a year after the birth of a child, with guaranteed entry back to the firm once that year is up. This type of flexibility allows female partners who are also mothers to have a substantial amount of time to bond with their children early in their lives. Many firms would retain a lot more of their outstanding female attorneys if they implemented these types of family-friendly policies.

## Emergency Child Care

Firms that offer emergency child care services on site will also get a lot of enthusiasm from working mothers who are also partners. Knowing that one has a "back-up" for any child care-related emergencies offers female partners peace of mind, security, and decreased stress. When a female partner no longer has to constantly worry about coordinating her professional schedule with her personal one, she is free to devote more time and energy to her law practice. Lastly, offering child care services to female partners will likely lead to feelings of increased loyalty toward the firm and better productivity.

## Sabbatical Option

[Having the option to take an extended sabbatical is a great benefit a firm can offer its attorneys.](#) For female partners, the option of taking time off to attend to urgent family matters or child rearing issues alleviates a lot of the pressure of having to end [their careers](#) in order to attend to family matters. Exhibiting this type of flexibility will create a lot of goodwill with all of the attorneys at a firm, including its female members.

## Setting and Publicizing Hiring Goals for Female Partners

If a firm is serious about hiring more female partners, it may want to pose a publicized challenge to itself and other local firms regarding its recruitment goals. A firm is more likely to be aggressive in fulfilling its desire to hire additional female partners if it will be held accountable for the results of its efforts in the media. By publicly issuing a challenge to itself to hire a certain number of female partners in a certain amount of time, a firm is truly committing itself to actively recruiting female partners. In addition, the firm will also be strengthening its reputation as being an employer that really values diversity and the presence of female attorneys in its firm.

This type of accountability is likely to motivate a firm's hiring committee to really put in the necessary programs and policies to attract and retain female partners. It is important to have a substantial number of female partners in a firm already when trying to attract additional female partner candidates. Established female partners are not likely to go to a firm where there is a lack of other female partners. Having a community of other female attorneys is very important for many female partners. [Thus, in this regard, retention goes hand in hand with recruiting.](#)

**[For more information about law firm diversity, see our Diversity Resources.](#)**

## Conclusion

All of these advances towards making [law firm life](#) more family-friendly and humane are moves in the right direction as far as offering female partners a good quality of life. [If firms are serious about attracting top talent and retaining their existing female partners, they would be wise to implement some or all of the above mentioned programs.](#) By offering a work environment where female partners have rich personal and professional lives, a firm is guaranteeing long-term growth and success.

**For more information about diversity, see the following articles:**

**[Law Firm Diversity: They All Talk the Talk, But It's Harder to Walk the Walk](#)**

**[Why Upper and Lower Class Attorneys Rarely Succeed in Law Firms: How Race and Class Often Hinder Law Firm Success](#)**

**Learn more about law firm diversity in this in-depth book:**

**[Law Firm Diversity: How Race, Gender, Age, Social and Economic Divisions Impact the Hiring, Retention and Advancement of Law Firm Attorneys](#)**