

Professionals demanding a work-life balance -- and backing it up

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TORONTO — Young professionals and managers are starting to rebel against the extreme work demands being imposed on them -- and will defect to employers willing to accommodate their personal lives, according to the authors of a survey released yesterday.

A survey of more than 1,400 Canadian lawyers found that 84 per cent of female law associates and 66 per cent of male associates rated "an environment supportive of my family and personal commitments" as an important factor in choosing to work at another firm.

The prospect of more money and better opportunities for advancement were well down the list of reasons that would make associates consider leaving their current positions, Toronto-based Catalyst Canada found in a research project supported by some of Canada's leading law firms. The survey also found that 62 per cent of female associates and 47 per cent of male associates expect to leave their current firms within the next five years.

"While the Catalyst study is based in the legal community, we know that work-life balance is everyone's issue, and while the experience of associates in Canadian law firms may be an extreme example . . . it's a subject of increasing concern for many industries," Susan Black, president of Catalyst Canada, said in releasing the research results.

"The newest generation to join the work force is demonstrating that work-life balance is of critical importance to them and to their overall satisfaction," Ms. Black said at the University of Toronto law school.

Professionals and managers are not covered by labour standards legislation restricting hours of work and, as a result, are often expected to work long hours in response to competitive pressures and customer demands, employment law specialists say.

Catalyst, a research and advisory group formed to support the advancement of women, found that making accommodation for people's lives outside of work cannot be dismissed

by old-line business executives as "a women's issue -- work-life balance issues are very serious for men, too," Ms. Black said.

Two of the law firms that sponsored the research, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP and McCarthy Tétrault LLP, have retained the services of Toronto-based consulting firm Parents at Work to advise working professionals about how to better manage the competing demands on their time. A number of major law firms have introduced flexible work arrangements for their associates and partners. Even so, their managing partners concede, the hours are long.

McCarthy Tétrault partner Linda Pieteron, a 41-year-old specialist in corporate law, said in an interview this week that, in private law practice, nine-to-five is considered part-time.

"It's very difficult for anyone in corporate law to try to leave at five. The phone is often still ringing . . . and if you are working on a big, multibillion-dollar deal, you need to be able to stay, do it, get it finished and not be too stressed about what's happening at home. That's where the support network really kicks in," said Ms. Pieteron, who gave birth to her third baby Saturday night.

McCarthy Tétrault has been "hugely supportive," said Ms. Pieteron, who is able to slow down her work pace a bit between "peak periods." She credits her husband, Paul Doyle, "a finance type" who works more regular hours, and a good, reliable nanny for helping with the home and family responsibilities when she is at work.

Ms. Pieteron plans to take a six-month maternity leave to look after her baby boy, as yet unnamed, and looks forward to the time with her older children, five-year-old Jack and two-year-old Nicole, before returning to full-time practice.

Kirby Chown, Ontario regional managing partner with McCarthy Tétrault, said her firm and others are particularly concerned about the number of young women who choose to leave the profession altogether.

In addition to the loss of talent, the Catalyst report estimated the cost of losing an associate at \$315,000 -- "approximately twice the average associate's salary" -- when recruitment and training costs are tallied.

Ms. Chown, who had twins in her first year of practice 23 years ago, said her firm is looking for ways to balance the needs of its young associates with the demands of clients.

At Borden Ladner Gervais, Joanne Poljanowski, a senior partner and a member of the firm's executive committee, is also grappling with these issues so top talent can be recruited and retained. Her firm and others have offered flexible work arrangements and part-time options to associates who need to get off the fast track for a while to take care of family needs. But, she said, it takes effort and planning to scale back the workload.