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Part-Time Partners Part Of The Legal Landscape

By Claude Solnik

UNIONDALE - At Nixon Peabody, as at most firms, hard-driving lawyers put in long hours, as they burn the mid-night oil and run up the meter on billable hours.

But the firm also has made accommodations for part-time partners, people who leave in mid-afternoon, or work four days a week.

Why? Nixon Peabody has become flexible in an effort to attract and retain top-notch talent in a competitive environment.

"We want Nixon Peabody to be the employer of choice, whether you're talking about partners, associates or staff. In order to do that, I think, we have to be responsive to the varying needs of all of our employees," said John Snellings, partner at Nixon Peabody and chair of its professional personnel committee.

"Sometimes that requires you to be creative and adaptive with regard to time requirements and technology." He said part-time partners typically meet the requirements of partners, even if they're not in the office during standard hours.

"They're stellar attorneys," Snellings said. "Their work is at a partner level. Either they developed a book of business or have become extremely important to existing clients. They've met those requirements. It's not a matter of checking off all the boxes. You have to fulfill the needs of the firm."

About 8 percent or nearly 20 of Nixon Peabody's associates have some type of alternative work arrangement, while six partners out of 300 are part time.

Other firms also are getting flexible in terms of hours to suit a diverse work force, though not necessarily at the partner level.

"We saw a couple of years ago that there were very talented lawyers with those special needs and required flexibility," said Mark Hamroff, managing partner at Moritt Hock Hamroff & Horowitz in Garden City. "If we were going to attract that talent, we were going to have to be flexible in their work schedules."

But Moritt Hock hasn't made the leap yet of naming a person partner who doesn't plan on living up to the demands of full-time practice.

"We have several attorneys in the firm on flex schedules," Hamroff said. "Some work partly from home. Some work less than full work weeks in the office."

Although both men and women work as part-time partners, firms said more women request working from home as an option.

"I think the changing demographics of the profession is putting pressure on it from all directions," Snellings said. "There are more women associates, more women partners. That reality is forcing law firms to rethink how they do things and how they evaluate things every day."

In many part-time partner arrangements, partners do about 70 percent of the work "other partners are required to do," Snellings said.

He said part-time partners often work four days a week with Monday or Friday off, though schedules also may include a work day that ends early.

"We have a female associate who leaves the office every day at 2 o'clock," said Snellings. "It's child care."

Firms that create part-time arrangements have to be careful to avoid unrest among other employees, who may feel certain people are being given special treatment.

"You have to create a culture where people understand you're trying to be flexible and responsive to people's needs," Snellings said. "And when they have a situation in their lives, we'll try to be as responsive as we can." ■