

## Beyond Policy: Creating a Culture of Flexibility

Flexibility is often associated with part-time schedules for mothers of young children. It is viewed as an accommodation where new mothers sacrifice career advancement for more time to devote to child care. Yet, this attitude prevents organizations from fully leveraging the power of diversity to attract, retain, and advance diverse talent.

The December 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversity Working Session discussed how to bridge the gap from flexibility policy to reality. The session was moderated by Deborah Epstein Henry, the founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers, LLC, a networking and support organization with a mailing list of more than 1,300 lawyers who work a flexible or reduced schedule in New York and Philadelphia. Panelists, Nancy C. Gardner, executive vice president and general counsel with Reuters America, and Lee Attanasio, partner at Sidley Austin Brown & Wood, LLP, shared their organizations' experiences with making flexibility a reality.

### Flex Facts

- ❖ 98% of law firm offices in New York City have a part-time policy (NALP, 2004)
- ❖ Yet only 1.1% of partners and 4.3% of associates in New York offices avail themselves of this option. (NALP, 2004)
- ❖ Among women law graduates of five top-tier law schools from 1970-1999, one-third have worked part-time at some point in their career (Catalyst, 2001)
- ❖ Only 22% of law firm women and 9% of in-house counsel women believe that using a flexible work arrangement will not jeopardize their advancement (Catalyst, 2001)
- ❖ Of law firm associates, 22% of men and 26% of women agree that flexible work arrangements are a viable option for those who aspire to senior leadership within their firm (Catalyst, 2001)

### Policy to Practice: Three Guiding Principles

1. ***The reason doesn't matter.*** There are numerous motivations for individuals to pursue flexibility -- elder care, religious observance, personal health issues, among many others. As Nancy Gardner states, "The reason is irrelevant. It's the neutrality of business impact," that should be the basis of the decision whether or not to allow a flexible work arrangement. In fact, both women and men avail themselves of flexible work arrangements at Reuters and Sidley Austin Brown & Wood.
2. ***Flexibility doesn't stand alone.*** Flexibility needs to be viewed as more than reduced hours and the ability to work at home on a regular or ad hoc basis. A part-time policy cannot be seen as the only, or the most important, mechanism to quell the high turnover rates of women and increase the partnership ranks. Advancement issues must also be addressed. Lee Attanasio discussed how flexibility was one component of the larger women's initiative at Sidley Austin Brown & Wood, which includes mentoring and networking, among other programs. As a result, in each of the last three partner classes, at least one new partner was working part-time.

3. ***Senior leaders set the tone.*** Nancy Gardner described how she accepted the corporate counsel position at Reuters because of the flexibility afforded her. She worked part-time until she became general counsel, and in her current role she champions formal as well as informal flexibility for the entire department. The participants also discussed the chairmen of two accounting firms who shared with their firm the challenges they faced in balancing work-life commitments, and their strategies for using informal flexibility to carve out family time without sacrificing their work performance.

To learn more about workplace flexibility or upcoming diversity working sessions, please see our Web site at [www.abcny.org](http://www.abcny.org), or contact Meredith Moore, director of the Association's Office for Diversity, at [mmoore@abcny.org](mailto:mmoore@abcny.org).