

Quality Part-Time Work for Lawyers

Meeting the Needs of the New Workforce

An effective solution to balancing work and family creates a productive workplace, as well as a rewarding family life. Today's workplace must respond to a changing labour force, the need for increased workplace flexibility and the importance of a skilled and engaged workforce.

In Singapore, turnover among practitioner lawyers with three to seven years' experience, particularly those who choose to leave the profession altogether, is a source of long-term concern.

Quality part-time work is one way of attracting and retaining skilled professionals who also have family responsibilities or other interests outside the law firm. Putting quality part-time work firmly on the agenda of human resource management is one step towards an effective response to contemporary needs and demands.

Having quality part-time work available in the workplace provides the opportunity to retain the skills and knowledge of staff who might otherwise leave, and avoids the cost of recruiting and training replacement staff.

That is why many law firms are now integrating practical flexible work options as part of employee benefits.

The information set out here is designed to encourage organisations to consider quality part-time work to assist staff in balancing family, work and interests.

Providing quality part-time work can also be a key short or long-term strategy for firms to retain female lawyers, particularly when they return from maternity leave or have other family requirements. Retaining staff during this phase in their lives through flexible work practices creates benefits for staff and greater morale and loyalty to the firm that has provided this support.

However, quality part-time work is not just for people with family responsibilities. It can assist staff in combining work with further studies or other life pursuits, or can be used to assist in graduated retirement.

Quality part-time work is a good way to optimise any employer's workforce.

Introduction

In a constantly changing world, knowledge is power. To remain competitive, law firms need highly skilled professionals, and many lawyers, particularly those with families, appreciate having the option of putting in fewer hours at the office. Effective part-time work policies are a necessity. Good jobs, whether part-time or full-time, attract good people.

And while there may be some part-time work in law firms, the key to attracting and retaining good people is *quality* part-time work.

While each firm is different, the one thing that distinguishes a quality part-time job from other part-time jobs is that part-time staff are considered and treated as part of the regular workforce of their employer.

The Advantages of Quality Part-time Work for Law Firms

Ability to recruit and retain experienced and skilled professionals

A major advantage of quality part-time work is that it helps to retain experienced and skilled professionals who may not wish to work full-time. Women returning from parental leave might return to work earlier if opportunities for quality part-time work are available, while those who are nearing retirement may remain in the workforce if they can cut back their hours.

Flexibility and improved client service

Quality part-time work could also enable a firm to match client needs with their pool of professional skills and

knowledge. Client service will improve with more motivated and satisfied staff.

Increased morale, productivity and efficiency

Morale, productivity and efficiency increase when staff know their employer has invested effort in keeping them with the firm. That's got to be good for the business. Putting quality part-time work in place can also help reduce staff or partner stress and unplanned absenteeism.

Becoming an employer of choice

Firms can benefit from being known in the community as employee-centred and a practitioner of Work-Life Harmony policies. This could mean attracting more skilled and experienced professionals and an enhanced reputation with potential clients.

Lee & Lee recognises that there is an increasing number of lawyers who want to work part-time or from home for various reasons. Some prefer to spend more time with their children while others have special interests that may require them to take time off from work.

The firm allows employees to work flexible hours or part-time from home on a case-by-case basis. For Lee & Lee, having a happier workplace is invaluable. Their willingness to provide opportunities for part-time work based on mutually beneficial terms have helped them to attract and retain talented lawyers. It's a win-win strategy for both employer and employee.

Myths about Quality Part-time Work in Law

While there are many myths about part-time work, many of these have no basis whatsoever. Here are just a few that may apply to the legal sector:

Lawyers who work part-time are not interested in career advancement

People who work part-time are like everyone else. Some want to climb the ladder and others do not. It should not be assumed that those who work part-time do not want to be promoted to more senior positions based on their experience and skills. Quality part-time work should be an option available to all, except where job requirements make this genuinely impractical.

We can't afford to let people work part-time

A common myth is that part-time lawyers mean higher overheads and reduced profits. However, if highly skilled professionals leave the firm because they are unable to work part-time, the cost of a replacement would far outweigh that incurred in enabling quality part-time work.

Once one person works part-time, everyone will follow suit

Part-time lawyers earn less and not everyone will want to incur such a loss of income nor face the potential impact on their career plans. Not everyone in the firm will want to work part-time.

Lawyers who work part-time cannot conduct a litigation practice

Court dates and client work load will require management. However, it is certainly possible to work in litigation part-time. A job-sharing arrangement may also make sense.

Only women want to work part-time

Men have family responsibilities too and some men are increasingly choosing to work reduced hours to help out with fulfilling family commitments. In addition, both men and women may have other interests, such as other business opportunities, which may mean that they only want to work part-time.

Part-time work is difficult to set up and to manage

Quality part-time work is all about fairness, transparency and consistency, the same as most typical work policies. It is not more difficult to set up and to manage than other work policies.

Part-time work needs to be done in the office

Not all work needs to be undertaken in the office. Focus should be placed on the outcomes achieved, not on the locale at which the work is done. Employers should be open to having work done at home if this suits the individual employee and employer.

WongPartnership provides flexible work arrangements for their lawyers. Lawyers on part-time schemes enjoy the same benefits as full-time staff, with dental, medical and leave benefits prorated accordingly. Part-time lawyers also get to enjoy bi-annual overseas trips organised by the firm.

Lawyers on part-time schemes are grateful to the firm for providing

the flexibility and support to help them harmonise career and family needs. The lawyers on these schemes reciprocate by also being flexible with their off-days and would make provisions to swap off-days and return to work when there is an urgent need. Says Christopher Cassim, Chief Operating Partner of the firm, 'The flexible work arrangements have benefited both the firm and our lawyers only because both the firm and the lawyers on the scheme have made an effort to accommodate each other's needs.'

More importantly, the career progression and remuneration of lawyers on these schemes are also managed fairly and transparently, so that they know that in terms of finance and career development, they are treated equitably and competitively.

Serene Soh, an Associate with WongPartnership, is on a three-day work week. She confided, 'I'm really pleased with this arrangement. This scheme has worked only because my team at work, as well as the management, has been very flexible. I'm not sure what other alternatives there can be if the scheme was not in place.'

Use the following checklist to see if the part-time positions in your firm are quality jobs.

The Quality Part-time Work Checklist

Both men and women are given the opportunity to work part-time. Depending on organisational requirements, all lawyers, from junior lawyers to partners to senior lawyers, can work part-time across all areas of the firm's practice

What sets firms with quality part-time work apart from others is that part-time work is open in all areas of the firm and both men and women may work part-time. If the opportunity to work part-time is available only to junior lawyers,

experienced professionals returning to work after maternity leave and wanting to work part-time, for example, may opt for another firm.

People who work part-time have the same protection as full-time staff, including job protection, predictability of hours and protection against discrimination

Predictable hours of work are particularly important to people with family responsibilities. For example, those with children in childcare may need to fit their work around the child care centre's operating hours.

People who work part-time receive pro-rated salaries and access to benefits

This includes any benefits from salary bonuses to access to company cars.

People who work part-time have their client load adjusted to the hours they work

Balanced hours and workable client loads are important to everyone.

Employing someone part-time does not mean having a part-time lawyer doing a full-time job.

People who work part-time have a similar job content and status as full-timers

For example, the part-time professionals in the firm still litigate.

People who work part-time are encouraged to participate in professional development and training programmes and can apply for promotion if they wish. They will be genuinely considered

Quality part-time work means equal access to any training and skill development. Lawyers who work part-time bring a full set of skills to the firm. Do not assume those working part-time are not interested in upgrading their skills and moving ahead in their careers.

People can move between full-time and part-time work as they require

While the option to move between full-

time and part-time work will depend upon the requirements of the firm and case load, the option should be there. For example, parents with young children may wish to work part-time, but as their children grow up, longer working hours might be preferred.

Part-time staff are treated the same as full-timers

In firms with quality part-time work in place, those who work part-time are seen as valuable contributors by the managing partners and colleagues. Their case load is challenging, meaningful and satisfying – not just the bits and pieces that no one else wants.

It is recognised that staff have a life outside of work

Better balance between work and other things in life, including family, is important to everyone. For example, the growing number of women in the paid workforce and an ageing population mean most people will have childcare and eldercare responsibilities for at least a part of their working lives.



Alban Tay Mahtani & de Silva has part-time and flexible work arrangements for their staff. The management believes that flexible work arrangements can help to retain good talent. So far, the availability of part-time schemes has improved employee morale and enabled them to retain skilled and experienced staff who are unable to work on a full-time basis.

So What Do I Do When Someone Requests to Work Part-time?

The real key to success in quality part-time work is open communication between staff and managers.

Be prepared

Every request for part-time work will be different. If the steps to be taken to consider a request are set out clearly, the process will be transparent and consistent. Consider developing a written policy, including the steps the firm will take in considering a request. This could speed up decisions and help ensure consistency and transparency.

Suggest that the employee develop a formal proposal

Before considering a request, ask the staff member concerned to document what they want to achieve by working part-time and the impact this may have on the firm, their colleagues and their client load.

Consider each request objectively and sensitively

Seriously consider each request. Be flexible and creative. Think about and plan for how the part-time work arrangement might be best managed. Make sure you think through and plan for the reduction in case load, as well as any impact on the work of colleagues and the firm. If it is not possible to meet the request for part-time work, consider other flexible work options that could assist the staff member in achieving his or her aims while not compromising the firm's business operations.

Document what has been agreed

Agreements should cover changes to working hours and other terms and conditions of employment, the period the arrangement will be in effect, as well as the dates for regular review. If a request is turned down, do explain the rationale behind the decision in writing, giving clear business reasons.

Ensure that part-time staff is part of the regular workforce

Include staff who work part-time in all communication, consultation processes and social activities. As far as possible, ensure that any training or staff meetings are scheduled such that the part-time staff is able to attend. Put in place a planned process to ensure that affected colleagues are aware of the changes to work hours and have an action plan to deal with any problems.

Monitor part-time work arrangements

Make it a point to schedule a regular review of part-time work arrangements to make sure they are working for everyone. If there are any doubts about whether they will work, consider having a trial period.

Appoint a partner whose responsibility is to consider or review part-time work requests

Having a partner oversee the part-time work requests provides consistency across the firm. One of the partner's roles would be to assess whether all options have been considered and to mediate issues that may arise when part-time work is requested. The partner can also be a mentor and advisor for employees considering part-time work.

S\$10 Million WoW! Fund

To help firms kick-start work-life programmes that can benefit both their business and employees, the Ministry of Manpower set up a special Work-Life Works (WoW!) Fund that offers a subsidy of up to S\$30,000 per employer. So far, firms such as Stamford Law Corporation, Lee & Lee and Rajah & Tann have applied for this subsidy under the WoW! Fund. For

more information about the fund, visit www.mom.gov.sg/Work-Life.

Since its establishment, **Stamford Law Corporation** has believed that in order to attract and retain a core of talented and motivated lawyers, the issue of 'burnout' needs to be addressed. Their solution was to develop policies and programmes to perpetuate a culture that supported work-life harmony. Stamford Law Corporation made use of the WoW! Fund to purchase laptops and a server to support and enable flexibility, as well as to recruit a dedicated person to develop and implement work-life initiatives for the company. The initiatives reduced staff turnover by 40% in 2005.

Mr Yap Wai Ming, Director, Stamford Law Corporation, was jubilant with the results. He said, 'The WoW! Fund enabled the company to initiate work-life programmes such as flexi-hours and tele-commuting. The employees are now happy and motivated to provide prompt and efficient service to clients.'

In 2006, Stamford Law Corporation was one of the winners of the Work-Life Achiever Award, which commends organisations for their efforts in implementing work-life strategies and encourages excellence towards promoting work-life harmony within the organisation.

The Ministry of Manpower in consultation with the Law Society of Singapore and the Employer Alliance

Based on guidelines originally developed by Industrial Relations Victoria.

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