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.

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 Associ-
ates 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 hear-
ing 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 orga-
nization’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 rea-
son, 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 servic-
es available for child care, while
a different group may want pro-
grams 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. law-
yers 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 associ-
ates 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 bal-
ance the needs of their employer
and important client demands with
the struggles of everyday life can
pay great dividends in job satisfac-
tion 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 insti-
tuting 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 men-
torship 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 substan-
tially 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 qualifica-
tion, 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.