

Scaling the maternal wall

*Firms in the industry need to offer greater flexibility to address the perpetual work-life balance conundrum, says **Susan Swanezy**, partner at Hodes Weill & Associates.*

We celebrated a milestone at Hodes Weill & Associates recently, the naming of our sixth partner, Stuart Elizabeth Baldwin. Stuart's admission to the partnership recognizes her critical importance in the formation of our company seven years ago and in her leadership of our project management team and at the firm overall. But what is additionally gratifying to me, a 30-year real estate veteran with three children, is that Stuart was named a partner at our firm only a few months after returning to work full-time from maternity leave as a new mom.

I came of age when women would hide their pregnancies for fear of missing promotions, of not being staffed on interesting deals, and of being written off as 'short-timers'. This prompted me to reflect whether attitudes toward attracting and retaining talented women are finally beginning to change. Are young professionals like Stuart, who are invaluable to their companies, able to navigate the numerous demands of their positions and play leadership roles in their firms, while also being present, caring mothers to their children? That is our goal for Stuart and all our female colleagues.

The number of women in leadership positions in our industry is still far too low, denying our critical input and perspective. But how can we help working mothers scale the biggest obstacle to advancement – the 'maternal wall'? That is, how do we, as employers, help women navigate nature's cruel irony that their prime career building years coincide with their child bearing years, and that integrating both is a perpetual challenge?

Having to juggle the demands of work and family for three decades, I should be an expert by now. Ten of those years, I was a single mother and primary breadwinner, and therefore could not afford to be on the "Mommy Track" as it was called in the 90s. The truth is that even after all these years, it is still messy at times. There are factors beyond your control, but you learn the importance of being flexible and having a strong support system, both at home and at the office.

The challenge to employers is to offer flexible options to encourage women to do their best work while raising families. Are employers providing suitable maternity leave policies, allowing women to feel like they can take that time off to be with their family following birth and that this won't set them back? Once women have returned from maternity leave, are employers willing to allow them to work on flexible time and/or at home instead of on a fixed schedule in the office? There is not a one-size-fits-all solution, to be sure, but what is clear is that companies need to tackle the challenge of devising programs and solutions appropriate for the role at the firm.

The responsibility is not just on the employer, however. For the women who may be reading this, one of the factors that may be holding you back professionally is self-doubt and worrying that you are never giving enough. If a woman develops a reputation for being consistently prepared, responsive, respectful and principled, she will position herself as an invaluable resource. Inherent confidence comes from gaining an expertise in your craft, and genuinely enjoying what you do.

With confidence, women are better positioned to take risks. Speak up, share perspectives, ask for more challenging positions. Don't miss opportunities to be on important decision-making committees. Be an advocate for yourself. ➡



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➡ And once a professional has accrued some political capital, she has a reserve to draw upon when she needs flexibility, such as when she has been up all night with her sick child.

Achieving a work-life balance is a challenge for men as well. Paternity leave is more available today than ever, but workplace culture has to change so men are comfortable actually taking leave or even being the primary caregiver. The best support for a working mother, after all, is a fully committed father engaged in their child's life from day one.

As Stuart commences her journey scaling the maternal wall, combining motherhood and her leadership role within our firm, we know there will be challenges, but we as a firm are committed to finding solutions to address her needs. We hope that more and more employers in the industry will do the same, because if they do not, it is not just to detriment of women or the firms that employ them, but the real estate industry as a whole.