



Today's Topic:

Achieving Work-life Balance in a Law Firm

Guest Speakers:

Kathy Benton, Chief HR Officer, Alston & Bird
Stephanie Denkowicz, Partner, Alston & Bird
Mary Gill, Partner, Alternative Career Path Advisor, & Head of Women's Initiative, Alston & Bird

Lynn Carroll, National Director of Attorney Management, Bingham McCutchen
Will Perkins, Committee on Associates Deputy Co-Chair, Bingham McCutchen
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Facilitators:

Suzanne Vickberg, PhD, Consultant, Great Place to Work® Institute, Inc.
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Work-life balance is an ongoing struggle of many companies, and the challenge can especially plague law firms. The two firms showcased below, Alston & Bird and Bingham McCutchen, have risen to this challenge and as a result, their employees are benefiting from an uncharacteristic ability to balance the demands of work and personal life. In return, these companies have been publicly acknowledged time and time again for creating and sustaining a great workplace and are reaping the benefits of a motivated, dedicated, and committed workforce.

Alston & Bird

An Atlanta-based law firm with 1,600 total personnel, Alston & Bird has been consistently recognized as a great workplace, appearing on Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For*® list for seven years in a row with four years in the top 10, and ranking #19 on this year's list. This national firm was founded over a century ago and employs over 725 attorneys in five major markets (Atlanta, New York City, Washington, D.C., Charlotte, and Raleigh). Representing world-class clients such as UPS, Cingular, Wachovia, Bell South, and Delta, Alston & Bird has been recognized for its commitment to pro bono work, as a top legal advisor based on number of US deals and deal value, and for many of its other achievements.

At Alston & Bird, leaders credit their success in creating and sustaining a great workplace culture to the fact that they are always trying to become better: the journey never ends. Leaders of the firm recognize that the culture is at the foundation of their success and they are committed to preserving it. When asked what makes Alston & Bird a great workplace, most people would mention the culture of mutual respect. Everyone matters to the firm, regardless of what one does or where he/she does it. Employees appreciate management's transparency and openness in discussing financial information and strategic plans.

The work-life strategy at Alston & Bird is to provide a support system for lawyers and employees that allows them to provide consistent high-quality legal services to clients. The firm's competitive and comprehensive benefits program is designed to meet the diverse needs of all employees. Alston & Bird is particularly active on issues addressing women. Last year, the firm realized a need to revisit the existing policy for reduced hours. In place for 18 years, the policy was outdated and situations were being tackled on an ad hoc basis, which led to a lack of overall understanding on the firm's stance. A task force was formed to research and respond to this issue and employees were surveyed to understand what it was they needed to help balance their lives. From this process, a new alternative career path policy was born. The three hallmark components that led to its success are:

- An individual who has pursued an alternative career path or reduced/flexible scheduling is now eligible for partnership without first resuming a full-time commitment.
- There is no duration cap on the length of time someone can work under a flexible arrangement, and there is no specified formula for the number of hours to be worked or how they can be contributed under a flexible arrangement.
- There is now a position, currently held by Mary Gill, to act as an advisor of career-path alternatives. Mary's role is to educate employees and make sure they understand the policy and the options available to them.

Alston & Bird offers several other benefits to employees as part of their work-life strategy. Mary is also currently working to develop a peer networking system for young mothers coming back to work from maternity leave to answer each other's questions and learn from each other's experiences. The main office in Atlanta boasts an onsite, stand-alone childcare center, while backup childcare programs are available at the smaller sites. Alston & Bird offers generous infertility benefits, parental leave (up to 3 months paid in full for primary caregiver), paternity leave, adoption benefits, new mother nursing rooms, and concierge services to help employees with day-to-day tasks that are difficult to accomplish during the work day.

Bingham McCutchen

Boston-headquartered law firm, Bingham McCutchen, has just over 2,000 employees worldwide and is ranked #82 of Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For*[®] for 2006. The firm has been awarded for its efforts in the local San Francisco and Boston areas, being recognized as a great workplace and among the top law firms in diversity efforts – both for two years in a row. Much like Alston & Bird, Bingham McCutchen credits this recognition and its success to the culture. Stated simply, the people are happy.

Bingham McCutchen has been focused on work-life balance for a number of years and tackles the issue with a committee comprised of partners and associates representing all offices to ensure that issues and concerns of all are well-represented. The company believes that respect is the cornerstone of a great workplace and that enabling individuals to better balance their work and personal lives is a clear demonstration of respect. Work-life balance is one of the five key components of Bingham McCutchen's Excellent Diversity Action Plan, among leadership, communication, recruitment/retention, and training/mentoring/professional development. These five areas of action were identified through surveys, meetings, and focus groups with employees. Some examples of initiatives in place to support work-life balance at Bingham McCutchen are:

- Strong focus on **technology support** to meet client and staff needs. The organization provides Blackberrys, state-of-the-art communications systems to enable staff to log on from any location, and 24-hour IT support. In addition, attorneys are provided with laptops to work remotely.

- **Flexible work arrangements** allow individuals to work under a part-time or flexible arrangement to meet their specific needs. Individuals work with their group and supervisor to devise a plan that works for everyone. Currently, 92 attorneys firm-wide are working under a part-time arrangement, and last year two part-time attorneys were elevated to partner (making a total of 19 part-time partners), proving that taking advantage of this benefit will not hurt one's chances of growth in the firm.
- An **internal transfer policy** accommodates attorneys when a spouse or family member has to move due to a job relocation or family care issue. Bingham McCutchen encourages these transfers and will provide up to \$5,000 to support the move.
- Considered a leader in the market, the company's **parental leave policy** offers 14 weeks paid leave for a birth parent (6 weeks short-term disability followed by 8 weeks paid childcare leave). After 14 weeks, individuals then have the opportunity to extend leave for up to an additional six months (unpaid). Adoptive/non-birth parents are eligible for 8 weeks paid leave followed by the 6-month unpaid leave.
- A **new parents' group** has evolved over the years into a formal support network where employees can share the challenges of parenthood and balancing this with the demands of a career. What started as an informal gathering of colleagues is now encouraged and resourced by Bingham McCutchen, although the organization allows the groups to evolve organically so as to avoid forcing anything on employees.

Conclusion

While much of what is explained above involves policies and procedures, it is important to note that great workplaces are not built on perks and benefits alone. Those companies recognized as part of Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For*[®] are named so primarily by their employees according to how they respond to an employee survey. Both firms showcased here speak very clearly to the importance of the individual, and provide these benefits as a way to demonstrate the care for their employees. Alston & Bird states it well by explaining that their alternative career path is in place because the company understands that there are twists and turns on the road of life and without the flexibility, understanding, and accommodation from one's employer to get through these times, it is hard to imagine a long-term commitment. When life changes arise, these companies realize that providing the safety net for employees to fall back on keeps them from having to decide whether to stay or go. Instead, the decision becomes how to best work around the issue.



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