

LAWYERS: Leaving is best way of achieving

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"I hid my pregnancy from my bigger clients until about a month before [my daughter was born] and then I took only a three-week maternity leave, just because clients get scared. People said to me: 'Are you going to work after you have a baby?'"

Fortino-Brown, 44, married at 40 and had a baby late last year. She started her firm in 1991, leaving "a male-dominated firm" where she said she was asked by one of the partners to take dictation on her first day and eventually considered suing for gender discrimination. She didn't, she said, because the Chicago legal community is a small one. Referrals from other lawyers might dry up.

At Fortino-Brown's firm, her two associates and paralegal are women; the receptionist-secretary is male.

A man also answers the phone at Corri Fetman's Chicago Women at Law Ltd., a matrimonial law firm she started in 1995, after practicing law at several firms. She left the last one, she said, because she experienced sexual harassment, salary inequities and what she described as a demeaning environment.

Fetman said she did not sue over sex discrimination or harassment because she was "afraid" of being "blackballed." She said the harassment involved unwanted attention from a supervising attorney.

Good working environment

In contrast, she said she tries to create a comfortable environment for her two female associates and two male paralegal/secretarial workers.

"When one of my associates had only been here a couple of months and she went in and did a trial. I said 'OK, you're on your own.' I helped her along with it. She got such an incredible result that I sent her flowers. I buy lunch; I do things to nurture them." That, she said, promotes loyalty and hard work.

She also offered flextime



Photo for the Tribune by Callie Lipkin

Corri Fetman tries to create a comfortable, nurturing environment for her associates and paralegal/secretarial workers.

when a previous associate had a baby, but the woman quit after she had a second child.

Her firm's clients are 70 percent male.

"I think men seek out women lawyers because they think it makes them look better in court, that they're on fair ground," Fetman said. "I hate to say this, but they think hell hath no fury . . . Seriously, that is what I have gotten from my male clients."

Starting a law firm, however, is not a cakewalk. It involves managing a business and bringing in clients as well as practicing law. Eunice Ward, of Nottage and Ward, said, "You may get flexibility but you're not going to get mobility, meaning moving up the ranks, higher profile clients, higher profile cases." Still, many women may not be deeply motivated by status. Women seem to gravitate to certain specialties: family law, divorce, immigration and employment, for

example. These specialties do not necessarily lead to the big time.

"It's compassion-based," said immigration lawyer Fortino-Brown of her specialty. "You're dealing with individuals. It's not the highest-paying field compared to a litigation firm, but it's certainly more interesting."

Joy Feinberg, of Feinberg & Barry, a divorce firm, noted that flexibility also allows for choosing all levels of practice.

"You can handle things at a high level or you can handle things as 'part-time,'" she said. The latter "is very hard to do but people do it. You can try to handle uncontested cases. You can handle middle-income, lower-income types of cases so that there are not a lot of assets to deal with. You can do it in a way where you can still take care of your children."

For the most part, the legal

profession has not been responsive to women's concerns about balance, even though men also share those concerns. In the Catalyst study, both women (68 percent) and men (66 percent) said they found it difficult to balance the demands of work and life.

A Herculean task

"Women are faced with an either-or decision," said Anne Weisberg, a lawyer who directed the Catalyst study. "It is physically impossible for all but the most Herculean of women to have a baby and bill 2,500 hours a year, the current requirement to make partner in many large firms."

The profession needs to make changes for both men and women, Ward said. "But the changes are never going to be made if they're thought of as being made for women."

Men, echoed lawyer Vicki Laffer Abrahamson, "don't feel they have to do anything about [the balance problem] because they have someone to do things for them. The culture would change if men took a stand and said to themselves or said to the people they work with, 'We can all do this; it doesn't matter.'"

When Abrahamson, a mother of three, left a large law firm to start her own practice, she was on the lookout for another woman lawyer who had the same interests—"to provide good service to our clients but at the same time be able to balance our life. Work hard when we had to and if we didn't have to work, we could do other things."

Abrahamson eventually found two partners: Darlene Vorchek, who had left a law firm and was seeking part-time work, and Mary Mikva, whom Abrahamson met while searching for a parent to share carpool duty at her children's school. All three specialize in employment law, representing plaintiffs.

"We see clients when we see clients and with the exception of a judge's schedule where they require us to be some place at a particular time, we're completely flexible," Abrahamson said.

"We know it can work. We have a good reputation and we have lots of clients. Clients come to see us because they want us, and they don't care if I might be talking to them from my cell phone while I'm attending to matters outside the office."