

Law Firm Management

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Firm Management In the **Changing Workplace**

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For firm leaders and partners at large law firms, the concept of work-life balance may seem faddish, a marketing ploy for those trying to appeal to Millennials and the new “iGen” generation. Worse, it may seem anathema to the profitable business model it’s taken premier firms years—even decades—to perfect.

Neither is true. Work-life balance initiatives are here to stay. This is not because they are simply a gimmick firms must now adopt to “keep up with the pack.” Fostering a healthy work-life balance for all firm personnel will impact the success of a firm.

Technological developments and generational changes have put significant pressure on the old law firm workplace model. To be competitive in the recruitment, retention and advancement of talent in today’s marketplace, law firms need to adapt their approach to work-life balance.

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I have long espoused the importance of “having a life” to incoming associates at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. The reasoning is simple: Making time to foster relationships and interests outside of the office helps one bring more passion to his or her work. Well-rounded employees tend to be happier, more creative, and more productive. This concept is not new. What has changed is the need for formal programs to support associates and others in maintaining this balance in light of workplace realities today. When effectively

deployed, work-life programs lessen other life pressure for associates so that they aren’t stressed at work trying to juggle too many facets of their lives.

So what are the keys to a work-life platform that makes sense and is adaptable to the needs of a diverse and evolving working population?

Soliciting Feedback

One of the best ways to get started in developing a program is to ask your lawyers for feedback on what would work best for them. At Weil,

we formed a Task Force devoted to examining work-life issues and then making recommendations to the Management Committee. Through a formal work-life survey of all lawyers at the firm globally and participation from the firm's Associates Committee, the Task Force was able to zero in on the few changes that would really drive morale and performance.

Soliciting feedback shows that firm management is invested in making change and open to hearing critical feedback. Moreover, the partners themselves do not have the answers. This goes a long way with associates in helping to build a dialogue. Transparency and honesty are important. No firm will be able to do everything that is asked for, but clear themes will emerge. Setting up clear expectations for change, processes and accountability can go a long way in underscoring the organization's commitment to change.

Take an Inclusive and Comprehensive Approach

Lawyers and other employees have very different needs, desires and working styles, and these can shift over time depending on one's life circumstances. For this reason, it is crucial to offer a suite of work-life programs that reflect and address their changing needs.

For some, having flexibility in working hours or place where work is performed remains of paramount

importance. Others may prioritize having access to back-up services available for child care, while a different group may want programs that connect them with the community and charitable giving opportunities.

At Weil, we have tried to go beyond the usual mix of programs and offer services that are inclusive of the needs of our employees. We now offer access to in-home adult care, which an employee can use to help care for a family member who is recovering from surgery or another medical issue, for example. We also launched one-on-one career and life coaching with an external professional, which is available on a confidential basis to all U.S. lawyers and their spouses or significant others. Our parental leave benefits are designed to be inclusive, such as for adoptive parents, same-sex couples, and fathers. We also offer same-sex and opposite-sex domestic partner benefits.

Enable Flexible Working Arrangements

I think it's fair to say that the overwhelming majority of associates today desire greater flexibility to work remotely on occasion. This can stem from myriad reasons, some as mundane as needing to be home to let in the cable company. Law firm life is demanding, and associates and other employees go above and beyond on a regular basis to meet

these demands. Helping them balance the needs of their employer and important client demands with the struggles of everyday life can pay great dividends in job satisfaction and talent retention.

When instituting a work from home program, it is important to set clear and defined guidelines so that it can be administered in a consistent way. It is equally important to solicit and address the concerns that partners may have in terms of how a work from home program can be successful for the team and, ultimately, in meeting and exceeding client needs.

Factors to consider when instituting a work from home program include determining if there is a particular group of people, such as junior associates, who would benefit more from being in the office, given the importance of training and mentorship when starting out. It is also important to address what sort of technological support associates may need to effectively work remotely and be reachable in the same or substantially similar manner as if they were in the office.

At Weil, we successfully piloted a work from home program in London for associates over two years post qualification, and our New York office recently launched a pilot for associates in their third year and more senior. Participants in the program are being provided with appropriate technology so that the business experience is seamless. This is in addition to flex-time, or reduced

schedule, arrangements, which the firm has offered for years.

Bridging the Intergenerational Divide

Soliciting feedback from and fostering communication between generations is crucial for success. No matter how “right” these changes in the workplace may be, they are big changes nonetheless, and it could benefit your firm to open the channels of communication for a conversation about concerns that exist from all the different groups.

One way to do this is to offer training for both partners and associates on effectively working together in today’s workforce, for example. Our workplaces are not just made up of the “old” and the “new” anymore; they are multigenerational. At Weil, we brought in a consultant to offer such training. Just opening up dialogue on these issues allowed associates and partners, some of whom are Millennials themselves, to better understand each other’s sometimes differing points of view and start to move to a place where we can find solutions. We are now launching a similar training program on effectively working remotely.

Community Connection

More than ever, employees want to feel connected to the work that they do and give back to the communities they serve. All law firms devote resources to their pro bono

programs and give back in meaningful ways through free legal services to those in need. Additional efforts that can help engender employee connectedness include philanthropic giving/matching programs and other initiatives to deepen ties with their communities.

At Weil, we have offered employee matching giving opportunities and established a volunteer time off program, whereby all U.S. employees are given one extra day in the calendar year to volunteer at a firm-approved charitable organization. (This is in addition to other personal time off.) Groups have joined together to support mutual causes—to make dinner for cancer patients or to entertain kids at the children’s ward of a local hospital.

While hard data may never be available, a firm culture that engenders connectedness allows employees to know that they are part of a human and humane organization and helps drive well-being as well as performance.

Embracing Change

It is difficult for firm management to make major changes in how work happens without hearkening back to what things were like while you were coming up the ranks. But just because things happen differently than when you were starting out does not make the new style wrong. You may prefer someone swing by your office in person but may also discover, over time

and practice, that web-chatting with them or Skyping is equally effective.

In order for your firm to have a successful work-life platform, senior management needs to not only support the spirit of these programs but also to openly encourage the participation of partners and associates in it. Associates and other staff will be acutely aware if there are unwritten rules that “serious” employees don’t take their full paternal leave or work remotely on occasion or call for flexible arrangements when personal circumstance calls for it.

Work-life issues will continue to change as generations, technology and societal rhythms change. The key to applying work-life initiatives into the workplace is listening, communicating and being transparent. Associates and employees will not expect perfection, but they will expect honest communication and an earnest approach to change.