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## Let's get flexible

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*Firms must embrace flexible work arrangements if they want to hold on to their best talent, writes Australian Women Lawyers' president Kate Ashmor.*



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Implementing flexible work arrangements is among the most pressing innovation challenges currently facing law firms. A number of firms have embraced flexibility, but many are still yet to do so. Employers who fail to provide genuine flexible working arrangements for their staff risk losing out in the war for talent.

Women have comprised the majority of law school graduates for a generation. According to the 2011 *Law Society National Profile*, over the past 10 years 57.8 per cent of admitted lawyers were women and 62.6 per cent of all lawyers aged under 35 are women.

Women lawyers usually take up to 12 months off after the birth of a child, and generous maternity leave schemes have made this a financially viable option. Paid maternity leave has certainly incentivised women lawyers to return to work after childbirth, but the best incentive for retaining women lawyers in the long run is the availability of flexible working arrangements.

Women still bear the majority of child-rearing responsibilities, so it often falls to mothers to collect children from childcare or care for them at home when they are ill. Normal business hours are incompatible with childcare centre hours, and until childcare itself becomes far more flexible and affordable, long daycare will remain the most commonly available form of childcare.

### Win-win

Innovative employers understand that the cost of attrition is not only the loss of corporate knowledge, personal networks, goodwill and the best talent: it's also a hugely expensive exercise to recruit and train new staff. The cost of replacing a lawyer has been variously estimated at up to 100 per cent of the departing lawyer's annual salary.

Research conducted by Victorian Women Lawyers reveals that, contrary to myths, it's of no consequence to clients whether their legal advisors work flexibly. Many clients have also utilised similar arrangements in their own workplaces. Furthermore, employers that offer flexible work practices know it is an investment in loyalty and retention. They know that employees who work flexibly are often more efficient and better time managers than their full-time colleagues. And those who seek to work flexibly often do so for only a limited period (until, for instance, their youngest child commences schooling).

### Not only for mums

Modern fathers wish to spend more time sharing child-raising responsibilities, therefore flexible work arrangements are just as advantageous for men as they are for women.

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workplace cultures. Younger people don't tend to define themselves by career achievements alone. They seek to balance different aspects of their lives including work, family, postgraduate study, travel, volunteering, sport, board roles, hobbies and entrepreneurial activities

A full and varied life doesn't mean someone is less ambitious or disloyal to their employer: in fact, it makes them a more interesting, happier and emotionally mature employee. And if flexible work arrangements are available to those who seek them, they will bring out the best in those employees.

Working fewer hours should not come at the cost of quality work. People working flexibly deserve the opportunity to work on quality matters and for valuable clients, who stand to benefit from the wide range of skills and life experiences flexibility brings to a lawyer's work.

Innovation is challenging and change can be unpalatable to those who take comfort in the status quo. But if law firms and legal workplaces fail to keep up with competitors in the way business is done, they risk being left behind by clients and by the most attractive candidates.

Just as firms of every shape and size have successfully introduced new technologies, any legal workplace can introduce flexible work arrangements. Victorian Women Lawyers offers a diversity training program entitled *Do You Manage?* for law firm partners; it specifically includes guidance on introducing flexible work arrangements. More information, including reports on research findings, business case tools and publications on flexibility and diversity, is available on Victorian Women Lawyers' website, [www.vwl.asn.au](http://www.vwl.asn.au)

As the war for talent rages, law firms and legal workplaces are well advised to genuinely embrace flexible work arrangements and reap the rewards; to do otherwise is to risk being left behind.

*Kate Ashmor is the President of Australian Women Lawyers. She is a commercial and IP lawyer with Public Transport Victoria and is currently on maternity leave. Follow Kate on Twitter via @KateAshmor.*



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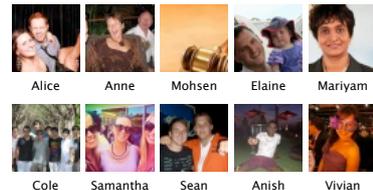
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