

## LAW FIRM ASSOCIATES

Below, we share the voices of three uniquely situated associates, who practice in three different AmLaw 50 firms. Sarah\* is a female senior associate with three children: one school-aged, one toddler and one infant. Her husband works full-time as a lawyer practicing at a small firm. Jennifer\* is a female senior associate with one child who is two years old and a husband who works outside the home in the medical profession. Gabriel\* is a male senior associate with a toddler and a wife who works as a public-school teacher.



*\*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.*

### PEANUT-BUTTER HANDS, SLEEPLESS NIGHTS AND ZOOM CALLS: BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME LIFE HAVE VANISHED

Both Sarah and Jennifer shared that their biggest challenge has been navigating the lack of boundaries at work, combined with the additional needs at home. "There are no boundaries anymore with timing of work. Everyone knows you're not out [of the house], and they're not out. Really no one cares about the weekend anymore, and it's hard to say 'no' in a way that wasn't hard before." Both women feel that there is an assumption that nobody is doing anything other than working. Jennifer now receives calls after 9 PM about non-urgent issues; she never had that experience pre-pandemic. Jennifer shared that, while some partners check in about her availability, others simply do not appear to care that she has a young child to manage. Sarah "wants people to be a little apologetic if they ask [her] to do something on the weekend" and to ask whether she "can do a call on the weekend." Similarly, a partner called Jennifer six times on a Sunday and "didn't care that [her] hands were likely covered in peanut butter while [her] child cried in the background." Even on weekdays, "it's not possible" for Sarah "to work the hours" that she is accustomed to. "I might have one kid upstairs Zooming, one kid downstairs crying. Even if the nanny is here, I still might ask to push a call back 15 minutes." Jennifer also has a nanny helping her now but still is exhausted trying to juggle the sheer volume of work with far less hours available than she had pre-pandemic.

Jennifer shared that, although she has a routine that is working for now, she is terrified to return to the experience she had from March to early June. With a husband who had to work outside the home, Jennifer was alone six days/week with her young child and the only way she could keep up was to work throughout the night while her child slept. Childcare was not available and her elderly parents, who often helped her prior to the pandemic, could not risk traveling to help her.

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Jennifer shared some strategies that have worked for her over the last two months. She starts each week by identifying her priorities and availability and then spends the time to communicate her schedule to both junior associates and partners. "I find that the more transparent I can be about my availability to work and the time when I need to take care of my child, the more effective I feel." Jennifer also raised the question of more thoughtful staffing or an acknowledgement that nearly all working parents no longer have the same amount of time available to bill hours as they previously had. "Leadership does not realize that, after I bill 7 or 8 hours each day, I also spend 5-6 hours taking care of my child because I have less support available. If a firm decided to staff multiple working parents on the same matter, there would be an ability for those parents to balance the load more effectively working together. This is not forever but, if firms want to support their working parents through this, things need to change for a while."

For Sarah, "it's virtually impossible to work and manage a toddler," and "it's frustrating when partners just schedule calls." In addition, with children of different ages at home, Sarah is "worried about getting through a call without a child crying in the background and without a technological crisis arising because [she's] on a work Zoom while [her] kid's on a school Zoom." On top of that, the pandemic "has taken a toll on [her] kids and their mental health, and you can only be as happy as your saddest child," she shared. Before the pandemic, she "wasn't present for all this but now—you don't want to leave your upset child to go answer a call." Despite these challenges, Sarah appreciates the additional time at home: "I've always really wanted a job where I could have dinner with my family a couple nights a week. I love having that now. It'll be hard to give up." Sarah finds herself "recommitted as a parent and spouse in a completely different way" during this time: "I got to opt out of people's feelings for years; I brought home the money. That doesn't work anymore."

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Gabriel's living arrangements and work demands have been different from Sarah's and Jennifer's, but he also has encountered challenges with balancing work and home life. Early in the pandemic, he and his family left the city to stay with extended family in another state. "At the very beginning, client and internal demands were still pretty high and I had to be available but also couldn't really neglect that I was living with a bunch of people and didn't even have my own room to set up my laptop," he shared. Later in the spring, his billable work slowed down but "the message was to stay engaged and proactive." The partners in his group encouraged associates to "do 8-10 hours of work a day, no matter what it was." Gabriel "tried to do that but, honestly, it was very hard to do 8 hours of any type of work, whether billable or non-billable," with a working spouse and toddler at home. It has been difficult for Gabriel to "keep the firm happy and keep the people at home happy." His goal has been to "show up every day, be responsive and reliable, while not neglecting the things that are happening in the house," yet he often has felt like he is "falling short on every single front."

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## CHAOS RIGHT OUTSIDE THE DOOR: THE COMMITMENT TO CLIENT SERVICE TAKES A DEEPER TOLL

Through the pandemic, Sarah, Jennifer and Gabriel remain committed to their clients; "that hasn't changed at all," Sarah shared. Gabriel is dedicated to "doing whatever I can to grow my practice, grow client development, stay busy, be a good firm citizen and be a valuable member of my team." It can be difficult, though, to navigate clients' increased appetite for Zoom meetings. Sarah and Jennifer both report that clients who never cared about seeing them pre-pandemic now insist on Zoom calls: "Some clients never wanted to Zoom before; they always preferred phone conferences. Now everyone wants to Zoom." This is challenging for both Jennifer and Sarah, who shared: "I don't want my clients to see the craziness. I don't want my senior or junior colleagues thinking I'm a mess. I'm trying to sit calmly on a Zoom while there's absolute chaos outside my office door."

Similarly, Jennifer shared that her clients do not realize that she often is sitting on her bathroom floor since that is the only place in her apartment where she has a white wall with complete quiet. "I listen to my clients openly sharing their childcare challenges while I sit on the floor of my bathroom hoping that they can't hear my child in the background." Unless her clients ask about her situation, Jennifer does not feel comfortable volunteering her childcare challenges: "We are in a professional services industry and, while there are some clients who show concern, many don't, and I don't feel comfortable volunteering my challenges to a client. Do I wish there was more empathy? Absolutely!" Sarah has been grateful for her clients' high level of understanding and flexibility: "Clients are much better about the time of calls than partners. There are definitely clients who remember what I told them about a nanny gap and propose different times." Gabriel echoes this sentiment: "It's never been an external demand issue. Clients have been very understanding; they're all remote too, and there's been no issue at all."

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## NOT A WALK IN THE PARK: MOMENTS OF SELF-CARE ARE RARE AND COME AT A HIGH PRICE

In terms of self-care, Sarah and Jennifer reported very different experiences. While Sarah wishes she had more "quiet" and misses "that delicious moment once in a while when [her] husband and kids [were] all out of the house," she is relieved that she does not have to commute. Her commute "was a huge waste of time" and, without it, she is sometimes able to "meditate, do yoga or exercise for 30 minutes in the morning" and "step away to take the dog for a walk" or "hang with [her] kids in between calls." Now that "it's established that the job can be done remotely," Sarah hopes "never [to] commute again on a daily basis" and instead go in only "when [she] need[s] to."

Unlike Sarah, Jennifer is exhausted physically and emotionally: "Any potential plans feel like an enormous effort to me." With a husband who has an incredibly demanding job in the healthcare industry that ties them to living in the city, Jennifer often feels frustrated by her inability to escape for even a walk. If she is not caring for her young child, Jennifer is working long hours to

keep pace with her clients' needs. For Jennifer, it is very demoralizing to repeatedly hear from her colleagues who have escaped the city that they are happier, have less expensive childcare available and can more easily get outside: "I am happy for them to experience that escape but the bottom line is that there is real inequity when you consider that many people don't have the option to flee from our lives in [the city]."

Although Gabriel misses working at the office, he has found routines, including working early in the morning and late in the evening, that enable him to "take breaks" to spend time with his toddler, who is "not an easy child," during the day; he enjoys their outings to the park. Still, he has experienced significant "stress and anxiety" due to the "pressure to get [his] hours even higher." Gabriel shared: "I'm not hiding. It's just very difficult, especially with both parents in the house working." In Gabriel's experience, "there was some understanding" from senior lawyers earlier in the pandemic "but not much." He has found himself being "compared to others in [his] group who don't have kids, and it doesn't feel fair." For Gabriel, "the insinuation that I used this opportunity to check out was very troubling. It really bothered me."

## FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY: THE ONLY CONSTANTS

Sarah, Jennifer and Gabriel all shared that they worry about handling the constantly changing situation as working parents trying to keep their families safe in a pandemic and manage their careers. Sarah is concerned about advancement because, although "it's been really nice to be seen as a human being," it also has been "very scary to open that part of my life." "I just can't hide all the crazy anymore," she laughed. This reality leaves Sarah worried about her partnership prospects: "There's a window into people's homes right now, and I'm not sure how that's going to shake out. I should be up for partner in the next couple years. Does this work to my benefit? Are people impressed with how I've handled it? Or will it be held against me for the rest of my career that I had to take on less for 18 months?" Sarah's "biggest fear" is that this experience "sets women back years," since women still are often "defaulted to as the primary parent" even though they have "spent so long and put so much time into balancing." She remains committed to her career and hopes that partners, particularly those with stay-at-home spouses, "are thoughtful about their perceptions" and "remember that all things at home can't be delegated to someone else."

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Jennifer feels fortunate to work at a firm that is profitable despite the pandemic but is constantly anxious about her inability to handle the next matter given her childcare challenges: "I am terrified that I won't be able to perform at my best because of the schedule I am juggling. I have strategies that are barely working now. I am raising another human being while also trying to perform at my best in my career." Jennifer also shared that her billable hours are higher than ever and that, in a pre-COVID world, her firm likely would be hiring to manage the abundance of work. Jennifer cannot fathom returning to the schedule she had from March to early June: "My only choice was to work while my child was sleeping. I was completely alone with my child because our nanny could not come to work and my husband was gone the majority of the day, almost

every day. So, I had to work throughout the night and slept 2-3 hours at most for months." Jennifer did not feel that she could request time off given the work demands that she and her colleagues have been experiencing. In contrast, Gabriel's billable work slowed down significantly this spring, and he is "anxious that the only consequence for [his] low hours this year could be losing [his] job," which would be "devastating" for his family.

## A "FAMILY" AFFAIR: TANGIBLE, EMOTIONAL AND INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT ARE NEEDED FROM FIRMS

When asked about support, all three associates shared that they appreciate when partners ask how they are doing, and they wish it happened more frequently. Sarah said: "It takes 8 seconds to type a note and ask to see photos of my kids. You don't even have to look at them! Just pretend to be human and recognize I'm human."

Gabriel wants partners in his group to ask, "in a real way," how he is "coping with this whole thing," to acknowledge that he has "been through a lot" and to express their appreciation for his having "found ways to stay collaborative and relevant." He shared: "I haven't seen any of that in my group. I'd love to hear, 'It's a crazy time. We value you and want you to stay with us. We know it's been difficult. We'll do what we can to keep you with us.'" For Gabriel, "the conversations have been more like, 'Your hours are low; what the hell's going on?'" This direct messaging from the partners in his group, who "may have been reacting to internal pressure," has contrasted with the messaging from senior management, which has "said things like, 'we'll get through this together' and 'we're understanding.'" Gabriel longs for "consistent messaging across the board," as well as transparency around the "firm's official position" in a year when many associates with children "don't have the required hours." He shared: "We're hearing things like, 'the firm is a family'—what does that mean for me and my future? Will they write this year off? Will they forego bonuses? Maybe there's no answer yet. But there's been no communication to give peace of mind at a time when people need it." And, although having a "community of parents in the office who are going through the same thing" has been helpful, "it doesn't really mean anything if there's pressure on your hours and you might be fired at the end of a year that's been upside down for everybody."

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With respect to childcare assistance specifically, Sarah has noticed a "lack of recognition that, as an associate, I can't afford to hire the amount of childcare that I would need to work the schedule that I'm always asked to work," which, "combined with the boundary-pushing, has been tough." After her au pair's time with her family expired months ago, Sarah was unable to get another au pair "because the visa program was suspended." Now, Sarah has a nanny until 5 PM each weekday, but she "can't afford to pay [the] nanny overtime" to cover until her husband is free to be with the children. "Bright Horizons back-up care is gone now, and people are pretending like we don't still need that. This need is no longer filled. I understand from a practical perspective that [firms] can't just pay people with kids more. But my husband's salary already goes entirely to childcare," she lamented.

Similarly, Jennifer is spending more money than ever on childcare because her typical support system is gone: "I used to have family and friends that helped when my nanny left and I had to stay at work. Now it is just me." Jennifer wishes that her firm would consider re-allocating resources like a gym stipend to help defray childcare costs. She also shared some other ways that firms could "throw some money" at this problem. For example, many firms subsidize the cost of food through on-site cafeteria service, all of which are closed due to the pandemic: "If the firm just gave associates a small amount of money each month towards a meal service, it would be an enormous help. We are all eating at home, making more mess and spending more time to feed our families than we did pre-pandemic. I would be deeply grateful for this type of gesture. Will it solve everything? No, of course not. But it would be an indication that the firm recognizes our increased burden and is willing to support us."

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Gabriel's wife "has been shouldering a larger piece of childcare, which has been great" for Gabriel but "unfair" to her. He has been "able to manage and help out" but feels "like it hasn't been enough," and he and his wife have "no family" in the area and "haven't really seen friends." Even with their nanny having recently returned part-time, balancing work with childcare responsibilities is "still very difficult." Like Sarah and Jennifer, Gabriel would appreciate the firm shouldering some of the additional childcare expenses that parents have been incurring. Sarah fears that, "without a short-term 'let's get everyone through this' mentality, people may opt out." In her view, firms "risk losing people permanently or semi-permanently" if they fail to offer "more financial support for childcare" during this time.

## HOPE FOR ACTION IN THE COMING MONTHS

When we asked about what they hope is ahead, Sarah and Jennifer both shared that they want health for their families, friends and colleagues. Sarah hopes that her older child is able to stay physically in school; Jennifer hopes that her nanny can continue to support her. But more importantly, all three associates emphatically shared that they hope for more support from their firms. Sarah hopes to see her colleagues acting like true "teammates, supporting each other and keeping our heads down together," and Gabriel hopes to have job security come year-end, along with a "sense that people at the firm are happy and value what [he] bring[s] to the table." Jennifer, with emotion in her voice, said without hesitation that she truly hopes her firm rolls out a clear plan that demonstrates an understanding of working parents and the struggle they continue to face: "My firm sends emails with acknowledgment that we are facing challenges but I, and lots of other working parents, want to see some action, and tangible evidence that they actually have some empathy."

## LAW FIRM PARTNERS

Below are the experiences of four partners, who practice in different types of firms across the country. Amanda\* is a female partner with a 4-year-old who works in a large non-coastal office of a global law firm; her husband is currently a stay-at-home dad. Justin\* is a male partner from a sophisticated, one-office, regional law firm; his children are 12, 10 and 6 and his wife, with a background in teaching online courses for colleges, is supporting the family full-time now. Liz\* is a partner at a boutique law firm and a single mother with a five-year-old child. Aaron\* is a partner in a large international firm who has two children, ages 6 and 3, and a wife with a very busy corporate career.



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## POWERING THROUGH: THE TRANSITION TO WORK-FROM-HOME HAS BEEN (SORT OF) MANAGEABLE

Amanda has “grown up” at her firm and developed significant relationships across practice groups and offices, which supported her making partner a few years ago. With a long commute to the office, she began working remotely most days of the week several years ago, so even pre-pandemic, boundaries between work and home life were blurred for her. Even on days when Amanda was going to the office, she would “leave early to head home to put [her] son down for a nap,” knowing she planned to get back online later that day or evening to continue working. Amanda noted that, now that everyone is remote, “others get it and there is less pressure or concern around the choice to be remote on any day.” Others at the firm also now see that there is “so much saved time in the day” and “much less distraction once you get used to it.” Amanda still generally connects by telephone with people outside her office with whom she had already worked before the pandemic. However, people in her local office, especially those who were not previously used to working from home, are very inclined to suggest a Zoom meeting. “It helps them feel more normal when they are used to seeing people in-person every day,” she shared. Although the increased use of Zoom does not bother Amanda or feel excessive, she noted that practice group lunches via Zoom are definitely “not as good” as in-person gatherings. With respect to her litigation practice, Amanda shared that, as courts have gone virtual, judges do not seem put off by background noise, even when “kids are screaming in the background.”

Like Amanda, Liz appreciates the efficiency of working from home. As someone who preferred working from the office pre-pandemic, Liz has unexpectedly found that “this kind of working from home—as opposed to working from home when I have an office to go to—feels more efficient.” She “powers through with no lunch, no breaks” and appreciates “not losing time commuting and getting ready” to go into the office. Before the pandemic, she shared, “it felt like work was encroaching when I had to pick back up again from home. Now, there’s no end to the day because it’s all the same. That bothers some people, but it feels easier for me now when I

have to work late." Still, there are drawbacks to not being in the office: "I feel more alienated. A lot of stuff happens behind the scenes, and I don't have the usual touchpoints because we're not there. There's no chatting by the copy machine." As a single mom navigating the pandemic without childcare, Liz reluctantly relies heavily on screen-time to get through the workday. "I'm on calls and my kids on the YouTube app watching science videos; it feels terrible," she shared. Still, she has had "no problems navigating the work part" and is grateful that she "mostly can manage" her own work and has "a fair amount of freedom and flexibility." "With where I am in my job," she reflected, "it's been fine. I'm not sure associates would say the same thing. I hope they would, but I'm not sure."

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With a wife at home "carrying the brunt of it" with the kids, Justin's pandemic work experience has been quite different from Liz's. He feels very fortunate that his wife can support their family during this time. Justin's 12-year-old is going to school remotely, while Justin and his wife have opted to homeschool their 10-year-old and 6-year-old. Justin recently re-joined his firm and, with the pandemic and everyone working remotely, he and his family have not yet made the move back from the East Coast. This creates time zone struggles throughout the day. Justin shared that he has never been able to have three meals a day all together with his family before, and he enjoys having that opportunity now, even though early dinner with his kids happens when it is still the middle of the afternoon in his office. He tries to keep his schedule flexible and goes back to work after dinner. Throughout the day, Justin's kids may come down to his basement office to check in or ask a question; for Justin, these "disruptions are relative to any sort of disruption at the office, just different disruptions."

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Aaron expressed more significant struggles than the others did regarding his work-from-home experience. At first, he and his wife were "treading water, waiting to see what was happening" before eventually coordinating a nanny share. Without childcare at the beginning, Aaron could not get anything done. "I like the structure at an office where I have dedicated time to focus," a "routine" and "the chance to collaborate with colleagues in person," he shared. He is now considering going back into the office once a week: "I'm very unproductive at home. I can spend 40 minutes making a sandwich at lunch if I want." Aaron also has struggled with the lack of on-site support from his assistant. At home, he is not able to print his work to review before submitting it, and he is worried about the quality of his work product. He also misses having support with preparing binders and other organizational matters. Aaron shared that he "has not mastered the art of working from home."

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## EMBRACING CHANGE: SHIFTS IN CLIENT SERVICE AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT ARE GENERALLY SEEN AS OPPORTUNITIES

Amanda's clients have appreciated reduced travel expenses, particularly with court hearings having moved online. She recently handled an out-of-state matter by connecting with the court virtually and saw that there was absolutely "no reason to make the trip down." This reduction in costs has been especially critical to "those clients whose businesses have been impacted by the pandemic," Amanda shared. The shift away from travel not only saves Amanda's clients' money, but it also allows Amanda to spend more time getting her work done and being with her family.

Liz has not noticed significant changes in her relationships with her clients or the service that she provides them. She appreciates that clients "are in the same boat and have been pretty chill" since "they're navigating the same thing." Having recently returned to his firm, Justin has been focused on business development and building his and the firm's practice. It has been challenging to cultivate client relationships remotely without the ease of lunches, dinners, drinks and ballgames, though, without these familiar social settings, Justin has had "an opportunity to be more targeted and direct" in his efforts.

Aaron remains focused on client relationships and providing his clients the "A+ service they are paying for and expect." He noted that, back in the spring, there was a sense even with clients that everyone was trying to "just get through it." Now, other than perhaps an extra question on a call, it is business as usual with clients. As a junior partner building his practice in the midst of a pandemic, Aaron has found it challenging to develop business: "You're not going to build a new client relationship by Zoom."

## WELL-BEING IS CORRELATED WITH SUPPORT AT HOME AND BREAKS FROM WORK

Amanda mentioned several times how fortunate she is relative to many of her peers. She is grateful that her family is healthy, and her husband is available to care for their child throughout the day. She also lives in a very walkable part of her town and, with her family, has been able to take advantage of the good weather by regularly going for walks. That said, she and her husband remain extremely cautious and are "cooking a whole lot more" to avoid eating out or bringing in take-out.

Justin also feels very fortunate about his situation and grateful to his wife not only for her abilities to teach but also for the advantages of her being able to teach "as their mom." She can address each of their children's unique needs. This provided comfort as the family was scrambling to piece together schooling back in the spring. Justin has enjoyed the extra family time and, although his family's planned trip to England and France was cancelled, they have stayed busy in recent months with the return of a few activities and sports. Still, Justin has appreciated the opportunity to slow down without all the typical commitments. He and his family have embraced the challenge of what to do on the weekends with fewer "traditional" options, like going out to eat or to the movies, available.

Again, Liz's experience has been different. Her biggest challenge during the pandemic has been "the stress associated with not caring for my kid in the way that I want." She is "so stressed all

the time," feeling like she is "not giving" her child "the attention and focus" that her child "deserves." Liz is grasping at any small opportunity for self-care. She laments that, before the pandemic, she "wanted to play" with her child after she got home from work. Now, "without any decompression time," she just wants to scroll through social media and watch old sitcom episodes. "I have to decompress instead of hanging out with my kid," she shared. Taking some time away this summer has helped Liz immensely: "Before vacation, I'd have said, 'Literally everything is terrible. This is the worst time on earth.' After being away for a bit, I felt like I could start over."

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As a parent with a spouse who also works full-time, Aaron and his family also have struggled during this time. Before the pandemic, Aaron would have, maybe, 30 interactions with his wife and kids each day and maybe one of those was a difficult one. Now, with the challenges of everyone working and learning at home together, he has about 1000 interactions with his wife and kids each day, including many more not-so-good interactions than usual. For Aaron, it has been important to carve out time for his family, as well as some time to be alone.

## LOOKING AT THE LONG TERM: QUESTIONS AND WORRIES ABOUT

Although the situation is fluid and changes daily, Amanda is cautiously optimistic about her family's current system, which seems to be working well. That said, she noted that "winter is coming," which will make it harder to go for family walks, and that their a "smaller home" does not have "an extra room to set up an office," which may make things "difficult in [their] space." Amanda's child was supposed to start preschool this year, although that is now off the table for the time being. She and her husband have been trying to teach their child at home but "there is no curriculum for a 4-year-old." So, for now, they work in close quarters and embrace their togetherness. This was illustrated as Amanda's child came into the room during our conversation and, when Amanda asked where her husband was, her child loudly proclaimed that "Daddy has to go poop!" With questions around the future of office space—her firm "just recently got rid of some space and we still have too much"—Amanda wonders how things will look when the firm returns to an in-person model.

*"[W]inter is coming, and we live in a smaller home...we don't have an extra room to set up an office, and without our walks it may be difficult in our space."*

Schooling and the move from the East Coast are the top concerns weighing on Justin these days. The transition to remote learning was shaky back in March so settling the kids into their learning this fall is a priority. His younger children have started with homeschool, which seems to be going well so far, and his oldest child is preparing to begin remote school, so there are some lingering concerns. Justin also wonders "how [school] will look long-term after the first few weeks," when the novelty has perhaps worn off. Justin shared that, even with a perfect home/remote-school scenario, there are critical activities and socialization opportunities missing for his children.

Liz has "so many" fears. Some days, it feels like the pandemic "will never end" and she worries that the "economy will tank." She also worries about the potential long-term effects of the

pandemic on her child. She half-joked: "I fear that my kid will be even weirder" due to the long-term lack of "interact[ion] with other kids."

Aaron's practice has slowed as deals and financing are on hold, which has been challenging. He sees indications that the market is picking up but is working, like everyone else, to fill his plate back up. Aaron also is very concerned about his associates. He and his group are working hard to maintain the team atmosphere but have encountered difficulties with the everyone being spread apart. He is not "checking in with [associates] as frequently" as he usually would and, when he does reach out, he wonders, "Is this ok? Do they want to take a call from me? Are they comfortable with a distanced drink on my patio?" He added that "casual interactions are harder" at the moment, which is unfortunate since they are "critical to a firm's culture."

### "ONE BIG LUMP OF TOO-MUCHNESS": PARTNERS FEEL SUPPORTED BY FIRMS BUT EMPHASIZE THE NEED FOR MORE UNDERSTANDING AND FLEXIBILITY

Amanda joked that, when she arrived in the office the day before the stay-at-home order went into place, she found that the firm's response included having "placed a single, individually wrapped disinfectant wipe on my desk." However, in general, the firm has been supportive. All Amanda really needs is a "lower billable hour requirement," although she has not heard about anything along those lines. "Most people understand this will be a slow year depending on your practice group," she shared. In her view, there likely will not be bonus payouts anyway so there appears to be less pressure around meeting hours requirements. While the firm has made efforts to set up webinars geared towards working parents, "a firmwide initiative is too hard with everyone's different situations," Amanda observed. Right now, as far as Amanda is concerned, "people just need understanding and flexibility from the firm, the office and their supervisors."

Justin agreed that, overall, his firm has been incredibly supportive; he does not often linger on negativity. Justin continues to be impressed with his firm's technology; they have spent the last several years migrating to better systems and were very well positioned to manage a firmwide remote scenario on short notice. Justin also senses the firm's support as he is "getting back and integrated" and "building his practice and supporting the firm's needs."

*"[P]eople just need understanding and flexibility from the firm, the office and their supervisors."*

Liz feels similarly satisfied with the level of support she has received at work; "institutionally, it's not that bad," she shared. The "help" Liz craves is "more bandwidth" and "more time—to have a modicum of cleanliness, be with my kid and get my work done." She continued: "I haven't had to do all three things at once before. And I recognize the privilege in that. But now I can't have help, and it's impossible. I need someone else to be doing even one of those three things." When she is not working, she often finds herself having to sit her child "in front of the TV" just so she can "have a few hours to clean." For Liz, "it's one big lump of too-muchness." Emotionally, she has observed an "issue of comparative experience." As she described it: "There's some shared experience in all this, but people don't have it the same. Lots of people have it worse than me. Some have it better than me. And there can be a lack of understanding."

*"I haven't had to do all three things at once before. And I recognize the privilege in that. But now I can't have help, and it's impossible. I need someone else to be doing even one of those three things."*

Aaron also feels generally supported by his firm. They are regularly sending resources around, including articles and a 90-day trial of the Calm app. He suspects there may be some leniency around hours at the end of the billable year. Still, he worries that, "if I'm not busy with hours, then the questions will be 'what else did you do with your time?'" He has tried to write articles and develop additional expertise to stay helpful to his team. He also shared concerns about the firm needing to find ways to bring all the different practice groups back together; to Aaron, it currently "feels like a bunch of small practice groups working in parallel."

*"There's some shared experience in all this, but people don't have it the same. Lots of people have it worse than me. Some have it better than me. And there can be a lack of understanding."*

## A CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Amanda is hopeful that her family's fortunate situation will continue as it is for a while. Justin keeps an eye on schooling as his family considers the timing of their move West. As Liz ponders the fall, her hopes include making "enough money to live on," seeing that her child "isn't permanently traumatized" and having her child "know people other than YouTube puppets and me." Aaron has appreciated his team's ability to adapt professionally with all the "work-flexible technology" and his family's ability to adapt personally with "finding new ways of eating and shopping for groceries, working out and managing self-care." He is hopeful that these new strategies will last and continue to support his colleagues and his family going forward.

## IN-HOUSE LAWYERS

Below we share the stories of three attorneys who work in-house. Beth\* is at a prominent financial institution and has one child who is just under two years old and a husband who works full-time outside the home. Tara\* works at a Fortune 500 company in pharma and has two teenage children whom she is raising primarily on her own. Alex\* works in media and has two elementary-school-aged children and a wife who is a partner at a global law firm. Beth, Tara and Alex all practiced in law firms for several years before moving to in-house roles.



*\*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.*

### BALANCE AND BOUNDARIES: EFFICIENCY, FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY ARE CRITICAL RIGHT NOW

At the start of our interview, Beth apologized if she sounded exhausted: "It has been one of those days where I am fraying at the seams trying to hold everything together." With respect to her routine, Beth shared that she feels far more able to cope now that her child's daycare has reopened: "I count it as a major win that we survived until daycare opened in June." From March to June, Beth's husband watched their child three days each week but, on the other two days, Beth was completely solo juggling her toddler and her demanding job. During this period, she took some time off and otherwise was able to schedule all her meetings and calls for the days on which her husband was on duty, but she found it "practically impossible" to manage her work on the other two days. She shared: "I was working around the clock because I could not truly work until my daughter fell asleep. The saving grace was that I work for a company that empowers us to just get the job done and trusts us completely." Although it was incredibly helpful for Beth's husband to have more time to care for their child, the commensurate reduction in his salary for nearly four months was stressful. And the complete uncertainty and lack of a reliable routine were maddening to Beth, who shared that she is less afraid of COVID than she is of having to once again handle the "catastrophe of our jobs with no childcare." Beth also shared that she is busier than ever: "This year did not have a summer lull—our team is operating at 120 mph without a break." She wishes for a "rhythm that is not a blast beat of unrelenting heavy metal."

*"I was working around the clock because I could not truly work until my daughter fell asleep. The saving grace was that I work for a company that empowers us to just get the job done and trusts us completely."*

Tara feels very fortunate to work for a company that has enabled her to work in a flexible manner. As the mother to two teenagers, Tara can start work in the early morning and have four to five hours under her belt by the time her kids wake up and really need her. "I am so grateful to have true autonomy and trust with my colleagues and supervisors," she shared. "It means that I, and our entire team, can work flexibly and take the time we need for our families and ourselves. Our culture is to do what works to get the job done." Tara spends lunchtime and a few hours each afternoon with her kids and has even been able to work out more regularly in the afternoons. She

then spends a few more hours in the evenings catching up and finishing work during quieter hours. "Chunking my day and autonomy is what makes it possible to juggle my career and my family," she has found. Tara emphasized that, in her opinion, "leadership has to be willing to take the leap—to trust your team and not micromanage them. This has never been more important than it is right now." Tara also acknowledged how fortunate she feels to have older kids; she worries about her friends with younger children who require more time and attention.

*"[L]eadership has to be willing to take the leap—to trust your team and not micromanage them. This has never been more important than it is right now."*

During the first week of the shutdown back in March, Alex and his wife "managed" with "no help," though it "wasn't great." "Sleep took the biggest hit," he shared. Relocating to a larger space outside the city and hiring a sitter to come stay with their family shortly thereafter has been a "lifesaver." Alex realizes that "having resources makes everything easier, and that's not available to everyone." He is "happy" with how his family has been "pretty resilient" and "able to adjust fairly seamlessly," though he acknowledges the challenges associated with having "moved small children from one environment to another environment on a day's notice" and having "kept them there without being able to see their friends or do the regular things they do." Still, "for all its challenges, being able to spend more time together as a family and be with [my kids] has been rewarding," Alex shared. "They really actually understand what mommy and daddy do now at work—I think they'll take something from that about what it means to work." With the sitter having been "primarily responsible" for weekday childcare this spring and summer, Alex has been able to focus on work, which has been key since "there hasn't really been any kind of relief in volume of work." Even with the sitter's help, a workload reduction of 10–20% would be "great," in his view. That said, he has not had "super complex, challenging" projects to work on during the pandemic and, compared to other aspects of life, his "day-to-day work" has felt relatively easy during this time: "I've had pretty stable consistent work, and I just focus on getting it done." Even so, Alex would appreciate more "balance" and better "boundaries." Before the pandemic, "even if you were on your email all night, there was still physical distancing when you left the office. There were different environments. I'm not sure if there's a way to do it. But, if there are substitute ways to recreate balance or separation, I'd appreciate that."

*"As a person who relies heavily on outside counsel, I want to emphasize: Not everything has to be an emergency and so much of the culture of immediacy is self-inflicted. I don't ever want to be that person who ruins someone's weekend!"*

Beth and Tara both hear regularly about the intense pressure their friends in law firms have been experiencing. Beth worries "constantly about my brothers and sisters in arms who are buckling under the pressure at their firms." Similarly, Tara shared stories of law firm friends who are exhausted from trying to keep up with their billable hour requirements. "You will never benefit from being efficient while you work for a firm. The whole system is set up to discourage efficiency. I am so tired of the face-time culture of firms—even during a pandemic. And, as a client, I would love to see efficiency—to know that a firm is really valuing that. I strive to be as efficient as possible because, frankly, that means that I can spend more time with my kids and also find a small amount of time for myself." Tara wants her law firm colleagues to hear this: "As a person who relies heavily on outside counsel, I want to emphasize: Not everything has to be an

emergency and so much of the culture of immediacy is self-inflicted. I don't ever want to be that person who ruins someone's weekend!"

*"You will never benefit from being efficient while you work for a firm. The whole system is set up to discourage efficiency. I am so tired of the face-time culture of firms—even during a pandemic. And, as a client, I would love to see efficiency—to know that a firm is really valuing that. I strive to be as efficient as possible because frankly, that means that I can spend more time with my kids and also find a small amount of time for myself."*

## NO TIME FOR ANY EXTRAS: MAINTAINING KEY RELATIONSHIPS HAS BEEN PRIMARY FOCUS

Beth, Tara and Alex all shared that they pride themselves on the strong relationships they have with their clients in the business side of their companies. Beth has worked on two "massive and complex projects" during the pandemic and, "in an insanely stressful year, when everything in regular life is hard, these successes feel really good. I am really proud that I have been able to continue to provide top-notch legal support to C-level clients." Similarly, Alex is proud that, although his employer's "business is being challenged during these times," the legal department, "as a group servicing that business, has been very reliable" and has avoided "any drop-off" in productivity. He is glad that his company "has taken stock" in his group's "ability to perform during these times." Although there have been fewer "big deals" happening, he considers his team's "great job keeping the trains running and supporting our businesses as they change during this time" a success. As for challenges, Tara shared that it has been more difficult to build trust with newer clients while working remotely: "It is incredibly challenging to prepare a skittish witness for a virtual deposition when I can't sit with her and connect. I am doing my best, but I have to work much harder to keep trust flowing."

*"[I]n an insanely stressful year, when everything in regular life is hard, these successes feel really good. I am really proud that I have been able to continue to provide top-notch legal support to C-level clients."*

Tara also shared some insight about outside counsel's efforts to connect with her. She emphasized again the importance of relationships and shared that she does not have the time or energy right now for anything extra. "I completely appreciate the need for outside counsel to stay in touch with me but the last thing I want right now is to participate in a murder-mystery by Zoom. Well, unless I can play the role of the dead person," she joked. Tara did appreciate a recent invitation to a firm's purely fun and social Zoom event, which involved a very small group of invitees whom she knows well: "What I love about this event is that the attorney who invited me has known me for years and it required absolutely no effort for me to be there. Oh, and it included chocolate, so it felt like decadent self-care!"

*"I completely appreciate the need for outside counsel to stay in touch with me but the last thing I want right now is to participate in a murder-mystery by Zoom. Well, unless I can play the role of the dead person."*

## WASH, RINSE, REPEAT: CYCLES OF ANXIETY AND STRESS REMAIN THE NORM DESPITE SELF-CARE EFFORTS

Tara and Beth both immediately shared that exercise has been the most important part of their well-being. Now, without a daily commute, Beth fits exercise in regularly, something she was never able to do before the pandemic. Beth feels fortunate to have been able to purchase a Peloton for herself, and she uses it every day: "I can feel the positive hormones flooding my body when I get on the bike. I don't know if I could keep my sanity without exercising right now." Beth also shared that, some days, she feels like she is "hanging on for dear life while she rides the emotional roller coaster we are on. There are days when I am moving along fine, and other days I can't focus, and I am sad, moody and annoyed, and those low points still surprise me. I ask myself: Haven't I rinsed, repeated this cycle of grief enough?"

Beth also laughed as she shared that she wants to hear less about people's relentless tales of thriving: "I want to throttle those people at times. Nobody who I know who works and has children is thriving right now. I can barely remember to shower or brush my teeth, let alone learn a new skill." She also jokingly described her obsession with replacing every "ancient brass doorknob" in her home, a process that even included a hacksaw! "I feel like I have this very limited existence in an admittedly lovely, safe place but it is also exhausting," she shared. "So, I am gilding the bars of the cell in which I exist. I never even noticed the doorknobs before I was here 24 hours/day, 7 days/week." Beth deeply misses "basic, human contact" and time with friends: "I miss a busy, fulfilling life outside my house. My natural extroversion has made this experience completely draining. I am not naïve enough to think that I don't have many advantages, but every day is still a struggle. I am exhausted, I am sad, and I miss friends. And I am one of the lucky ones!"

*"There are days when I am moving along fine, and other days I can't focus, and I am sad, moody and annoyed, and those low points still surprise me. I ask myself: Haven't I rinsed, repeated this cycle of grief enough?"*

For Alex, an unexpected source of "anxiety" during this time has been the need to put decisions related to his long-term career plans "on hold." Having practiced in-house for several years now, Alex is at an "inflection point career-wise" and has been thinking about next steps since before COVID hit. He is "very grateful to have a job during this time" and to not have had his career "significantly affected" by the pandemic, though the "delay in [his] own career progression" has been difficult. He wants to continue to "learn and be challenged" but "some of that has been paused as a result of all this." He shared: "When it was a month or two months, it was temporary. But, at some point, when does temporary become not temporary? And when do you need to start planning? Is normal coming back? There's no way to determine."

*"I want to throttle those people at times. Nobody who I know who works and has children is thriving right now. I can barely remember to shower or brush my teeth, let alone learn a new skill."*

With respect to self-care, Tara first shared that she "has reached the end of wine! Is there any left?!" When we finished discussing our pandemic cocktail adventures, Tara shared that it is challenging to find much time for herself: "I have the sense that I am either with my kids, or doing

something for them, or I am sitting in another Zoom meeting or meeting a deadline." Because of her flexible work schedule, Tara has made time to exercise daily and takes advantage of her company's fitness center, which offers virtual classes and became free in the middle of March: "We used to have a fee to use the fitness center but, now that we can't access gyms, the company waived the membership fee and offers boot camp, yoga classes and many other fitness classes." Tara also shared that she makes a conscious effort to do something she enjoys every day whether that is reading a book, watching Netflix or taking a walk. Tara also suggested that, if a firm wants to connect with outside counsel, they should think about offering an experience that feels more like "self-care than an obligation."

## HOLDING IT ALL TOGETHER WITH "DUCT TAPE AND A PRAYER"

As with our other interviewees, Beth, Tara and Alex shared that they worry about handling the constantly changing situation as working parents trying to keep their families safe while also managing their careers. But, unlike their law firm counterparts, they are not concerned about advancement or being valued by their employers; Beth and Tara in particular both feel confident in these areas due to regular communication and feedback. Instead, Beth, Tara and Alex all worry about their children more than anything else. Tara and Alex both are concerned about the pandemic's impact on their children's social development. Tara shared: "I will be fine and, frankly, I am so fortunate, but I worry about how my kids will process the lost time with friends and normal development." Likewise, Alex "worr[ies] that [his] kids' social and emotional and academic development will be less as a result of all this." Although his family's resilience has been high and he sees his children "learning something" from "being around mommy and daddy, listening to their calls and seeing what they do," he worries about his children's lack of "day-to-day school experience" and "interaction with other kids," which is "probably the most important thing" at their ages. Alex is eager for his children to return to school this fall, even though it means another "change in routine," a "relocation" back to the city (and a return to a smaller living space) and the process of "finding a new childcare provider," all of which feels "daunting." Alex and his wife recently have been "Zoom interviewing" nannies to care for their children on the days when they will not be at school, and they also have been coordinating with other families on remote learning arrangements. Alex shared: "Who knows if school will even actually open? Everybody is going into this with a grain of salt, knowing that whatever we come up with is temporary at best."

*"I will be fine and, frankly, I am so fortunate, but I worry about how my kids will process the lost time with friends and normal development."*

Until now, Tara has never wished that she could "swap out her life for a different life." She shared: "I wish my kids had more space to be outside, but we live in the city and I can't afford to just move to a completely different place. I don't want to hear one more person tell me about their fabulous vacation home or yacht they are enjoying during COVID. Not everyone has the luxury to pick up and relocate during this pandemic, and it shows a serious lack of empathy if you don't understand the negative impact that [talking about it] has on your colleagues!"

Beth also worries about her child but for a completely different reason: she fears the inevitable stream of daycare colds and infections that are disruptive in a normal year but mean something completely different in 2020. Beth shared that she, her husband and their child all had to be

tested for COVID recently because they experienced cold symptoms after their child picked up something at daycare. They had to wait eight days for their results, and Beth once again found herself juggling her child and job, all while feeling exhausted and worried. Beth is dreading the "sheer panic that strikes you when you not only face the possibility of a deadly virus but the total crumbling of the routine you are holding together with duct tape and a prayer." Beth also admitted that she is drained from the "not knowing, when this will end, when things will be normal, when a cold will just be a cold again."

*"Not everyone has the luxury to pick up and relocate during this pandemic and it shows a serious lack of empathy if you don't understand the negative impact that [talking about it] has on your colleagues!"*

## NO PRESSURE TO MAKE IT LOOK EASY: FEELING SUPPORTED AND SEEN BY LEADERSHIP

Beth was quick to say that her employer has been very generous in talking to employees regularly about what they need and implementing real, meaningful policies and not in a "half-hearted way." All employees have unlimited, paid time off with "no questions asked and no repercussions." According to Beth, "the tone from leadership has been consistently that we should do what each of us needs to do to support each other and to take care of ourselves and our families." Recently, her company also announced an additional childcare leave program that includes multiple weeks off with full pay to ensure that every employee can dedicate time to their children. Finally, the company created a multi-faceted financial benefit to all employees to be used for any hardships and stated that it was in recognition of families struggling in a myriad of ways due to layers of hardships. In this announcement, the company noted the often-hidden impact of COVID on employees (such as shouldering burdens of a spouse's job loss or caring for aging parents or extended family members). Beth was emphatic that, even though her job is demanding and she has had to juggle her child and the many stressors of 2020, she has felt, and continues to feel, "completely supported by her boss, by her team and by leadership." She wishes that her law firm counterparts felt similarly: "These challenges are about time and money. When you have a problem that can be solved by more time or money, you can solve it. Most firms can realistically give both to their associates. If you increase the demand in workload *and* reduce salaries and you do not even provide some basic compassion, very talented people will walk out. And make no mistake, even if they don't leave now, associates will remember the way they were treated in this time."

*"The tone from leadership has been consistently that we should do what each of us needs to do to support each other and to take care of ourselves and our families."*

As with Beth, Tara has consistently felt supported by leadership and her team throughout the pandemic. While her company provided "anything we needed for a home office, a plethora of supportive emails, extra financial support, and unlimited PTO," all of which was appreciated, what has really mattered to Tara is the attitude of "true flexibility and a respect for boundaries. These intangibles have been the most helpful thing I have experienced." Tara also shared that her colleagues feel comfortable being authentic and asking for what they need: "Nobody feels pressured to make it seem easy. Leadership is modeling what it means to be human, and to be

flexible in this unpredictable time. People are taking vacation, and truly spending time away from work, which makes it so much easier to truly take care of myself and my kids." Recently, Tara's company also announced three initiatives in recognition of their working parents, many of whom are juggling their jobs, kids and remote schooling. The initiatives include a mandate that employees block their calendars to take a 90-minute break at lunchtime each day and that all meetings end 5-10 minutes early. The company also extended its summer schedule of shortened Fridays through the month of September; the stated intent for these initiatives is to underscore the imperative that parents need time throughout the workday to take care of their kids.

*"These challenges are about time and money. When you have a problem that can be solved by more time or money, you can solve it. Most firms can realistically give both to their associates. If you increase the demand in workload and reduce salaries and you do not even provide some basic compassion, very talented people will walk out. And make no mistake, even if they don't leave now, associates will remember the way they were treated in this time."*

Like Tara, Alex has found "great" support in his employer's "super flexible" approach. "I need some understanding that I may be teaching my kids" sometimes during the regular workday, he shared, and he appreciates his employer "not being rigorous in demanding a particular schedule" during this time. The expectation remains that everyone will "get their work done," but "normal working hours have shifted a bit" and conversations about "figuring out a different schedule" or reallocating workload as needed are welcome. Alex also appreciates the policies that his employer has announced that will be helpful not only for the legal department but also for the company at large.

*"Nobody feels pressured to make it seem easy. Leadership is modeling what it means to be human, and to be flexible in this unpredictable time."*

## FUTURE OUTLOOK: EVERYTHING WILL FALL INTO PLACE... EVENTUALLY

With two young, school-aged children at home, Alex's primary hope for the fall is that schools will remain open, at least in a hybrid model, and ideally will have a plan to return full-time early next year. From there, he hopes, "everything else will fall into place." Beth and Tara had remarkably similar thoughts about their hopes: they wish for "normal" and for health for their family, friends and colleagues. Both also said that they hope the legal community will finally realize that face time is unnecessary, and that people can work flexibly, without being micromanaged. As Tara said, "if the face-time culture of law firms finally dies, we will have achieved something important." And Beth eloquently closed with this: "I am committed to embracing that some things are worth bringing back and others are not. For me, fitness will stay and, even as a busy extrovert, I now realize that I need time to unplug, to read a book, to have relationships with the dear friends that truly matter to me. Not everything needs to be a major production, and 2020 has illuminated for me who and what really matters."

## BUSINESS SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Below we share the stories of two law firm professionals who are both at global law firms. Runa\* is a paralegal in a West Coast office of her firm and has been with the firm for over fifteen years. She has a 6-year-old child and her husband is an entrepreneur. Taylor\* is a legal assistant in an AmLaw 50 firm on the East Coast and a full-time law student. She has a teenage child and also lives with a teenage relative, her grandmother and her father.



*\*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.*

### "NOTHING IS EASY RIGHT NOW": SALARY CUTS, GENDER STEREOTYPES AND NON-EXISTENT BOUNDARIES

Runa, like others, began her time during the stay-at-home orders not knowing what to expect. The "first 6-7 weeks was really hard" adjusting to the shift. Her husband is a business owner and was home for two months but then went back to work. This is typically a very busy time of year for Runa at work and, pre-pandemic, she consistently was billing 200+ hours a month. She has managed to keep her hours up and, even though her "numbers are great this year," she is still dealing with a salary cut.

With her husband back to working outside the home, Runa is managing the education of her child and keeping everything moving at home mostly on her own. Her child's school has been incredibly supportive, for which she is grateful. Since Runa is still working from home, everything that needs to be done at home has fallen on her and she has "felt the gender role stereotypes." In addition to her child's homeschooling, she handles the cooking and cleaning. Runa has gotten better at navigating her schedule and getting into a remote work groove. She has found ways to manage her to-do lists and has set up a clear workspace with a calendar and whiteboard in her home office, just like she has in her firm office. Still, Runa finds herself "getting up an hour earlier" than her child so she can get going on her day. All said, Runa feels lucky that her "bosses are chill and cool." She has been working with them for a long time and has the credibility and stability she needs right now.

Taylor started our interview by sharing her enthusiasm about talking to someone who is willing to listen and let her vent: "Nothing is easy right now. I am sitting in a hotel room by myself, and it is the first time I have been alone since March! I am fed up and exhausted from the endless stress, so I decided to take myself to a hotel for 24 hours to focus, organize myself and be alone." Taylor works as a legal assistant to earn enough money to support her family, pay for law school and to experience "what it is like to practice law in a large firm." Taylor has raised her child alone, and when her mother died, her father moved in with Taylor. Taylor proudly shared that she is the first person in her family to graduate from college, let alone attend law school. With respect to time

management and boundaries, Taylor said very emphatically that there is a "complete lack of any boundaries—both with work and my family. My boss texts me and calls me at all hours of the day, including nights and weekends. I don't experience anyone at my firm respecting the weekend during COVID." Taylor shared that her boss asked her to work on Mother's Day and, when she explained to him that she was busy, she realized that he had forgotten she had a child.

Taylor is "extremely organized with a strong work ethic"—and maintains a very respectable GPA in law school—but "no amount of time management and planning can make this better. My burden has increased ten-fold as a result of the pandemic." She knows that, "without a plan, I would not be able to keep all the balls in the air. I have to buy all the food for my family, plan and cook three meals every day for all of them, convince my family to respect my workday, get to my virtual classes, and find a few hours to sleep." Taylor has found that moving into her basement to work has enabled her to concentrate and that working from home has saved her a lot of time that she previously spent commuting to work and school.

*"My boss texts me and calls me at all hours of the day, including nights and weekends. I don't experience anyone at my firm respecting the weekend during COVID."*

## A DESIRE FOR A MORE INTEGRATED, INTENTIONAL APPROACH TO STAYING CONNECTED WITH INTERNAL CLIENTS

While Runa is mindful of the external clients that her group supports, she is focusing her efforts on her internal clients. On the one hand, she misses the team of lawyers with whom she works; on the other hand, there seem to be "so many video meetings" that can be difficult to manage. She has tried to log in to the firm-arranged Zoom coffees and happy hours, but she has found it "weird engaging with colleagues I don't really know." Runa has many great co-workers whom she "enjoys seeing in the [office] kitchen as we get our morning coffees," but they do not have much to talk about beyond their weekends and how their children are doing so formal Zoom gatherings during the pandemic can be awkward. Runa also finds it difficult staying in touch with people to keep her plate full. For her, it seems "forced and weird to just check in with people while remote;" it is so much easier for Runa to offer help when she sees people around the office or in the elevator. She has made efforts to opportunistically connect with people by jumping on projects that are announced in mass emails.

Taylor has a great internal network at her firm and is very conscious of the importance of strong relationships. She has limited interactions with firm clients now and misses working in the office, where she frequently interacted with clients and her colleagues. She participates in firm-sponsored happy hours, meetings and trainings by Zoom and, while she enjoys these opportunities, they "aren't enough and don't provide the important interaction we all need." Taylor also wishes that firms would mix attorneys and staff together for trainings and other Zoom events: "We have a very team-based approach to our client matters so it would be helpful to connect the team [regardless of title] because that is whom I work most with. I am happy to see other legal assistants, but we have less in common."

## SELF-CARE INVOLVES SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY AND COLLEAGUES

Runa shared that, back in July, she "went through some dark times and now [is] coming out if it." She experienced a great deal of distress due to fatigue and the state of the world. As she came out of the slump, she accepted that "it's too hard to be depressed about what I can't change." To support this shift in energy, she diverged from some friends who were handling the situation in a way that was out of alignment with her approach. Runa also stopped reading the news and social media feeds to clear some of the clutter. She has found a supportive outlet in a mom group from her child's school; they are a group of like-minded people, which allows Runa to feel as though she is not alone in her struggles. Runa is also enjoying the firm's gift of the Calm meditation app; she was "very skeptical at first, but now loves it." On top of everything else, Runa is trying to "find an hour a day to decompress" and shed the day's stress.

*"[I]t's too hard to be depressed about what I can't change."*

Like Runa, Taylor has struggled to find time to care for herself. She is "more tired than [she] imagined possible" and feels hopeless many days. Taylor wants more "time alone to relax and breathe" and "more time in this hotel." Her stress level is "incredibly high," and she has started to set boundaries with both her family and her work colleagues: "I can't walk into the kitchen without someone in my family asking me for help—even in the middle of my workday when I just want a drink of water. But that has to stop; I have to refuse to help more often." Taylor has started to feel more comfortable sharing her situation with the partner for whom she works, too: "I know he is stressed and busy too and he just moves so quickly that he forgets my situation. I am learning to remind him that I can't be available 24/7." Taylor also plans to try meditation and to find time more regularly to unwind; she is even hoping to see a friend or two in the coming weeks.

*"I know he is stressed and busy too and he just moves so quickly that he forgets my situation. I am learning to remind him that I can't be available 24/7."*

## A SWITCH TO "LOW-POWER MODE": CONSERVING ENERGY TO SURVIVE IN LIGHT OF SO MANY UNCERTAINTIES

Runa "feels left out and disconnected" from the team and the firm while working remotely. At home, she struggled with sadness and disappointment when she had to cancel her 6-year-old's birthday party, which brought up a lot of questions from her child. Runa tried explaining that, when "you fall, you just have to get back up," to which her child responded, "but it's like someone pushed us down." Several months into the pandemic, Runa still finds it almost impossible to maintain the stamina needed each day; there "is not much left in the tank," she shared. As things at work have slowed down recently, she realizes that she might not make her hours for the year, but she just cannot care about that anymore. Runa has shifted life into "low power mode" to conserve energy for the unknowns in the future. With so many questions around "school, a vaccine and the political landscape," Runa has determined that "it's ok to just survive right now."

While Taylor knows that the pandemic is creating "layers of challenge for everyone," she is most worried about paying her bills and staying healthy so she can continue to take care of everyone in her household: "I have no idea what will happen if I lose my job. I am the sole income in our household of five and that's what keeps me motivated." Taylor had high hopes of eventually joining her firm after law school and was excited to build her network there. Sadly, working at her firm has had "the complete opposite effect," she shared. "I don't want to work in a place that has demand at this level, where there are no boundaries or a recognition that a working mom has a child and should have the peace to celebrate Mother's Day without multiple calls and text messages. There is absolutely no balance and I would rather work two jobs for the rest of my career than be in this environment forever." After law school, she now plans to focus on working for the government and starting a business on the side to supplement her income.

*"I don't want to work in a place...where there are no boundaries or a recognition that a working mom has a child...I would rather work two jobs for the rest of my career than be in this environment forever."*

## TRUST AND EMPATHY ARE MOST NEEDED FROM FIRMS RIGHT NOW

The support Runa most needs from her firm is continued trust in her abilities to get done what she needs to do. She is grateful for her team, that everyone in her circle is healthy and that she has extra time to spend with her child at home. She expressed gratitude for the "empathy" that she has received and the "resilience" that she has seen in herself.

Unlike Runa, Taylor truly wishes that her firm and her classmates would "just recognize the immense burden so many have. I have multiple types of burdens with four generations in one household, balancing endless responsibilities while I seem to be smiling and keeping it all together. I wish that they could all comprehend all the roles I play every day." Her mom was her "best friend" and helped her raise her child so her death has deeply impacted Taylor. Taylor also wishes that employers would recognize the "immense burden on women." She shared: "COVID is already setting women back; I see it everywhere. I am the default in my family when they need anything done. And when I am not available, they turn to my 90-year-old grandmother to do it!" She also said that financial support in any form would be "helpful with all the loans."

*"COVID is already setting women back; I see it everywhere. I am the default in my family when they need anything done."*

As a Black woman, Taylor is deeply grateful for the important discussions that she sees happening in her firm as a result of the racial protests. She also hopes that "the 'us vs. them' mentality starts to change at every level in law firms. So many people don't realize that this secretary is actually a very smart law student, holding a lot together."

*"So many people don't realize that this secretary is actually a very smart law student, holding a lot together."*

THEIR HOPE FOR THE COMING MONTHS: BEING HEALTHY, SANE  
AND...SEEN

Runa does not know what is ahead but will try to "live in the moment" and find the positive side to everything. She expects to work from home until at least January and will do what she can to enjoy that time. Taylor hopes that she, her family, her colleagues and her friends all stay healthy. "And that I don't lose my mind or a list I have made. Oh, and that my boss finally remembers that I have a child."

## LAW FIRM LEADERSHIP

Below we share the stories of two leaders at large, global law firms. Olivia\* is a partner and a member of her firm's Management Committee with two college-aged children and a husband who works full-time. Madeline\* is a senior member of her firm's business team focused on developing talent and has two teenagers and a husband who works full-time.



*\*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.*

### NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC EARLY ON WAS LIKE TRYING TO HIT "A BARRAGE OF CURVE BALLS"

Madeline started the interview by sharing how fortunate she feels that her mom lived with her family for several months during the pandemic: "I was so incredibly busy trying to deploy resources at my firm in a completely new way. Nobody had clarity on what to do or how to do it. I was glued to my computer and phone 12 hours per day. Fortunately, my mom was living with us because I am not sure how I would have managed otherwise." When everyone started to work from home, it was a daily struggle for Madeline to handle the stress points: "Most of the firm's attorneys did not even know how to use Zoom, and we had to work around the clock to keep up and be the eyes and ears of the firm to support everyone." Madeline described it as a "barrage of curve balls that you could not hit. It was not about striking out; I literally could not swing fast enough." Madeline's teenagers are "fairly independent" but still needed help with online school, and Madeline found herself regularly bickering with her mom. To her, this experience has felt like a constant balancing act of trying to keep her kids engaged while also handling work demands and the typical "domestic" chores: "I am always trying to figure out what I can let slide in our house and what really needs my attention. It has been impossible to reach a steady state." On the positive side, Madeline's kids are reading more often, and she has felt more efficient without having to commute or travel for work.

*"I was so incredibly busy trying to deploy resources at my firm in a completely new way. Nobody had clarity on what to do or how to do it. I was glued to my computer and phone 12 hours per day."*

As a member of her firm's Management Committee, Olivia has experienced first-hand the struggle and disparity among how people are handling the pandemic: "We see some people in real crisis, while others are perfectly fine right now." Leadership at her firm is focused on making decisions that are "not about 'us' and 'them' but instead are more inclusive, holistic, and humane," she shared. "It isn't always obvious how much we are agonizing over decisions and how hard we are working to find ways to support everyone at the firm." Olivia herself feels very lucky since she has adjusted easily to working from home and has college-aged kids and a husband who also is able to work from home: "We all have our own space and have spent some great, quality time together that we would not have otherwise had. I have not had to travel for clients or for

internal firm obligations so that has been a positive for me. I can still get a lot done through Zoom! I know how lucky I am, and I also know that we must support people who are struggling in a myriad of ways."

Olivia spends time every day checking on her colleagues and is very concerned about "how badly our associates, and even many of my partners, are really struggling to balance their work and their families." She shared her worries about the physical and mental strain of the pandemic, racial crisis, turbulent economy and constant anxiety of 2020, and explained that leadership is grappling with how to best provide support: "I know this will eventually come to an end, but it is hard to see when or how at this point."

*"It isn't always obvious how much we are agonizing over decisions and how hard we are working to find ways to support everyone at the firm."*

## "ALL COVID, ALL THE TIME": LAWYER DEVELOPMENT AND CLIENT MANAGEMENT HAVE TAKEN ON NEW DIMENSIONS

Madeline's "clients" are the firm's attorneys themselves; a large part of her role is focused on their professional development. The pandemic has made it "nearly impossible" for Madeline "to actually do the important part of my job: developing the lawyers. When I am trying to make sure someone has the resources they need to simply perform the basics of their job, everything else falls to the side."

Olivia has continued to be busy throughout the pandemic and, for months, it was "all COVID, all the time." She "had daily calls with clients to grapple with the constantly changing COVID-related issues. Our clients were desperate to get answers and turned to us for support." In Olivia's view, client outreach and communication are more important than ever, and it is important to be creative when finding ways to connect; Olivia often "shares a walk via FaceTime with [her] clients." Olivia knows that her in-house colleagues are facing enormous stress, too: "Clients are struggling in unpredictable ways, like a loss of hundreds of millions [of dollars] because people aren't accumulating roaming charges as part of travel."

## SELF-CARE HAS BEEN ROOTED IN THEIR CONCERN FOR OTHERS

Like some of the other lawyers we interviewed, Olivia has been able to find time to exercise, which has been helpful. She also has felt very grateful for the extra time with her family. With respect to well-being and stress management, Olivia is mostly concerned about others.

Like Olivia, Madeline has been able to exercise more frequently and spend much more time with her family than pre-pandemic, which she appreciates. Ultimately, this experience has led Madeline to decide to resign from her job: "I never had the time or space to reflect on what my kids really needed from me. I have never spent this much time, day in and day out with my kids, and it made me realize how much they need me right now. My husband and I were staring down a long road ahead with no support for handling our kids' remote education needs and two working parents. This is not permanent for me, but it needed to happen for now. My kids have never

known a world where I have not worked, and they have told me how happy they are to be with me every day." Madeline seriously wrestled with this choice; in the end, part of what made the decision easier was that the "emotion and connection [she] felt when [she] was working in the office each day has disappeared." She realizes that she "would have had a much harder time deciding to leave [her] firm if [she] was in the office every day right now." Madeline also realized that the stress she was struggling with was unhealthy; in leaving, she will be able to get some time for herself, "to take more walks and just breathe." She "want[s] to stop the relentless multi-tasking."

*"I have never spent this much time, day in and day out with my kids, and it made me realize how much they need me right now. My husband and I were staring down a long road ahead with no support for handling our kids' remote education needs and two working parents."*

## LOSING GROUND: THEIR BIGGEST FEAR IS THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

As Madeline faces a significant transition in her professional life, she is uncertain about what will come next. She knows that she will continue her career, when the time is right. She is really worried, though, about how the pandemic is affecting women: "How is it possible that it has taken this long for a real statue of a woman to be in Central Park? My daughter and I talked about that today. Our generation was raised by mothers and aunts who fought for our rights. And what have we done—did we rise up in the streets about the pay inequality or harassment we faced? No, because nothing would have happened if we complained. But my daughter's generation and Millennials, they are not accepting it. They are rising up, speaking up." So, Madeline feels very conflicted as she steps back from her current role to support her kids. She knows that she has to "weather this shift but that, like other women, she may lose ground in the process." Still, she does not see much of a choice right now. Madeline is discouraged about the prospect of firms encouraging lawyers to reduce their hours or take a leave of absence and then return without penalty: "We know that in corporate America [as opposed to law firms], there is far more flexibility and a recognition that a few months or even a year doesn't mean the end of a career."

Olivia had different fears than Madeline but also shared her worry about the pandemic's effect on women. She has been deeply involved in supporting female lawyers throughout her career, and she fears the loss of women due to the current strain of childcare and the billable hour. Olivia is focused on finding ways to support working parents in her firm and recognizes that there is "not one solution, or an easy solution." Olivia also touched on the loss of culture and connection with colleagues—from the front desk assistant to the associates she mentors to her fellow partners—that has resulted from the shift to remote work: "I miss seeing everyone, hearing about what's happening in each other's lives and just running into someone in the hallway. Working from home is easier in some ways but, inevitably, we are losing so much."

*"We know that in corporate America, there is far more flexibility and a recognition that a few months or even a year doesn't mean the end of a career."*

## "\$500 AND A LAPTOP WON'T CUT IT": COMBATING THE IMPACT ON WORKING PARENTS WILL REQUIRE COMPASSION AND A REALITY CHECK

With respect to support and solutions, Olivia expressed concern about the loss of connection: "Nobody feels comfortable just picking up the phone. We are so isolated, and it is hard to know how to communicate effectively. I try to reach out to associates to ask them what is needed and how I can help. But I know it's not enough." Still, she keeps trying and hopes that her firm's support for working parents will provide more relief. Olivia also has regular text exchanges with her fellow partners, and firm leadership has regular meetings by Zoom for all firm attorneys and non-attorney staff in which they share the state of the firm. She shared: "The pandemic has made it very clear how important it is to have the right people in the right positions in our firm. We are very lucky to have a compassionate leader who is regularly communicating. To lead people through this, we need grace under pressure, empathy and trust. This is an evolving situation, with multiple crises, and I am grateful to be part of a leadership team that is really trying to find solutions."

*"The pandemic has made it very clear how important it is to have the right people in the right positions in our firm. We are very lucky to have a compassionate leader who is regularly communicating. To lead people through this, we need grace under pressure, empathy and trust."*

Madeline firmly believes that firm leadership, "and I mean all firms," must address the "systemic issue of the lack of diversity and lack of female partners and leaders." In Madeline's view, "firms have not moved the needle and, until they realize that people develop in different ways and re-define the old standards, we won't see real change. The pandemic has exposed what has always been there. What will happen when clients start to ask where all the women have gone?" Madeline offered an example: "Working parents, especially women, are working twice as hard to bill the same hours as the non-working parents. They don't have the support for their kids or nearly enough time to get it all done. But firms are not looking at that reality and confronting the fact that real change is needed right now if we want to retain women." While she knows that some firms are conducting surveys and finding creative ways to provide support, "the simple reality is that for a parent who is struggling to cope with the continuing demand of clients, billing hours and caring for children with no real help or sign of relief, \$500 and a laptop won't cut it."

*"The pandemic has exposed what has always been there. What will happen when clients start to ask where all the women have gone?"*

## THEIR HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: FINDING NEW WAYS TO THRIVE

Both Olivia and Madeline truly hope for health for their families, friends and colleagues. Both also see true opportunity for more flexibility in law firms, the ability to allow people to work from home and a de-emphasis on the legal industry's insistence on "face time." Olivia shared: "I hope that my male colleagues will truly understand that when a woman has requested to work from home, it does not mean that she isn't efficient. It means that she wants to have flexibility and will likely be more efficient." Olivia also shared that leadership at her firm is considering the amount of office space they have and contemplating what they really need: "With the possibility

of people working from home more often, a firm's strategic planning may need to shift." She closed our interview by sharing that she hopes for "more compassion, understanding and healing."

*"I hope that my male colleagues will truly understand that when a woman has requested to work from home, it does not mean that she isn't efficient. It means that she wants to have flexibility and will likely be more efficient."*

Madeline shared very similar themes: "I really believe that our success in working virtually may mean that people can thrive in new ways and find stability and perhaps more balance when we are out of the pandemic crisis. My hope is for a calmer, steady state, that we truly find rest somewhere in this year of crises." She hopes that her kids, and all children, will be able to "cope with the losses they are facing and that perhaps there will be more opportunities when the world opens up again someday. There has been so much loss for so many people, in countless ways this year. My hope is for healing."

## COMMUNITY

In our final installment, we share the experiences of Michael\*, a stay-at-home dad supporting his wife, a partner at a large law firm, and their preschool-aged child; Julie\*, the wife of a partner from a global law firm, who works full-time in the corporate world, with two young children at home; Viraj\*, an 8-year-old boy whose parents are both senior lawyers at AmLaw 50 firms; Charlotte\*, a 9-year-old-girl whose mother is a partner at an AmLaw 50 firm and whose father also works full-time; and Danielle\*, an elementary school teacher in an affluent suburban school district who is married to an essential worker and has two young children of her own.



*\*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.*

### THE SPOUSES

When asked how she and her family have been doing recently, Julie hesitated and then responded, “we’re...fine.” She recognizes that, as hard as things have been for her family, they still have it better than many others. Julie is a busy professional and received a promotion during the pandemic, so her work schedule recently ramped up even more. Unlike “attorneys, [who] are pretty well suited to working remotely” with just a few technological tweaks, Julie works in a field “with operating businesses and real concerns about keeping employees safe while they are [physically] at work.” Managing the schedules of two working parents, plus a school-aged child and a preschool-aged child, has been a big task for Julie. In contrast, Michael reported that his family has “all been good” and has “a decent scenario.” Michael feels fortunate that he and his wife “have only one child,” who “is not yet in school,” and that “one of us works and the other doesn’t.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, Julie and her husband were playing “mind tricks” on themselves, thinking that this situation would pass rather than recognizing that it would persist for some time. She and her husband are both accustomed to having stressful jobs and demanding schedules, so they initially “appreciated when the world stopped” and there was an opportunity to spend more “quality time with the kids.” But it got much harder for them as time went on and “people got bored.” Both Julie’s and Michael’s families have taken a conservative approach to staying safe during the pandemic. Michael noted that, as “first-time parents, he and his wife “are wiping everything down, which is an added step and frustration to keep it all sterile.” Michael and his family also have not been seeing anyone at all, even their parents, which has been difficult. “Managing the social norms and the awkwardness” around everyone’s different views on socializing has been hard for them. Similarly, Julie and her family have not been seeing many people, and they also have experienced the “strange social pressure to lean in or lean out, and neither feels that great.”

At some point, Julie realized that she and her husband could not continue to get through this time alone while navigating two very demanding careers. For a while, they had resorted to mapping out their schedules on a whiteboard, noting who had phone calls when, and they were literally tag-teaming their day. This approach was "super messy" and, in the evenings, they both hunkered down to finish getting their work done. Eventually, Julie worked out a nanny-share situation with another family, which "changed our lives as we opened up our bubble a bit and embraced a bit of socialization for us and the kids." Although this change did not come without additional stress regarding the risks, the two families have been taking safety seriously and are mindful about who they are each seeing outside the bubble. Still, it can be challenging to "lose an element of control" in this situation, Julie shared. Julie's kids recently returned to school, so she and her husband have a core part of the day back where they can focus and get their work done. The kids' schools are both running with limited schedules, though, so the family still relies on support from the nanny in the afternoons. Even with this support, though, Julie still finds herself working in the evenings to get it all done.

Both Michael and Julie have lingering fears and uncertainties as this situation continues. Michael feels like this is "Groundhog Day" and questions "when will this all be different?" He also worries that his child "will never know the difference, they won't even know a life before the pandemic." He thinks we may be a "masked society forever," and he worries whether a "vaccine will even help." Julie is concerned about the arrival of colder weather, which will render much-needed outdoors time more difficult and limited. With the weather shift also typically comes colds; Julie shared: "How are we to tell the difference between a fall cold and COVID?" Questions around the economy also weigh on Julie as she wonders where we will be after all this. Julie also shared a common theme: "We are totally over it and miss traveling and seeing family and friends." Michael and Julie both worry about individuals and families who are not doing so well right now and are grateful for how fortunate their own families are.

Julie and Michael have very different needs, but both expressed a desire for additional support. Julie shared that, although she is getting support from work, it feels very surface-level and she questions whether it is genuine. Being told to "do what you need to do" is not cutting it, she said; she would prefer that her employer take a more "proactive stance on flexibility." Many of Julie's co-workers and employees "don't have kids, are men with support from a spouse at home or just aren't as concerned about getting sick." Doing what she needs to do looks very different from what others might need to do. Michael's concerns were much more political as he feels there is no national direction at the moment, which "makes finding our own way harder than it should be."

All in all, Julie and Michael are both still able to see the upside in that they are all healthy and have this additional time with their kids. Michael is enjoying family walks around the neighborhood, and Julie is still exercising when she can, which helps a lot. Julie and her husband are even fitting in a socially distanced patio drink with a friend from time to time. When asked what is working well for them now, Julie noted that they have their routine down: "It is a messy routine, but we have it down."

## THE CHILDREN

For Viraj, what most stands out about the past six months is "online learning" and "Zoom calls." In some ways, he liked remote learning in the spring because, without being confined to a "certain time" to complete his schoolwork, "it was easier to get [it] done." In other ways, though, he did not like remote learning; "you were on a screen too much, and I don't like being on screens a lot." Charlotte shared similar sentiments. On the one hand, being "at home" and having "less schoolwork" in the spring made it "easier" for her "to have time to think." "We're not in class, there's no whispering, we're not being timed—that's pretty nice," she shared. On the other hand, Charlotte also has reservations about the additional screen time she has had during the pandemic: "It used to be just a little iPad in the morning. Now it's big TV in the morning, then iPad, then Roblox, then computer, and on and on. I don't really like that. I don't want to be a screen maniac. I'm glad to go back to school."

It has been very challenging for Charlotte to "not see anybody—my friends, my teachers." She "remember[s] being in class on the last day of school and we'd heard that the virus was in China, but we thought, 'it's not going to be here.' That night we found out schools were closing." After having not "even seen [her] school building in months," Charlotte will be "really glad to see everyone and my school again," when hybrid learning starts this fall. "I don't even know when school is starting or who will go on the same days as me," she shared, "but I'm just glad my school is opening because most schools aren't." Like Charlotte, Viraj is very excited about "seeing [his] friends" and "finally being close to people" when he returns to school this fall. As Charlotte gears up for the new school year, she is "nervous about the same things [she's] nervous about every year," like having a new teacher and being in a new area of the school building. This year, she also is worried that her friends might not recognize her when school starts "since we've been apart so long!"

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Charlotte and Viraj have concerns outside of school as well. In general, it has been "crazy" and "surprising" for Charlotte to be "living in a pandemic;" she "never thought that would happen to" her. "It's crazy how many people could get this," she shared. "It's scary. It could be people I know. I haven't really enjoyed this experience at all. It wasn't that great. The cons definitely outweigh the pros here. Thousands of people are dying. My friend's grandpa died, I think." Charlotte also continues to find it hard to be "cooped up": "We don't get outside every day, and every single thing is virtual, even camps. I feel like I'm going crazy!" Charlotte joked that one of the easiest things for her and her sibling right now is "messing up our playroom! It's funny but also true. We've been having babysitter interviews and there's always Monopoly on the floor, books scattered. The only civilized place in the room is my desk!"

*"It's scary. It could be people I know. I haven't really enjoyed this experience at all. It wasn't that great. The cons definitely outweigh the pros here. Thousands of people are dying. My friend's grandpa died, I think."*

For Viraj, it has been difficult to wear a mask; "it kind of hurts my ears a lot," he shared. It also has been "really different being six feet apart from somebody or wearing a mask all the time." Still, now that Viraj has "gotten used to" seeing people outside his family only from "far away" or while wearing a mask, he has found that "it's not really so bad." Having temporarily left the city this past spring, Viraj also recalls the challenge of "moving a lot, driving a lot. It was kind of hard because I wasn't where I should be normally, and it felt different." Moving "from place to place...so many times" was not easy for Viraj. Both Charlotte and Viraj struggled to think of something in their lives that feels the same as it did before the pandemic. Viraj does not know "what feels most the same because most of it is really different. We were in different places and doing school on an iPad instead of near people." Charlotte quipped, "What hasn't changed? I'm still seeing my friends daily. It's on Zoom, though, so it's not the same."

Despite these challenges, both children have found some silver linings. Charlotte appreciates "being with [her] mom and dad more," especially since pre-pandemic she would not see her "mom at night some days." According to Charlotte, "it's good to spend this time with them—but six months straight is a little much!" Charlotte also is glad that the world is experiencing less pollution "since we're not outside as much," and she has appreciated receiving additional and bigger technological devices, since they help her and her sibling with "schoolwork and with having Zooms at the same time." For Charlotte, the silver linings end there: "I can't come up with any other things with all these people dying." Viraj shared a similar sentiment when asked about the best part of the past six months: "I don't know. It's pretty hard to find what the best thing is." Ultimately, Viraj shared that visiting his grandparents, after having been separated from them for much longer than he is used to, was the best part. If Viraj could make a wish related to this experience, he would wish "for coronavirus to stop." Charlotte "would wish that we still had to stay home and still had a global crisis because some good came out of it. But I wish it wasn't coronavirus...and I wish no one got hurt and no one died."

*"I can't come up with any other things with all these people dying."*

Charlotte and Viraj share similar hopes for the coming months. Charlotte hopes for a "vaccine for coronavirus," to be able to "see [her] friends again," to stay "back in school" and for "everything [to be] better than before." "Coronavirus can't go on forever," she said. "People won't let it go on forever, I hope." Viraj hopes that "coronavirus [will be] over," "things [will be] back to normal," "we're not online for school," "we don't need to wear masks" and "we can stay closer to each other." In the meantime, Viraj wants more "assignments that you could actually write instead of doing on the computer," and Charlotte wants more "cake, books, a robot...and physical contact—as long as we're seven feet away, wearing masks and not in big groups. Oh, and more people wearing their masks."

## THE TEACHER

When Danielle reflects on the past six months, "guilt and stress are the dominant feelings." "My thoughts are all over the place," she shared, "and that sums it up." Danielle wrestled this spring with the "guilt" that she felt while balancing work with caring for her own two children: "In a way, I was showing them that other children were more important than they are—because it's my job to spend time with other children. My kids feel that." Danielle also "had a really hard time

juggling too many things." Being the sole caretaker for her children as her husband worked outside the home and also teaching remotely took a toll on her: "It felt like ping pong balls. I couldn't 'clear the mechanism.'" She "couldn't calmly focus when teaching on Zoom with [her] kids in the background," and the "anxiety in [her] grew." "I felt violated," she shared. "When I was Zooming with my class (and their parents) and my kids were stepping in, it was too much overlapping in an unhealthy way." This "collision of everything in one space" was really difficult; when Danielle recently had a planning meeting with her fellow teachers on Zoom and her children interrupted, she "almost had a PTSD moment." Because she realizes that she needs to "focus on one thing at a time," she has made the "hard decision" to send her children to daycare this fall. "When I'm 'at work,' I need to be 'at work.' I can't be focused only on my kids' safety, and I made peace with [my decision to send them to daycare] to ease the burden," she shared.

*"In a way, I was showing them that other children were more important than they are—because it's my job to spend time with other children. My kids feel that."*

Danielle's self-care routines have suffered during the pandemic, and she longs for more time to herself: "I'm a little introverted; I like alone time. I like to read, watch a movie, go shopping by myself. I didn't realize what I did to care for myself until I didn't have it anymore." Without this time to recharge, Danielle has felt "like a loose cannon sometimes, like [she's] not able to hold everything" she usually holds: "I felt myself go from 0 to 10 a number of times, without any thought process in between—with my colleagues, my spouse, my kids." And, because Danielle is "lacking self-care," it can be hard for her "to hear about other people's problems when they seem to have it easier" than she does.

Still, Danielle has found some positive experiences during this time. She appreciates that life "became simpler": "Some things I cared about, like my own kids' activities and academics, I learned to let go of. My kids are happy playing in the backyard. And, even if on paper they aren't where they 'should be,' they've learned lessons about how to handle the world." She also has found that "things come around" with her own children academically; she "could let up a little bit" and does not need to be "so hard on [her]self as a parent." Danielle is grateful for her children's "ages and innocence and flexibility" and for "having childcare [she] trust[s]" and on which she can rely this fall. "My kids are at an age where they'll be ok. This is part of their learning experience. I still feel guilt, but, when I really stop and think, my kids are completely happy," she shared.

*"I felt myself go from 0 to 10 a number of times, without any thought process in between—with my colleagues, my spouse, my kids."*

When Danielle reflects on the support she needs, she thinks about "emotional support—true understanding of where I'm coming from; for my students' parents to say, 'I get you' and 'thank you.'" She shared: "At the end of the school year, one parent said, 'I know what you just did. Listen, this was hard. You did this and you have two of your own kids at home.' I don't need accolades—but acknowledgement, saying 'I saw you through all of this,' means a lot." She wishes that others would ask her, "how do you feel about this?" and "what's your perspective?"—and be "willing to hear the answer." "Unless you live in someone else's shoes," she shared, "you can't understand their experience. Having to explain a lot to get someone to understand makes this all even harder."

It has been challenging for Danielle to worry about the impressions that her students' parents have of her and to compare herself with other teachers: "I can be jealous and compare myself with colleagues and friends who have different situations, like teachers without kids or whose kids are grown." She also wonders whether her students' parents "know how much work it takes to give them what they want, to give them 'the best' and to go 'above and beyond.'" "I think about that a lot," she shared. "I'm an overachiever, a perfectionist. You kill yourself. You worry that [the parents are] thinking I didn't give them enough information, I'm not communicating enough, I'm not fun enough, I'm boring, I'm not trying enough. I realized as a parent that I don't think like that about my own kid's teacher, so that taught me a bit. But I still want to do the best I can and be known as 'amazing.'" To Danielle, "it feels like there's an unspoken expectation to give [her students' parents] 'the best.' And, in this scenario, I think they're assuming I'm not doing everything I could be doing for them." She sees a contrast between her perception of what parents think makes an "amazing" teacher and what she thinks makes an amazing teacher. In Danielle's mind, her students' parents think a teacher is "amazing" if she "communicates [with them] often" and "tailors [her] lessons" to their specific children. "You could be talking to parents all day. Everybody is needing you; parents are looking for answers, saying 'help me,' wanting us to bend over backwards. How can I do that? And at what expense?" Danielle thinks a teacher is "amazing" when she can "connect with [her] students" and "you can see that [she] loves what [she] do[es]." At the end of the day, Danielle is committed to doing her "best in all [her] roles—mom, teacher, everything" and to "being there for everybody in the best way [she] can." Through it all, she hopes her students' parents can remember this: "I'm going through this too, with my own family. I'm going through the same things as you right now."

*"You could be talking to parents all day. Everybody is needing you; parents are looking for answers, saying 'help me,' wanting us to bend over backwards. How can I do that? And at what expense?"*

As she looks ahead to the fall, Danielle feels daunted by the prospect of "going back to a profession that doesn't look anything like the first twenty years" she did it. "Everything I've been taught and believe about education is out the window," she shared. "I feel like a first-year teacher all over again. I feel unsure, uncertain; it's all very different. And we're just expected to do it." Because "it's so layered what teachers do—right down to our environment, our classroom," Danielle finds it "frustrating to feel like the community thinks what teachers do is easy," and she hopes that more people will start to "understand where teachers are coming from." "As teachers," she and others are "living something that looks nothing like what we wanted to do." Still, they "want to make it work because we care about the kids." So, despite the many "unknowns" and "barriers this year," Danielle is committed to "being flexible" and "learning" what she "need[s] to do to continue in this profession and continue loving it."

*"I feel like a first-year teacher all over again. I feel unsure, uncertain; it's all very different. And we're just expected to do it."*

## PROJECT WRAP-UP

As we grappled with how best to conclude our "Parents-In-Law" Project, we had mixed feelings about what to say. How could we properly share our thoughts in a powerful way? How could we maintain the momentum? And this is where we landed: we will not conclude here. Our hope is that this project is *a beginning*. Still, it feels important to share a few thoughts as we move from our interview series into the next phase of Volta's commitment to working parents in the legal industry.

The genesis of the "Parents-In-Law" Project came from the 2018 Volta Forum.

The Forum was a day of collaboration, innovation, learning, creativity and fun. As we learned how to engage in design thinking, the power of peers was palpable in the room. On that day, we at Volta asked our clients to be curious, to collaborate, to lean into the uncomfortable and to learn from one another. Fast forward to August 2020 and Volta's care for, and commitment to, the legal industry. As we contemplated hosting another Forum—virtually, of course!—we realized that the themes we were hearing from working parent clients needed attention and thought—*right now*. Knowing the intensely difficult confluence of demanding workdays and caring for children with little to no support, we committed to sharing information and collaborating in a way that felt accessible and manageable. What emerged from this dialogue was the "Parents-In-Law" Project.

Our goal through the project was to shine a light on the experience of a few as a means of opening a broader dialogue in our community about how the parents among us are doing.

As these interviews have shown, each person's experience is unique and yet there are common threads that we hope will inspire our community to act and to keep asking questions. We have heard that nearly every working parent feels overwhelmed. Some of that overwhelm takes the form of sleep deprivation, fear of losing employment or crying behind a closed bathroom door; in other instances, the overwhelm manifests in a myopic focus on changing every door knob in the house, or a quiet hope that someone asks the simple question, "How can I help you right now?" What we know is that the parents are most certainly *not alright*.

While Volta cannot offer one simple solution, we did take away some ideas from our interviews and wanted to share them with you. These ideas are consistent with solutions that our team recently proposed [here](#). Click on the themes below to read more.

## INDIVIDUAL OUTREACH

Many of the lawyers and professional staff with whom we spoke have felt like their supervisors and teams have been checking in with them only on a surface level, if at all. And, across the board, the people we interviewed long for more. They want their leaders to ask them truly curious questions about how they are doing and what they need. As organizations consider the next phase of support for their lawyers and staff and their families, we invite firm leaders, practice group leaders and team leaders to ask themselves and their colleagues some of the questions we used in our conversations, such as: "What are you experiencing in this moment? What feels challenging for you now? What might be another way to look at this? What feels easy right now? (Pro tip: prepare for the person to say "nothing.") What do you have? What do you need? If a genie could grant you one wish, what would it be? What do you want more of? What do you want less of? What does support look like? What judgments are you making about yourself? What judgments are you making about others? What would you have if you could be 10% more compassionate to yourself? What are you committed to? What are you longing to be asked? If you could say anything, what would you say?" These questions signal curiosity and open-mindedness, both of which are desperately needed right now. When asked by a leader, colleague or coach, these questions may lead a working parent to find a new perspective and identify additional coping strategies.

## COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Our conversations confirmed that working parent affinity groups offer a much-needed sense of camaraderie, and many appreciate the benefits being provided through these groups. Although some report "Zoom fatigue," many also have appreciated other opportunities for connection with colleagues, particularly where families are visible and welcome. We hope that organizations will continue to provide and expand upon these types of opportunities.

## EMPATHY AROUND BOUNDARIES AND FLEXIBILITY

A central theme of our interviews was that, without the physical separation of home and office, boundaries are being seriously tested. There is no longer any type of standard workday, or even workweek. At the same time, weekends also look different on the home-front with parents needing more time available to care for and creatively entertain their children, which leaves even less time to respond to weekend work requests. And, depending on their family structures, financial resources and other considerations, different working parents are experiencing wildly different levels of child-care responsibility. In these circumstances, we encourage team leaders to foster an atmosphere of flexibility and acknowledgement of team members' unique situations and constraints, which will help team members feel supported and motivated. And we encourage team members to communicate with their leaders and teammates about what they need.

## TRANSPARENCY AND ASSURANCE

Many of the law firm lawyers and business service professionals with whom we spoke conveyed concerns about having lower billable hours for this year and about the potential for

compensation-, advancement- or job-security-related consequences. They are eager for transparency, understanding and assurance from their firms about what this year means with respect to their careers. Some wish for a formal, temporary reduced billable hours expectation; others long for an informal acknowledgement that this has been an unusual year and will not impact the future. All hope to feel valued by their organizations. As our interviews with firm leaders demonstrated, firms' decisions around these and other issues have been "agonizing."

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-CARE AND BREAKS

Our interviews made clear that opportunities for self-care and time away from work are scarce—and essential. While webinars on time management and subscriptions to meditation apps are helpful and should continue, people also need intangible support on this front. In particular, leaders should actively and genuinely encourage their people to take time off.

Several of the working parents with whom we spoke noted that additional financial support, whether childcare stipends, meal support or something else, would be greatly appreciated. Many struggle to afford the amount of childcare they currently need in order to get by, and many find it difficult to keep up with meal preparation and other household duties. While this type of support would not fix everything, it would provide actual and symbolic value to those who need it.

These ideas are simply a starting point.

As we continue to work together as a community to support working parents, we know the following to be true: in the words of Robin Chase, co-founder of Zipcar, there are always more smart people outside your organization than inside it. Connecting not only with the people who work at your firm but also with your peers in other firms will speed the pace of innovation and will help to minimize mistakes. You are surrounded by dynamic, experienced, smart peers who are more accessible than ever right now thanks to 2020's hyper-connected digital experience. There is true magic when we come together and share ideas, stories and struggles. So, this is not our wrap-up of the Parents-In-Law Project. Instead, it is our request that each person reading this take one step to continue the conversation to support the working parents in our community. And maybe, just maybe, we watch as something miraculous unfolds.



# Call It a Crisis: Law Firms Need to Quickly Respond to Needs of Working Parents

Whitney Beard + Malini Nangia · August 13, 2020



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Imagine you are on the leadership team of any large organization in this country. A tornado has torn through a city where the majority of your employees live. Or a wildfire has leveled the homes of people who work for you. Perhaps some other unforeseen tragedy has both individually and collectively rocked large swaths of your workforce. What measures would your organization take in such a situation? Hire counselors to help your team members grieve, talk about it, and start to plan what comes next? Reach out personally to particularly hard-hit employees to offer support or ask what might help? Consider allocating funds or other resources that show your solidarity with your people through a difficult time?

**Consider this: The parents who work for you are currently living through a crisis.**

And they have been for five months. It is by no means over, nor is it showing any signs of resolving. In fact, ask any parent and they will tell you their deepest fear is that this crisis will be with us for many, many months with no relief in sight. Meanwhile, these same parents are being asked to work and lead as if nothing has changed on the home front.

**In short: We are currently in the middle of a childcare crisis in this country. And parents are not alright.**  
(<https://gen.medium.com/parents-are-not-ok-66ab2a3e42d9>)

Your employees, especially those who have younger children, and, yes, disproportionately the moms, are operating in pure survival mode. In April 2020, the National Bureau of Economic Research published a Working Paper (<https://www.nber.org/papers/w26947.pdf>) underscoring that Covid-19 may have a disproportionate impact on women. And what's so surreal about it is there has been no national dialogue – no reckoning with the expectation that parents continue to be

fully productive at work while also caring for children who need near-constant supervision, direction and teaching.

This crisis is the source of too many consequences to list here. Among them are serious issues of equity, health and safety, and the future of public education. But the consequence we invite you to consider now is that your employees are in the midst of deciding what their future looks like and, in many cases, whether it includes you. In fact, a recent study suggests that 1 in 5 parents are considering leaving the workforce due to the impact of Covid-19 (<https://hicleo.com/blog/return-to-work-member-survey-results/>). Most recently, Goldman Sachs economists headlined that many parents may have to stop working entirely if schools don't open and Covid-19 could "tilt the scales back in favor of men" remaining in the workforce - here (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/04/economy/schools-reopening-economy-jobs/index.html>). Just imagine it for a moment. Right now, your high potential team members are wondering if it's really worth it to stay on this career path. Some of your most profitable associates are doing the math to see if they can live on one income and never return to your office again. The women you work so hard to retain are exhausted and at the end of their ropes. What are you doing to retain them? What have you done to acknowledge their struggle? How have you shown them that you are working just as hard as they are to try to figure out how to make this work for them?

**Given what's at stake, call it what it is: a crisis. Now, what can we do to try to address this crisis within the legal industry? Here are some of our ideas.**

1. Individual Outreach. While employers have historically behaved, for the most part, as if their employees' personal and family lives stopped and started at the door of the office, COVID-19 is breaking down this traditional separation. Homes have become workplaces that are now inhabited with children as *quasi* co-workers. As a result of this convergence, family circumstances have a direct impact on wellbeing, engagement, work productivity and bottom lines. To retain talent, it is imperative for firm leaders to initiate and enter into the discussion with worried parents and establish a framework for frequent

working parents and establish a framework for frequent check-ins. While leaders may develop the framework of those conversations in conjunction with HR, it is important to recognize that no two conversations will be identical given the unique makeup and circumstances of each family. As such, creating space for a dialogue between each employee and the leaders with whom they work is crucial to identify their specific pain points and potential solutions. Having such conversations in earnest and listening to the concerns of each employee can help to shore up their engagement and, potentially, lead to their retention.

2. Empower the Collective. Beyond individual check-ins, law firm leadership can also leverage collective platforms such as Working Parents' Affinity groups to enter into and stay in dialogue. From the law firm's perspective, affinity groups may be an opportunity to highlight firm resources, feature webinars on how to navigate issues relevant to parents, roll out initiatives and discover common problems parents face that the firm may be able to help with. Based on our experience providing coaching support for Working Parent Affinity groups, it is critical to select firm leaders who align with this group and encourage them to stay visible, active and highly engaged. To the extent your law firm does not have a Working Parents Affinity Group, here (<https://hbr.org/2018/11/how-to-launch-a-working-parents-support-group-in-your-organization>) is a great article to help you launch one.
3. Additional Support Mechanisms. Law firms may also consider a suite of additional resources, some micro-add ons and some more sweeping initiatives, to support working parents.
  - *EAP and Counseling Services*. Law firms can bolster and promote the use of counseling as a support for associate well-being, through EAP and other similar programs.
  - *Subscription-Based Services*. Subsidizing mindfulness/meditation subscriptions such as Headspace or Calm can be a tool to support your

employees' well-being.

- *Coaching*. Laser-focused coaching is a powerful tool to support lawyers in navigating the challenges and obstacles created by the pandemic.
- *Revisiting + Revising Flex Schedules*. Proactively encouraging and working with lawyers to take advantage of agile working and flexible-working arrangements without compromising work and advancement opportunities for those involved. To borrow from the parental leave framework, consider exploring a ramp down for a defined period of time without financial or other repercussions.
- *Revisiting Paid Family Leave*. Law firms can encourage attorneys to take advantage of statutory paid family leave. While this leave may not result in full income replacement, it can provide some level of compensation without an attorney having to resign and abandon the workforce entirely. Even further, law firms may elect to “top off” statutory paid family leave thereby getting an employee closer to total compensation levels.

Recently, many tech giants, such as Microsoft, are giving employees an additional three months of paid parental leave to deal with extended school closures in Covid-19. Employees can elect how they utilize the leave (consecutive or a few days at a time) in a program at Microsoft called “12 week Paid Pandemic School and Childcare Closure Leave (<https://hrexecutive.com/microsoft-offers-employees-12-weeks-of-paid-parental-leave-due-to-pandemic/#:~:text=Microsoft%20offers%2012%20weeks%20of%20paid%20parental%20leave%20due%20to%20pandemic&text=Microsoft%20is%20offering%20up%20to,all%20at%20once%20or%20intermittently.>)” Google

(<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/tech/google-family-leave-policy/index.html>) has also created a similar initiative. It remains to be seen whether law firms have the financial capacity to emulate Google

firms have the financial capacity to emulate Google and Microsoft initiatives.

- *Adjust Billable Hour Expectations.* One of the most stressful elements of any lawyer's job, even when there is no pandemic raging and their kids are able to attend school, is the billable hour. Fear of not hitting minimums set by firms can keep lawyers – in the best of times – from taking good care of their well-being, spending extra time with their families, and taking much needed vacation. During this crisis, firms could alleviate this drive to cut out self-care, downtime, and family time by reducing or even eliminating concerns over the billable hour. Consider making time spent caring for family or schooling children partially creditable or implementing a billable hour holiday during which billable hours expectations are reduced or eliminated.
- *Throw (More) Money at the Problem.* With schools staying closed, childcare and related education costs for your associates are skyrocketing. Parents are looking at additional monthly costs in the thousands of dollars to ensure that their children, who would typically be in school, are cared for and educated (and kept out of their busy parents' conference calls). These parents cannot be both fully-productive lawyers and full-time educators and caretakers. Whatever firms can do by offering stipends or bonuses to parents to help defray these costs will ease the strain on these employees.

4. Innovations in Childcare Benefits. This pandemic provides a unique entry point for employers to confront and tackle child-care challenges in such a way that may differentiate them in the gender and inclusivity landscape for years to come. In an August 2, press release, McDermott Will & Emery announced it will partner with Homethrive to offer employees family elder care benefits. Covid-19 affords a unique opportunity to reimagine the nexus between law firms and childcare in an attempt to not only retain working moms during the pandemic but to attract working moms long after Covid-19 is over. Initiatives

working months long after COVID-19 is over. Initiatives ranging from subsidizing at-home childcare or classes through platforms such as Outschool (<https://outschool.com/>) or offering virtual childcare through companies such as Flexable (<https://staging2.flexablecare.com/flexible-virtual-minicamps/>) may be forward-looking initiatives.

Partnering with childcare-providers like Bright Horizons to expand assistance may also provide a support structure for parents.

5. Transparent Commitment Across Law Firms. Finally, just as tech companies such as Zoom, Salesforce, Uber etc. have signed an “Invest In Parents (<https://www.axios.com/tech-companies-working-parents-coronavirus-cleo-576198cc-2127-4962-9713-2d2f21ec611f.html>)” initiative, it is imperative that the legal industry similarly demonstrate clear commitment to, and investment in, working parents. Such a collective action can build public pressure amongst law firms to provide better resources and support for working parents during this unprecedented time.

If law firms do nothing, or fail to respond to this crisis with real solutions, they run the risk of facing a long-term talent exodus as working mothers self-select out of the law firm workforce. As we said, parents – particularly moms – are not alright.

### **However, this is not a crisis without hope.**

It is actually an opportunity of epic proportions for law firm leaders to do what they do best – innovate, strategize, and solve complex, multi-layered challenges. If the parents who work for you were your clients, and they asked you to help solve this problem, what would you come up with? Don't shy away from this. Instead, bring the genius of your lawyers and leaders to the table. You might be surprised at the possibilities that emerge.



## 'My Career Is Basically Over': Working Parents Offer Pleas for Empathy From Law Firms

Whittney Beard + Malini Nangia · January 19, 2021



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Working parents find themselves caught in the crossfire—managing their lives and careers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and working through a child care crisis of epic proportions. The result? The potential for a long-term talent exodus that disproportionately impacts women and diverse attorneys or, for those who remain in the workforce, a professional framework that ends up unintentionally penalizing parents. The solution? Surprisingly, at least for a start, the demonstration of empathy and understanding by employers and leaders.

In “**Call It a Crisis**

(<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2020/08/12/call-it-a-crisis-law-firms-need-to-quickly-respond-to-needs-of-working-parents/>)” we flagged the damage being done to working parents by the pandemic and outlined several initiatives that law firms might take to mitigate the impact on this group.

Inspired by an overwhelming response to the article, we decided to ask parents what they needed, and to work on creating meaningful solutions and support. Thus, we designed the basis for this article, the Working Parents and COVID-19 Survey, the objectives of which were two-fold: to gather specific data on the impact of the child care crisis for lawyers, and to support and contribute to the design of real-world solutions across the legal industry.

## IDENTIFYING THE IMPACT

Before adopting a solutions mindset, it is critical to clarify exactly what are we solving for. What are the specific pain points for working parents in the legal field? Through our coaching and our work in support of working parent affinity groups at law firms, we have found that this population is experiencing unique challenges to stay afloat professionally while homeschooling and keeping their family lives running. We know this pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on working parents. However, we wanted to better

understand what specifically has been hard about working and parenting through the pandemic. For that reason, the first part of our survey examined what has been most difficult for lawyers in their personal capacity, as parents, and then in their professional capacity, as lawyers.

Respondents indicated that managing stress and mental health/well-being was the single most difficult thing they contended with as parents. “I am never not parenting or working,” and I am “always on” and operating in a “24 hours, seven days a week” reality were frequent themes. Our finding for working parents in law is consistent with the broader population, as evidenced by the American Psychological Association’s **statement in May 2020** (<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/stress-in-america-covid.pdf>) that reflects “American parents are, on average, feeling significantly higher levels of stress than adults without children” due to the pandemic. The second-most-difficult issue respondents contended with as parents was homeschooling.

When respondents were asked to drill down on what in their professional lives, as lawyers, has been most difficult, one-third of all respondents said managing workload was the most difficult issue they faced, followed by staying motivated. “Finding enough hours in the day to get billable hours in,” “lack of uninterrupted work time,” “managing to maintain billable hours with all the other additional responsibilities, including homeschooling, that has been thrust upon me” and “juggling work and homeschooling during the day,” were common themes.

Prior to the pandemic, working parents relied on school, enrichment activities and outsourced care to get their jobs done. With child care options gone overnight and schools closed, two things become abundantly clear: adding homeschooling to the already full plate of working parents has a direct impact on their ability to manage their work and get it done at pre-COVID levels, and the mental health/well-being reservoir of working parents is rapidly depleting (if not already depleted).

## WHERE EMPLOYERS HAVE SHINED

We asked respondents to tell us about the best thing their employer did in response to the crisis. Almost 90% of respondents took the time to provide narrative feedback about their employers. Their responses fell into three distinct categories: efforts to shift the way work gets done; offers of compensation, benefits or stipends; and expressions of support, empathy or transparency.

By far, the most meaningful efforts by firms were to shift the way work gets done, including:

- Remote work (29%): allowing and encouraging remote work, communicating regularly about how long to expect remote work arrangements to last, and affording working parents the autonomy to decide whether to remain working remotely longer than mandated by the government or by their firm; and
- Flexible work (20%): shifting expectations about when work gets done, when meetings occur, billable hours expectations, and reduced hours arrangements.

Next, respondents valued firm initiatives to provide compensation or other financial relief to their lawyers. These included:

- Technology stipends or direct-shipped technology to enable a seamless transition to remote working (10%);
- COVID-19 bonuses, unchanged salaries and/or salaries restored to pre-COVID levels after initial austerity measures were put in place (7%); and
- Offering child care stipends or back-up care, as well as additional leave (2%).

Unsurprisingly, 16% of respondents took the opportunity to praise efforts at outreach, empathy and transparency on the part of their employers. The things respondents appreciated the most were:

- Efforts at transparency, communication and maintenance

of connection by the employer, through regular calls, affinity groups and events aimed at improving morale (9%); and

- Outreach and acknowledgment that leaders understood the burden on the individuals (7%). Respondents praised “acknowledgement of the challenges through communications from management” and appreciated when “leadership embraced the pivot,” “projected a message of support” and it was made “clear that firm leaders are also struggling with these issues.”

## WHERE ARE THE GAPS?

In response to the question, “If you could ask your employer for the support you need now, without fear of judgment or a negative impact on your career, what would you ask for?” the top six answers were:



### Empathy and Understanding

Mirroring what respondents shared about what employers have gotten right, it is clear from these responses that greater efforts at expressing empathy and understanding would have a high return. Employers often assume that what employees really want is more financial benefits, and thus find ways to spend money to solve the problem. Financial solutions are also

often the easiest thing for employers to give. But, what the Covid-19 crisis seems to be revealing is that lawyers want understanding from their leaders—they want to work for and with people who care about them and their families and who understand that this is an atypical situation that may not reflect their optimum performance as an employee. Ultimately, working parents fear their careers will be harmed and defined by their performance during the pandemic. For instance, one respondent shared their worry that they wouldn't "be considered for promotion or no longer viewed as high potential" because of the pandemic.

Employers should engage in genuine outreach, expressing authentically held concern as well as curiosity about what parents need while making good-faith efforts to take action on what gets shared. Law firms should strive to create cultures where working parents do not feel they are being faulted for being parents. Seeing lawyers as whole people with lengthy careers that are worth investing in—both in times when they are able to be maximally productive and during times when they cannot. Paradoxically, this may be among the hardest things to offer if firm leaders are not clear about how to, or bought into why they should, express genuine empathy and concern. As a starting point, we invite you to visit **Volta's Parents-In-Law Project Wrap-Up** (<https://www.voltapeople.com/parents-in-law-project-wrap-up>) for ideas.

Somewhat related to this need for empathy is the request by over 40% of respondents that the reality and impact of the pandemic be taken into account at performance review time. This suggests what lawyers are asking for is that their employers understand their unique challenges, and be willing to acknowledge the struggle and sacrifice parents have made to continue working at all while the pandemic rages and they manage busy households and homeschooled children. Employers need to create strategies for how to provide fair and legitimate feedback to their lawyers while also broadening the lens of their reviews to account for the reality of each employee's "whole life" in 2020.

**Flexibility, Flexibility and More Flexibility**

After empathy, the next four most important places for support were related to flexible work: time off, reduced billable hours expectations, and flexibility in work arrangements.

### **Part-Time Programs Are Essential**

Well over half of respondents have thought about reducing their work hours since the crisis began. Nearly a quarter have asked, or plan to ask but are not sure how to go about it. Further, about one-third would like to go part-time but cannot seriously consider doing so, whether that is because of the financial toll of such arrangements, the availability and practicality of such programs, the impact on career prospects, the possible failure of such arrangements, or some other reason.

The implications are clear: If nearly 57% of your working parent lawyers would like to reduce their work hours, but only 12% have asked, what is to be done for those who have not asked and possibly never will? What is the predictable outcome as the pandemic wears on and rates of burnout increase?

Further, of the 75 respondents who identified as people of color, 59 of them (79%) said they have thought about reducing their work hours as a result of the pandemic. Assuming the same fears around the success of such arrangements or the potential damage to long-term career prospects hold true, this would potentially further dilute opportunities for advancement and retention of diverse lawyers by their firms.

### **Parents Are Feeling a Financial Strain**

While two-thirds of respondents reported that they are not spending more on child care due to COVID, 33% are spending significant amounts of extra cash to keep their kids occupied while they work: 11% are spending up to \$1,000 extra per month; 10% are spending between \$1,000 and \$2,000 extra; and 12% are spending more than \$2,000 extra.

### **What If Employers Do Nothing?**

One of the most interesting data points relates to how many parents are looking for new jobs as a result of COVID-19. Almost 20% of respondents said they have accepted, are

looking for, or planning to look for a new job as soon as the pandemic eases. Another 26% would like to change jobs, but aren't likely to follow through. That means almost half of respondents are seriously thinking about leaving their current employment as a result of COVID-19. Of that half, about 35% are lawyers working in law firms larger than 700 lawyers. If we include firms with 250 or more lawyers, that figure increases to 52%. In fact, 71% of the respondents who are thinking seriously about changing jobs work in law firms). This seems alarming to say the least—assuming firms have worked hard to train and retain this talent pool, made up mostly of women (85% of respondents identified as female).

In addition, these numbers are in stark comparison to typical associate attrition rates which **Laterally reported** (<http://blog.laterally.com/blog/2020/2/12/7s30yki4lp6tr1szjxjj3efupaqeg#:~:text=Attrition%20is%20a%20fact%20of,20%20lawyers%20a%20decade%20later.>) was on average 16% per year at Am Law 100 law firms. It is difficult to draw stark conclusions from this information because there is no solid pre-pandemic data available around what percentage of lawyers are thinking about or in the process of changing jobs. Mid- to high-level attrition rates in law firms are common, but it remains to be seen if there will be a much higher exodus of talent once the pandemic is behind us.

As an additional complexity, non-white and Caucasian respondents (17.5% of those surveyed) had a markedly higher desire to look for or plan to take a new job once the pandemic eased. Twenty-seven percent of diverse attorneys expressed the desire to change jobs as opposed to 20% of their non-diverse counterparts. This is in contrast to pre-COVID analysis of minority associate attrition rates which a National Association for Law Placement and Major Lindsey & Africa survey **report at roughly 22%** (<https://www.law.com/2020/10/05/law-com-trendspotter-big-laws-lack-of-diversity-is-being-exacerbated-by-its-lack-of-creativity-part-i/>).

In addition to the number of diverse attorneys that either were looking for a job or would look once the pandemic eases,

another 26% of diverse respondents wanted to change jobs but were unlikely to follow through. Take this in. More than half of all diverse respondents (53%) would like to leave their current employment as a result of COVID-19. While the data suggests that the pandemic has yielded an extremely high percentage of working parents to consider leaving their current employer, the severity and prevalence of this is even higher within diverse populations. This is sobering data which forecasts a potential talent exodus as the pandemic begins to ease, with potentially disproportionate impact on diverse attorneys.

## THE COST

Survey respondents have sounded an alarm: The cost of the pandemic is burnout, diminished well-being and frustration over hampered career advancement. Perhaps the best way for us to demonstrate the risk is to amplify the voices of our survey's respondents. The following are comments made in response to the survey:

### Burnout and Diminished Well-Being

- "This is unsustainable long term"
- "I am worried about my ability to continue to balance it all, through more ups and downs, I will be crushed if schools close again"
- "This is ridiculous to pretend that money, health and child care concerns are not impacting me daily"
- "Not sure I can manage stress if COVID continues"
- "Mental and emotional exhaustion on top of out-of-control client 24x7 demands"
- "Lack of sustainability—I know that I cannot keep going at 200% forever and working fulltime and homeschooling is 200%. I fear burning out."
- "I can't do it all"

### Hampered Career Advancement

- "Inability to advance at my current employer but fearful of changing jobs"

- “Lack of time to make forward career progress”
- “Having colleagues without kids leapfrog over me”
- “Falling behind while others continue to progress”
- “Being seen as underperforming or making excuses and therefore not as valued or respected”
- “Setback to my career at a critical time”
- “My needs and challenges as a working parent have been exposed. I fear being seen as less committed.”
- “I think my career is basically over”
- “I don’t know if I will ever recover professionally”

Perhaps what COVID-19 has so exposed is not what happens when a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic throws a whole society into chaos, but rather, it has magnified how thin the margin for error is between success and failure for working parents in the legal profession. The pandemic is a powerful collective experience of isolation and loss of support. Typically, people deal with these situations individually, and for parents, events like this occur often—a child gets sick, a babysitter quits last minute, school gets canceled. While working parents are certainly not a monolith, during the pandemic, most working parents are facing somewhat similar facts, circumstances and constraints at the exact same time, and many parents are managing the downsides of the pandemic plus the near total loss of outside support for child care. This is magnifying how tenuous career success may be for working parents and the unsustainable nature of being both a high-performing lawyer and a working parent.

Working parents often rely on complex systems of support that enable them to succeed as lawyers—structures and systems that have been destroyed during the pandemic. Without employer intervention and support, working parents are struggling to perform at pre-COVID-19 levels, fearing stunted career possibilities and considering leaving the legal workforce altogether.

While no solution is ideal, this pandemic has surfaced a need that has always been present, but has been masked by its

t at as a ays bee p ese t, but as bee as ed by ts individual nature: the importance of viewing lawyers as whole people with full lives and long careers. The need for a workplace environment where we are not only as good as our last billable month or matter, but also valued for the quality of our lawyering, our client service, and our potential over the span of years, during which our capacity to perform at 110% may ebb and flow depending on what is occurring in other parts of our lives.

Perhaps what the pandemic can help us begin to appreciate is what has been needed all along. Parents in our ranks (and yes, mostly women) are managing families and practices at the same time, and their value as contributors must be viewed through a lens that takes account of more than a single fiscal year.



# DON'T FORGET THE WORKING PARENTS! 5 WAYS TO HELP ALLEVIATE PANDEMIC CONCERNS

By Randy Liss, Kara Dodson, and Malini Nangia

**A**s 2021 wraps up, we are that much closer to the two-year anniversary of this new normal. Almost two years ago, most of our offices shifted to “temporary” remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and we were thrown into the virtual world of doing business. In addition, restaurants and bars shut down, travel came to a halt, and schools closed for a “few weeks.”

Working parents don't need a reminder about how difficult and disruptive that last one was. They were faced with the impossible task of simultaneously managing their full-time jobs and their kids at home with no outlets for schooling, friends, sports, or activities. The gut-punch of virtual schooling began a couple weeks later and, while the kids now had something to do, many of them needed a parent beside them to help. Here we are, almost two years later and in the middle of the third school year affected by the pandemic, and the challenges continue for the working parents. Some offices have opened back up while others are set to open in the coming weeks

## Working parents are often engaging in multiple cycles of decision paralysis in any given one day.



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and months. While this transition back to the office is difficult for most, there are many unique concerns facing parents, particularly those with young, unvaccinated children.

As coaches, we hear a lot from our clients regarding their struggles with these issues. As parents ourselves, we know how they feel. Here are five of the more significant concerns that we hear almost every day.

### Parent Concern 1: Seesawing

It is important to understand where we are in this moment as we contemplate the range of issues. As working parents have continued to balance their children with their work this spring, people were looking forward to

summer vacations followed by a return to school and for many, a hope of “normalcy.” And as the Delta variant wave swept through the United States, dashing hopes of normalcy and stability, many already deeply fatigued working parents sank into a state of despair. The surge capacity upon which we relied to adapt and survive the pandemic is depleted. The optimism working parents had in May and June of this year disappeared quickly as COVID cases climbed dramatically. Reports of people feeling empty, anxious, exhausted, and hopeless have been repeatedly documented. As one [Washington Post article](#) aptly observed, “The problem is that most of us are incapable of processing the reality of a new pandemic. Not because we don’t understand math or have thrown caution entirely to the wind, but because our capacity to comprehend information with nuance, particularly information

about health, is gone. That capacity has not yet recuperated from the total exhaustion of the pre-vaccination months.” We are asking working parents to “run a half-marathon the day after running a marathon.”

### Parent Concern 2: Decision Paralysis

For almost two years, as the pandemic has raged on, individuals have been plagued with an extra layer of assessment and hypervigilance. Going to the grocery store is not just going to the grocery store. It may involve assessing what times are least busy, what stores adhere to COVID protocols in ways that are in congruence with your own personal protocols, which mask you need to wear, do you have sanitizer, etc.

For parents, this level of assessment and hypervigilance is compounded by the fact that individual decisions do not just impact them but rather, reverberate to their families, including potentially unvaccinated children. As such, each personal decision — ranging from going to a grocery store, to attending a birthday party or social event, deciding to return to school or homeschool, or participating in extracurricular activities — are plagued with permeations of “what ifs” and “what could happen.” Taking this analysis one step further, working parents also must contend with professional decisions including whether they should return to work in person, meet a client in person, or travel, and of course, what are the career consequences of not engaging in any or all of these activities?

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Confronted with a multitude of complicated choices with a seemingly infinite number of implications, working parents may often find themselves with decision paralysis (also known as choice paralysis or analysis paralysis). Simply put, this is a complete inability to come to a decision. The more decisions that are in front of us and the higher the stakes, the harder it may be to arrive at conclusion. Imagine this — working parents are often engaging in multiple cycles of decision paralysis in any given one day. Which grocery store? Should my child attend in-person soccer? Should I attend the in-person meeting? Such questions are all simultaneously spinning. The result? Fatigue, exhaustion and perhaps, complete inability to take action. Procrastination may occur.

### Parent Concern 3: **Shifting Priorities**

With all the uncertainty that parents were presented with at the beginning of the pandemic, they were forced to adapt. Many parents with school-age kids created daily schedules to help their children stay focused, complete their schoolwork, and take care of their responsibilities around the home. Other parents with younger children pieced together childcare options within their bubbles or, in many cases, parented all day and worked all night. Parents hid in closets and bathrooms for a little quiet so they could take phone calls. Parents had much more of an active role in the day-to-day activities with their families. In addition to

school-related involvement, and especially now that schools are reopened, parents of young kids are home in the morning, home when kids finish school, helping with homework, and eating dinner together. All while not commuting and having much more autonomy to still work hard, but on a schedule that works with them.

Over the past two years, the panic within the crisis evolved into the joys of reconnecting with our families, and many are conflicted now that they are being asked to give it all up again. As offices are reopening and people are expected to head back in, many are re-thinking their career goals and gaining awareness of how their priorities have shifted. What was important before may not carry the same value now. Everyone, and particularly working parents, is thinking differently about the time they spend in their cars or commuting on a train. They are hyper-aware of what they are missing, and they are considering their options to maintain some of their re-prioritized family and career goals. They are asking for more flexibility from their employers, and, in this bullish job market, they have the leverage to do so.

### Parent Concern 4: **Impact on Advancement**

Somewhat related, but very much deserving its own acknowledgment, is the impact that these shifting priorities — and in some cases the choice to continue working remotely — is

having on opportunities for advancement. Parents have been disparately impacted in this area and are having to make the choice between family and career. As noted earlier, this is an especially challenging circumstance to consider, particularly with unvaccinated children at home. Many parents with younger children fall into the senior associate ranks. Above these associates are partners trying to maintain their practices and meet the demands of their clients. Below them are junior associates, many of whom began their careers in a remote work environment and are eager to be back in the office for guidance and mentorship. These are critical years for this population of senior associates to continue to develop their skills, foster internal and external relationships, and build practices of their own.

Both the firms and associates have the responsibility to address this impact. Associates can enhance their ability to communicate their needs and gain clarity around what is expected to maintain the trust of those providing them with work. On the firm management side, there are tools within their workflow and assignment processes to support an objective approach to maintaining equity of opportunity. A little accountability along the way will help both the firms and their associates stay on track. What measurements of success can be put into place?

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## Parent Concern 5: Emotional Regulation

In a time of never-ending stressors, which can deliver a crushing blow to our mental well-being, the importance of emotional awareness and stress management tools has never been clearer. What we know is that emotional regulation is a modifier which helps us act in a way that is appropriate to the stimulus or stressor. Outsized emotional responses are unavoidable in the pandemic as working parents continue to navigate the instability. Something as simple as an overflowing trash can or an empty roll of toilet paper is capable of provoking rage. And yet in this time of heightened stress, as our children watch us, effectively managing our emotions is critically important.

One way to achieve this is to create the mental space to notice our emotions and rationally formulate a balanced response. The Yale Mood Meter ([moodmeterapp.com](http://moodmeterapp.com)) is one tool that helps us identify our emotions by evaluating the energy level and comfort/discomfort of a specific situation. The intentionally colorful tool is useful for parents and children to define a present emotion together, consider what may have caused the feeling, and understand the stressful situation. This purposeful pause creates an ability to choose our actions more carefully. Emotions are simply information, energy in motion, and the more we learn how to use that information, the more effective we become.

## Sending a Message of Empathy and Support

Organizations are managing the full range of issues right now as they transition their talent back to the office. Some are new issues, and some are new spins on issues that have haunted the industry for decades. As coaches, we hear exactly what parents are concerned about as well as what they need in this moment for support. We have found that empathy and flexibility around the issues parents are facing

will send a message of support and unity as they grapple with the emotional impact and their shifted priorities.

Additionally, regular communications around the transition back to the office, including discussions about shifting timelines, expectations, and guidelines, allow parents to plan accordingly and weigh their decisions. Parents will benefit from clearly defined expectations around time needed or required in the office and what the firm is doing to support their

growth when they are remote. As your organizations ponder these issues and continue to manage these transitions, please don't forget the working parents. +



Randy Liss

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with advancements and transitions, interview and job search techniques, leadership, professional identity and wellness. Randy has held leadership roles in law firm recruiting and professional development at AmLaw 100 firms in New York City and Denver where he led life-cycle recruitment and development initiatives. Randy completed his coaching certification through the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (iPEC).



Kara Dodson

**Kara Dodson** ([KDodson@foxrothschild.com](mailto:KDodson@foxrothschild.com)) is an ICF-credentialed coach and is the Director of Coaching at Fox Rothschild LLP, where she supports associates and partners to be as successful as possible,

focusing on whatever areas they need to make that success happen. Prior to joining Fox Rothschild, Kara spent six years at Volta Talent Strategies where she provided coaching and consulting services to multiple AmLaw 100 firms. Kara brings to her coaching work her 20+ years in the legal industry as a practicing attorney, a Talent Development professional, and a law school adjunct professor.



Malini Nangia

**Malini Nangia** is a former litigator and an ICF-credentialed executive and career coach. Currently, Malini is the West Coast CareerLink coach with Kirkland & Ellis LLP. Prior to joining Kirkland, Malini was a consultant

and executive coach with Volta Talent Strategies where she helped attorneys across practice areas and at all seniorities reach and reside in their professional sweet spot.

**From:** [Priddy, Melanie Renee](#)  
**Cc:** [Schwartz, Stacey](#)  
**Subject:** Working Parent Challenges  
**Date:** July 14, 2020 3:35:34 PM

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*To: All Personnel (bcc)*

We wanted to send a quick email to acknowledge an ongoing challenge that continues to become more complex, stressful, and difficult for so many of our attorneys and business professionals. While there are many advantages to working from the safety of our homes for the last several months, one of the ongoing challenges has been for our working parents. Whether you are a single working parent, one of two working parents in your household, or something in between – we know that this has been hard. This issue is compounded as more and more school districts are announcing plans for the fall which range from children in school for just a few days a week to 100% distance-learning, including yesterday's announcement for schools in Los Angeles County:

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-13/l-a-unified-will-not-reopen-campus-start-of-school-year>.

Another recent article in the NY Times described the difficult position that many parents find themselves in: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/02/business/covid-economy-parents-kids-career-homeschooling.html>

Unfortunately, as you know, there are no easy solutions to this issue. But we want to reassure you that the Firm has been discussing the impact on our community, and we are working on figuring out the best ways to balance both the needs of our employees and our business needs. In March, we created Katten Parent's Affinity Group that meets regularly. Their next meeting is scheduled for *Friday, July 24<sup>th</sup> at 3pm ET*. We encourage you to join the group and their discussions, as we use it as a resource for feedback on best solutions. We also encourage you to reach out with any questions, comments or suggestions to [Stacey Schwartz](#), our Professional Development Manager who has been leading our Parents Affinity Group meetings.

As a mother to two school-aged children, this challenge is very personal for me, and one that I know so many of you share. We look forward to working with you to come up with the best possible solutions to help further support our Katten community.

Thanks and please let me know if you have any questions or comments.

Melanie

**Melanie Renee Priddy**

Chief Talent Officer

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Draft:

## Katten Caregiver Survey for Parents

This survey will help measure the impact of coronavirus (Covid-19) on Katten parents and collect feedback on what they need to effectively work and care for their family.

Age of children in your household (please check all that apply):

0-5

6-12

13-18

Is the time you spend per week on childcare, education and household tasks significantly greater than prior to this pandemic? Yes/no

Are you currently experiencing school or daycare closures? Yes/no

If yes, do you have the alternative care that you need? Yes/no/sometimes

Do your children have all of the educational resources that they need (e.g., technology, tutoring/school work help, learning pods)? Yes/no If no, please explain.

Which Firm resources and benefits have you used to support you since March 13, 2020 (check all that apply):

- Part-time, Flex-time options
- Caregiver resources through Bright Horizons
- Employee Assistance Program resources
- Katten Parents Affinity Group
- Parenting Resources for Working from Home (Katten Intranet)

What additional resources would be helpful to you during this period?

The Katten Parents Affinity Group strives to provide programming and discussion topics that support the firm's parents. Have you found any of the following programs helpful (please check all that apply):

How to Talk to Kids About Racism: A Conversation With Pediatrician and Child Health Advocate Dr. Jacqueline Dougé

Coronavirus Parenting Series:

- Strategies for Staying on Track: An Open Discussion With Katten Parents
- Managing Your Children's Emotions and Your Own: A Conversation With Dr. Rebecca Schrag Hershberg
- Strategy Session for Back to School

I have not attended any of these programs

What topics would you like to see covered during future Affinity Group meetings?

Please provide any additional comments:

## Six Steps for Creating (and Sustaining) a Parents Affinity Group Today

Stacey Schwartz, Professional Development & Legal Recruiting Manager, Katten ([stacey.schwartz@katten.com](mailto:stacey.schwartz@katten.com))

Successful affinity groups provide mentorship, connection and belonging that, in turn, have an out-sized impact on satisfaction at work. This model can provide important benefits to parents, who experience unique challenges, questions and tradeoffs in intense professional environments.

Here are six steps to the successful creation and sustenance of a parents' affinity group in your firm:

**1. Be realistic about the lift.** Starting and managing a parents' affinity group, like any large-scale project, can be time consuming, particularly in a hybrid environment. There will be the initial effort involved in launching the group – email blasts, budget questions, event planning – followed by the more complicated work of keeping the group going. Make sure there is someone who can liaise with leaders, set up meetings with appropriate technology and follow up with plenty of reminders. You'll also need someone to facilitate the discussions and help the group to identify goals. Participants will have limited bandwidth for these tasks.

**2. Gauge interest and identify core members.** Find out who is in AND who is excited and driven enough take a leadership role. Word of mouth, surveys, lists of employees who have recently returned from maternity leave are all good places to start. Consider a pilot in a small office where interest is high.

**3. Dispose of threshold questions.** Make administrative decisions upfront about things like:

- Local office or firm-wide
- In-person, remote or hybrid
- Lawyers, business professionals or both
- Infant, toddler, school-age, tween or teen parents

**4. Identify the desired impact.** In a local office, a parents' affinity group can offer support and resources that save parents time, provide solutions to distracting problems and empower parents to successfully navigate and positively impact their children's development. A firm-wide parents' affinity group can spearhead programs on timely parenting topics and drive change in firm policies to make them more family-friendly.

At our firm, one local office parents' affinity group's lunch discussion topics ranged from the pros and cons of the Ferber method for sleep-training to how to talk to school-age kids about money and finances. Our firm-wide parents' affinity group has hosted programs on a wide range of topics such as educational and age-related issues, parental wellness and stress relief, and confronting social justice challenges.

**5. Encourage engagement at all levels**

Welcoming participation at the most senior levels on down contributes to a culture where parents feel they can be themselves. A parents' affinity group, like all law firm affinity groups, can be an opportunity deepen professional relationships and gain valuable work-related insight and informal mentoring from more senior colleagues, many of whom are just a few steps ahead in the parenting journey. It also provides partners an opportunity to "pay it forward" by being a mentor and coach.

**6. Keep the lines of communication open.**

Short, regular surveys are a great way to understand the immediate challenges working parents face and how the firm can best support them. A survey can help to uncover blind spots, establish trust and make parents feel heard. This is particularly important today in the midst of rampant burnout and unusually high turn-over in law firms.

Once you're informed, be sure to be responsive. At our firm, we have found one-on-one coaching to be one effective way to support parents' individual needs.