

Working ROLE MODEL

How one attorney led the charge for more part-time, flexible work schedules

BY TERESA WARREN

When an attorney decides to move to a part-time or flexible schedule, they should know that Claudette Wilson had an important role in making that possible. Wilson was a pioneer of part-time working arrangements in law firms dating back to 1986, when she was a first-time mom of twins and an associate at Luce, Forward, Hamilton & Scripps. Realizing that juggling both full-time roles was going to be extremely difficult, Wilson asked if she could work part-time. Until then few, if any, large firms had made such an accommodation.

Luce Forward, however, was receptive. Wilson, an employment law litigator, believes going part-time didn't hurt her position. The unique arrangement even garnered some press, as she was featured on local TV news and on the cover of the *National Law Journal* holding her twins.

Today, being a part-time attorney is accepted at most firms. Partly due to the cost of training and

retraining associates and the importance of good employment practices in recruiting quality talent, law firms have gradually allowed more schedule flexibility and work-life balance.

"When I started practicing there was still a widely held belief that if a woman had children, she couldn't also have a career," she reflects.

Now balancing family and career is more often a couple's issue. At her business litigation firm, Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP, a male employee recently requested to take reduced roles to manage family responsibilities.

"I'm starting to see more circumstances where responsibilities are being shared equally by fathers and mothers," says Wilson. While Wilson thinks there is still a stigma about men looking for work-family balance, she is delighted when she sees couples working together to make family decisions instead of this falling on just the women.

Wilson characterizes her move to part-time at Luce Forward as part of a wave of

change. She notes that she was one of many women influencing such changes, including several women involved in Lawyers Club, where Wilson co-chaired a committee that looked at the issue of part-time work for women lawyers and pursued significant outreach and education on the topic.

"One of the

works very well, but we've had some missteps. I tell lawyers who want to take a part-time role that it is still a work in progress," says

Wilson. "Both the firm and the employee have to be flexible and honest with each other about expectations and needs, in order to create the greatest



Claudette Wilson

"Law firms have become willing to allow more flexibility and work-life balance over the years."

greatest barriers to part-time lawyering, at least in litigation, has been the demanding and variable nature of the work," says Wilson. While firms in general have accepted the concept of part-time lawyers, they are still working on creative ways to allow attorneys to contribute on a part-time basis.

"More often than not, it

chance of success."

Wilson Turner Kosmo has had success with lawyers working as little as 10 hours a week, handling limited projects, and lawyers working three days a week with complete case responsibility. One male paralegal works a reduced schedule so he can have more time at home with his children later in the

day. "Technology has been instrumental in making part-time arrangements work, but flexibility and organizational skills seem to be key components," adds Wilson.

One hurdle that Wilson sees for flex schedules is partnership. Historically, the opportunity to become a partner is delayed or lost altogether when an attorney transitions to part-time. While some part-time attorneys are already partners, she sees part-time partners becoming more common for her firm and others in the near future.

Wilson believes there are solid business reasons for keeping more women on the trial team. Corporate clients are demanding diversity and pledging to increase the use of women and minority lawyers. Wilson credits organizations like the National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF) for providing companies with access to pre-vetted and accredited women and minority attorneys. Wilson Turner Kosmo, which is one of the nation's largest women- and minority-owned firms, in the U.S., is an active NAMWOLF member.

Wilson recalls recently looking at a list of the trial counsel involved in a group of class actions and noting that more than half were women. "That's a big change," she says. "It made me smile. I feel like we met a milestone." ✍️

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