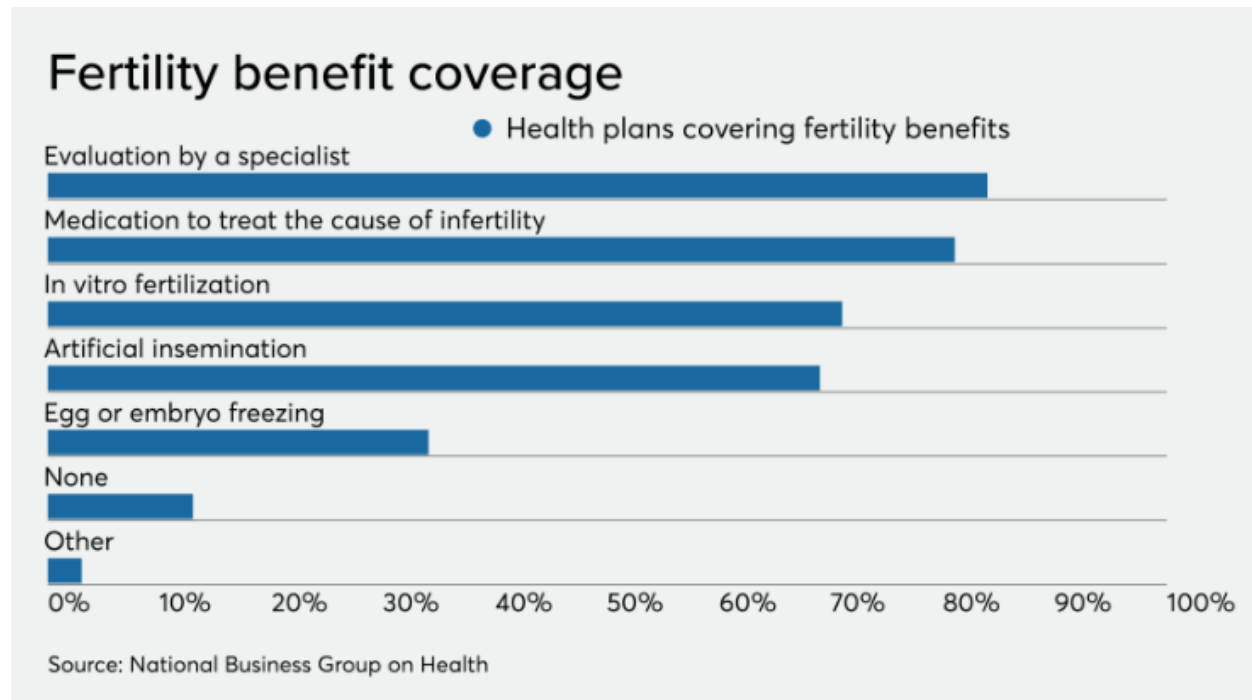


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Law firms reject old stereotypes, embrace family planning benefits

By Amanda Schiavo

Like many professional women, lawyer Heather Haughian chose to delay having a family in an effort to build a successful career. Adding pressure to her delayed timeline was her husband's Air Force career, which forced them to move every two years. The traditional law firm set up was not equipped to handle these challenges.



“The biggest thing in terms of support [to start our family] was the capability to have a flexible schedule. I hadn’t found a place where I could have that,” Haughian says. “It can be very difficult in a traditional law firm model to push yourself and bill the hours you need to bill and have the face time that is required, while having kids, without going on the mommy track.”

Law firms have a social reputation of being cold places of business, where over caffeinated workaholics spend every waking hour at their desks, doing whatever it takes and making sacrifices in their personal lives to make partner and establish their careers. That reputation is not unfounded: the billable hours required for the partner track is more than 2,000 hours a year and a 60 to 70-hour workweek, according to Law.com.

This schedule has proven difficult for the majority of women in the field: two-thirds of female associates will leave their firms within five years after having a child, according to the National Association of Law Placement Foundation.

For many lawyers, becoming a partner in a firm is the pinnacle of their careers, but is often happening at the same time as they plan to start a family.

Professional women often must confront family planning and career planning at the same time, typically in their 30s, which may be their most important years as a lawyer, says Bridget Deiters, the managing director of InCloudCounsel, a legal technology company.

“It can feel overwhelming for someone who is trying to make the decision to really commit to being a partner at a law firm and what that means for their family planning efforts,” she says.

When lawyers make the decision to have a family — specifically women — it means eventually having to ease their workload. But the employee must understand they will not be returning to the same career trajectory they were on when they took parental leave.

“Backing off the throttle is an absolute necessity when you have a child,” Haughian says. “It’s an unfortunate part of the traditional law firm model that you are penalized if you do that. Whether it is conscious or not, when women try to come back, they are at a disadvantage with their male counterparts.”

In 2013, Haughian and some like minded lawyers decided to try and break that traditional mold and created the Culhane Meadows law firm, a completely cloud-based, remote work practice with lawyers based all over the country.

Haughian’s firm joins several other law firms that have started to develop more inclusive workplaces that focus on the total well-being of their employees as well as their clients.

“Taking care of the employees wasn’t as much of a focus [20 years ago] as it is now,” says Amy McCormick, director of human resources at the Chicago-based law firm Neal Gerber Eisenberg. “We want to evolve with everyone else, to take care of our people.”

Neal Gerber Eisenberg recently expanded its benefits offerings to include family planning and caregiver support. The more than 300 employees at the firm have access to a family planning concierge program and a platform that connects them with an expert in caregiving coaching and with a social worker to help manage more complex care needs.

The firm also realized that fertility benefits were a must have after speaking with employees and finding that they — women particularly — were looking for family planning options.

“We started thinking about things from a more holistic perspective, really understanding that if we’re concerned about the well-being of our employee population that it’s not just about giving them good medical insurance,” says Sonia Menon, chief operating officer

of Neal Gerber Eisenberg. “It’s also about looking at all of the different factors that might impact their lives.”

While the cost of fertility treatments like IVF can be prohibitively high for employees, costing \$12,000 per cycle on average, just 18% of employers offer IVF coverage. About 19% of employers offer infertility treatments, other than IVF, to employees, according to the Society for Human Resource Management’s 2019 employee benefits survey. Both figures declined by roughly 7% when compared to the previously collected data in 2017.

However, employers who offer financial assistance can foster a culture of equality and fairness and lower health care costs. New York-based Weil, Gotshal & Manges teamed up with WINFertility earlier this year to offer a reimbursement program to employees looking to adopt or undergo fertility treatments.

“Employee benefits today are driven in large part by the changing needs of our employees,” says Meredith Moore, the director of global diversity and inclusion at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. “Our family building considerations cross populations: we started researching after inquiries from our LGBTQ+ community regarding surrogacy and adoption benefits, and we also received requests from our attorneys and administrative staff to provide enhanced infertility and egg freezing benefits.”

But while more big law firms are moving to include family planning benefits into their offerings, being flexible with parental leave once they become parents is still a major obstacle for employees.

When Grant Walsh, a lawyer with Culhane Meadows, had to fight with senior colleagues at his brick-and-mortar firm to take the day off for the birth of his first child, he knew there was a problem.

“I ended up being able to negotiate three days off for that,” Walsh says. “Most law firms will give their lawyers 30 days off, that is standard. But if you try to take the time off, it is really frowned upon.”

Often, lawyers will be offered substantial time off but may be passed over for a promotion or left off the next big case, Walsh says.

“You’re sold this bill of goods at traditional law firms where they promise you the world but when it comes down to it, [if you take that time off] it may impact your career growth,” he says.

As Walsh was growing his own family and career, he became disillusioned with brick-and-mortar firms and joined Haughian in founding Culhane Meadows, the remote law firm. Walsh works out of a home office where he has the flexibility to take his children to school, help them with homework, and coach their sports teams.

“Technology has changed such that I can use my smartphone and find any case law I need in seconds,” Walsh says. “Law firms that are still stuck in that old way of doing

things are really being wasteful with client money and making it uncomfortable for lawyers.”

Employers are in a unique position to offer benefits to help their population achieve these personal goals, Moore says.

“By making employees more fulfilled in their personal lives, employers make for happier, more productive employees, which benefits business generally,” she notes. “With a diverse employee population, we need an inclusive approach to equitably meet their needs.”

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[Heather Clauson Haughian](#) is a managing partner & co-founder at Culhane Meadows PLLC. An international attorney with experience from both sides of the pond who counsels global clients through complex technology transactions and intellectual property matters.



[Grant Walsh](#) is a managing partner & co-founder at Culhane Meadows PLLC. A seasoned business negotiator and litigator who serves clients by combining logic, reason, and creativity while concurrently acting as a tenacious advocate when disputes arise--all the way through trial if necessary.

About Culhane Meadows – *Big Law for the New Economy*®

The largest woman-owned national full-service business law firm in the U.S., Culhane Meadows fields over 70 partners in ten major markets across the country. Uniquely structured, the firm's Disruptive Law® business model gives attorneys greater work-life flexibility while delivering outstanding, partner-level legal services to major corporations and emerging companies across industry sectors more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional law firms. Clients enjoy exceptional and highly-efficient legal services provided exclusively by partner-level attorneys with significant experience and training from large law firms or in-house legal departments of respected corporations. U.S. News & World Report has named Culhane Meadows among the country's "Best Law Firms" in its 2014 through 2020 rankings and many of the firm's partners

are regularly recognized in Chambers, Super Lawyers, Best Lawyers and Martindale-Hubbell Peer Reviews.