

# Moms and Law Firms: Please Steal My Ideas but Not My Team

By Eric S. Newman

Since my girls were born, I have spent a lot of time in places where kids gather and, as a result, a lot of time where moms gather. A dilemma that often came up from PEPS (Program for Early Parent Support) moms, preschool moms and playground moms was going back to work and how to balance work with time spent with their kids.

The fact that this is largely a mom dilemma, and not a dad dilemma, is a subject for another article, as is how moms themselves solve this dilemma. This article is about how employers can solve this dilemma and be rewarded for the effort.

When my kids were young, I wanted more control over my career, so my partner and I left big firms to start our own. We were fortunate and it did not take long before the work was more than we could handle, so we started looking for help.

Of course, if we wanted to keep that business, our clients were going to expect the same quality of work from our employees as they expected from us. We needed talent, but we had a problem. We had to attract that talent away from big firms with fancy offices and large staffs. These firms were well-established institutions, while ours was a two-year-old startup with part-time staff. We needed a hook.

That got me thinking about those playground conversations. For many moms looking to go back to work, flexibility was a big factor. They did not have to be with their kids every minute, but they wanted to be around more than a full-time job would allow and they wanted flexibility to be around for those special moments. The "white whale" job was challenging, professional, part-time and flexible. We could do that.

We could not provide fancy offices, but somewhere out there, there was a great lawyer looking for that dream job and we knew just where to look. We sent out a job announcement on the MAMAS list-serve and from it we were lucky enough to hire a talented, experienced litigator, Molly. We were excited to get such a fantastic member of our team and Molly was excited to have a fulfilling, professional job, while still being able to be president of her kids' preschool board and volunteer in their classrooms.

Somehow there is a perception that litigators always have to be in the office in case something happens. I can tell you, this is simply untrue. Molly works in the office three days a week. If something comes up that requires her to come in on a different day, she changes her schedule for that week.

She keeps her computer on when she is at home and her phone with her when she is out. Our clients and our adjusters can almost always reach her. Occasionally, she is out of contact, but so am I, so are we all. If a client calls and cannot reach her, it may be because she is leading a

reading group in her kid's classroom, but it is just as likely that she is in a deposition with her phone turned off. Nobody is available 24-7.

So, the result of our experiment: In the five years Molly has been with us, her part-time, flexible schedule has never caused a problem. I have not received a single complaint from a client or adjuster about her work product or her availability.

Hiring a part-time lawyer was a huge success, but we did not stop there. We were disappointed when our fantastic legal assistant, Jessica, announced she was leaving to have a baby and would not be returning. However, six months after her baby was born, we were in need of more help and we wondered if she would be interested, so we contacted her. She did want to come back, but she did not want to work full time.

Granted, it can be tough to have a part-time assistant. Because we put so much trust in our legal assistants, continuity is important, but we were willing to be flexible to get Jessica back. We spent some time analyzing the tasks she performed. We found she spent most of her mornings working on motions, filings, scheduling and correspondence, and she typically spent her afternoons working on scanning, copying and filing. We also found that we rarely had filings that had to go out on Fridays.

Our solution: We brought her back part time and we got her an assistant. Jessica worked Monday through Thursday until mid-afternoon. To free Jessica up to focus on the more highly skilled portions of her job, we hired a part-time, work-study document clerk who helped with the scanning, copying and filing Monday through Thursday, and who also came in on Fridays if anything needed to be done.

Not only did we get our fantastic legal assistant back, we actually saved money because work-study document clerks cost much less than skilled legal assistants. Our system worked brilliantly for another year until Jessica left us for law school. An occupational hazard of giving your employees opportunities is that they may outgrow their work and be ready to take on new challenges.

So, it worked with a lawyer, it worked with a legal assistant, why not try it with a paralegal? Several years ago, Elissa, one of the best paralegals from my former life at a big firm, had a daughter. She decided she wanted to spend more time at home, so she left the big firm and I heard opportunity knocking.

Ours is a small office, so we store everything electronically. As a result, no matter where we are, we can access our files remotely. I needed help with managing large amounts of documents with medical chronologies, document indexes and deposition summaries. I thought there is no reason why those tasks could not be done remotely. So, we hired Elissa and she worked for us remotely.

A year later, she had another baby, but we hardly noticed her absence as she recovered from labor and delivery. We had planned ahead and adjusted her workload to allow her to take the time she needed. But because she worked from home, she was ready to take on more assignments a couple weeks later.

Eventually, Elissa decided she was ready to go back to work full time and we could not fill her time, so she left us for a bigger firm. However, less than a year later, our flexible system came through for us once again. Elissa found that she missed being away from her kids; she

preferred working from home, part time, so she came back to us. Take that, big firm!

The work world is changing fast. Improvements in technology allow for creative solutions to problems. It is time the legal field rethinks its approach to staffing. Our specific solutions may not work for every firm, but if a small firm like ours can make this work, big firms can, too.

It feels great running a family-friendly firm and giving our employees the opportunity to do the kind of work they want to do, at the pace they want to do it. But our motivation is actually not all that altruistic. Our flexibility allows us to attract fantastic employees who contribute a tremendous amount to our firm. Oh, and when my kids have a school program or when I chaperone a field trip, I have an understanding and supportive team who covers for me, too.

At our firm, a child's spelling bee is as valid a reason for rescheduling a meeting as being in trial. If that became the norm, ours would be a much happier, healthier profession.

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