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4 local firms recognized for family policies

By Maria Kantzavelos
Law Bulletin staff writer

Kathleen L. Roach has long maintained an active trial and complex commercial litigation practice, while serving as a partner in Sidley, Austin LLP's Chicago office and assuming leadership roles in the firm — all on a reduced-hour work schedule.

But Roach, a mother of two who has been following what some might consider an alternative work schedule at the firm since her son was born 16 years ago, said she is not unusual in that respect.

"There's a substantial enough number of associates and partners working reduced-hour schedules who are successful at the firm," she said. "The firm has been successful in removing much of the stigma that used to be attached to it."

Sidley, Austin is one of four law firms with Chicago offices that are among the most family-friendly firms in the nation, according to the Yale Law Women, a student organization that promotes the interests of women in law school and the profession.

Along with Sidley, the firms making the organization's fifth annual Top 10 Family-Friendly Firms List, which was released this week, were Kirkland & Ellis LLP; Mayer, Brown LLP; and Perkins, Coie LLP.

Yale Law Women bases its list on a survey of firms named in the 2009 Vault Top 100 Law Firms list. The categories of information sought included the percentage of female attorneys in various positions, access to and use of parental leave policies, and the availability of child-care and alternative career programs.

Yale law student Christine Ku, co-chair of the project, said firm responses were weighted based on a 2010 survey of Yale Law School alumni who were asked about the importance of each category of family-friendly policies and practices.

The group found that many firms have embraced policies aimed at promoting more flexible career paths, noting that 24 percent of firms responding to the survey offer formal "off ramp/on ramp" programs, which allow attorneys to leave the firm for a number of years to pursue other types of legal practice or to take time off to spend with their families.

In the category of flexible and part-time work options provided by firms, on average,

6.3 percent of attorneys at firms that responded to the survey were working part time in 2009. Also, the group said, many firms provide a partner to manage part-time attorneys' work flow.

Although the group found that options for flexible work arrangements are becoming the norm at firms, with 100 percent of part-time requests granted on average at responding firms, the question of whether part-time work still carries the stigma or career-limiting effect it once did remains elusive, Yale Law Women said in a news release announcing the findings of the survey.

The survey found that of the 6.3 percent of attorneys working part time, only 10.7 percent were partners. Only 6.8 percent of the partners promoted in 2009 had worked part time in the past, on average, and only 4.9 percent were working part time when they were promoted, according to the survey results.

While firms have shown improvement in the area of developing and practicing family-friendly policies, the group remains concerned about a low rate of retention of women at law firms, and a dearth of women in leadership positions, despite a slight increase in the percentages of female partners over last year, Ku said.

The survey found that women make up 19.4 percent of partners and 44.8 percent of associates at responding law firms.

The group also pointed out a gender gap in those who take advantage of family-friendly policies. While 37.8 percent of responding firms have adopted gender-neutral policies, women are allowed more than twice as much parental leave as men on average, with birth mothers receiving 16.4 weeks of parental leave compared with 6.3 weeks for men, according to the survey. Also, the survey found, women make up the vast majority (80.6 percent) of the 6.3 attorneys working part time.

Ku said an interest in family-friendly law firm cultures exists for both men and women.

"The change in the trend is that it's important to both men and women. It's not just a women's issue," Ku said. "People are looking for a balance in being able to maintain a family and pursue their goals in a firm. It's really engaging a greater population in the discussion."

At Perkins, Coie, 96 attorneys were granted their requests for part-time work schedules as of Dec. 31, 2009, 22 of whom were men, said Theresa D. Cropper, the firm's chief diversity officer.

"Family-friendly is not gender specific, and for this generation coming up, it is absolutely not gender specific," she said. "The Gen Xs and the millennials really have gender-neutral perceptions on parental involvement. The firm that's responsive is the firm that's going to be, not only rewarded, but will have a better retention of their younger associates who will become partners and managers and ultimately change the paradigm."

Sidley, Austin's Roach, who chairs the firm's committee on retention and promotion of women, said one of the reasons she thinks her firm made the top 10 list was because its reduced-hours policy contains the general expectation that associates will remain on a partnership track. She said in the firm's last five partnership classes, nearly one-third of the women who made partner were either working reduced hours at the time of the decision or had done so at some point in their career.

Roach said another reason she thinks the firm made the family-friendly list had to do with its paid parental leave policy for associates. She said the firm provides eight weeks of short-term disability leave for a birth mother; four weeks of parental leave for any new parent, including fathers and adoptive parents; and six weeks for a primary caregiver, whether its a mother or father.

Parental leave policies also may have mattered in Kirkland & Ellis's landing on the list, said partner Linda K. Myers, a mother of three who serves on the firm's management committee. She said the firm has a practice of allowing 26 weeks of parental leave for partners and that for associates, leaves are roughly four to five months long.

Along with offering alternative work schedule options, Myers said her firm provides informational programs for new parents.

Yale Law Women did not specifically rank the firms within the top 10 list, and it does not disclose the specific number of firms that responded to the survey.

To see what other firms made the top 10 list and to view survey results, visit www.law.yale.edu/stuorgs/ylw.htm.