

## What we might think about working mothers... (but would never say.....)



*Kate Buller, September 2011*

**We all have them. Those niggling thoughts in the back of our minds that can subconsciously bias our views, colouring our perceptions. One area that is littered with preconceptions, concerns working mothers. Offering flexible working arrangements to women during the phase of their career where they are seeking balance and bringing up families is critical to retaining valuable and talented female lawyers.**

While a number of progressive law firms are making important strides in this area, there are still lingering myths about the performance of mothers working flexibly.

There are exceptions to every rule and individual circumstances and attitudes can vary widely, however in my experience of 16 years coaching and mentoring female partners and senior associates at several leading City law firm during their return to work after maternity, the vast majority demonstrated entirely the reverse of the common stereotypical preconception. Some of the internal, and occasionally voiced, accusations often levelled at working mothers include:

### **1. Women chose to get pregnant, we give generous maternity leave, they owe us and so should redouble their efforts on return**

In my experience, women return to work eager to re-establish themselves. Their ambition, work ethic and desire for achievement are often renewed.

Their confidence in being able to juggle the demands of work and childcare is often low, however, when they first return. Returning mothers feel guilty about being away, feel out of the loop and unusually insecure about their capabilities. They need to revalidate themselves quickly and this can be hard if the best cases and matters are reserved for their full-time colleagues. With flexibility and active support they can deliver excellent results and return with a sharp focus and ruthless approach to prioritising.

### **2. Once women have families they aren't as committed, the work doesn't take priority, it won't get done to the same standard**

Almost all the lawyers returning from maternity leave who I've worked with are extremely conscientious, they wouldn't dream of letting a client down, day off or not. Women tend to be co-operative by nature and work best where they feel appreciated and where there's a bit of give and take. Without an elastic day, women are acutely aware of not over-committing, they manage

expectations carefully, clarify deadlines and outputs; this draws attention to what can and can't be done.

### 3. Part-timers on the team are resented, we have to pick up the slack

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across time zones, means that the conventional working day is less relevant. Away from the office, valuable work done at home can sometimes go unnoticed. What is more visible is the working mother leaving 'on time' to collect the kids; often characterised as the 'walk of shame'. Trainees want to see senior associates and partners who have well-balanced lives. If they don't see positive models, they'll leave, before children are even on their agenda. Managing remote workforces well takes real skill and discipline. Partner focus has to be on planning, specifying desired outcomes and trusting individuals to deliver.

### 4. When women work from home, they're probably doing the childcare or shopping

People who routinely work from home have an entirely different approach to those who do it occasionally. Working several days a week from home means that logistical arrangements have to be carefully established and distractions minimised in order to focus, often including finding creative childcare arrangements away from the home. People who only work from home occasionally,

rarely have such an efficient set up. Anyone who thinks you might be able to look after a baby yourself and juggle demanding calls and work, has clearly never tried it. All that most flexible workers ask for is trust.

### 5. We've generously provided women with newly created roles that allow them to fit work around their families, why are they still harping on about promotion

Off-counsel and PSL roles are proving popular alternative career paths for women wanting more predictable hours. However, they want to still have a career path and not feel like they're in a dead end. For the relatively short period while their children are small, women are often prepared to compromise their ambitions. However the role has to be fulfilling and feel like it is still a good long-term investment. Firms need to be careful how they talk about these roles and make comparisons with fee-earners.

### 6. They're useless at business development, because it has to be outside working hours and offsite.

In Lynda Gratton's book 'The Shift' she talks about the future of work and the need for us all to become 'innovative connectors'. Women have a head start here, often being great connectors who see business development as part of the day job, not something that's done in bars or on golf courses. The female approach to business development: do a great job, give good client service and the work will come, is often under-valued.

## 7. The full time people need to be fairly rewarded for their billings, why do the part-timers complain?

The focus on billable hours creates a long hour, competitive culture. Lawyers who exceed billing targets are, rightly, well rewarded. However this narrow way of evaluating performance is outdated. More sophisticated performance management systems allow recognition for those who contribute significantly in other ways. Financial recognition is sometimes the only real feedback we get and verbal feedback can be sparse, or only negative. Skilfully delivered, feedback helps women gauge how they are doing, manage their career as well as financial expectations.

## 8. You can't be a good lawyer if you work part-time

The idea pervades that you must be utterly immersed in the law, and available 24/7, to be good at it. Research shows that those working reduced hours are among the most productive employees. Management must adapt by being excellent project managers, good coaches and focusing on outputs. Creatively getting back up to speed is foremost in many women's minds as they have invested heavily in their careers. Technology is helpful, as are succinct PSL updates. In effective teams the outputs are clear. With good management, where and when the work is done is increasingly irrelevant.

Published Article: <http://maternity-coaching.ayrmer.co.uk/files/541011WorkingMothers-MP-September2011.pdf>