

## Thinking Small

Large firms aren't the only option for women seeking a career and a life.

BY CHRISTINE M. GARTON

**W**omen lawyers increasingly are turning from large firms and looking to solo and small firm law practices and other entrepreneurial endeavors as another career option. According to the most recent figures of the U.S. Census Bureau, about 20 percent of law firms were women-owned in 1997. These firms provide the kind of flexibility to balance career and family obligations in ways not often possible at large firms, some women say.

### 'NOW, I GET TO DECIDE'

For Mary Legg, motherhood presented challenges to her legal career of seven years at a big firm. Ultimately, it was the burden of juggling new family responsibilities with her career that pushed her to consider entrepreneurial options.

"I believed that with a nanny and strategic planning skills, motherhood would make no difference to my career," says Legg, 45 and a married mother of two. "I was wrong."

After being required by a judge presiding over one of her cases to cut her maternity leave by two weeks and later having to work nearly 300 hours in one month for an important case, Legg realized that a baby did make a difference. "I started asking myself what else could I do," says Legg.

Soon after, Legg quit her job at Seyfarth Shaw and attempted to find a career that would help her make time for her family as well as provide satisfying work. After spending a year as an in-house counsel and later working from home, Legg was dissatisfied. "Sitting at home one day in front of the television, I decided that I had had enough," exclaims Legg. "I needed to go back to work."



ROBERTO WESTBROOK

**GETTING A HEAD START:** Mary Legg began her own head-hunting firm after finding that life as a practicing lawyer was not satisfying and left little time for her family.

With this epiphany in 2000, Legg founded Firm Advice Inc., a legal staffing agency that caters to law firms and corporations. At Firm Advice, Legg supervises three other individuals in addition to performing her primary head-hunting and business development responsibilities.

"What I love most about my work is that I can control the direction of my company," says Legg. "There were policies that I didn't like at the firm. Now, I get to decide how the employees should be treated and what business cards our company uses. This is what I love most about my work."

"The work and life balance issues are much easier to manage now," says Legg. "I'm doing what I'm doing because of the flexibility that this type of career provides."

For instance, next year Legg will be a schoolroom parent for her child—a job with significant time requirements for monthly meetings and the responsibility of planning field trips and parties.

“This would not have been possible if I was at a large firm,” she says.

In addition to having more time for her family, Legg has more time for herself. She regularly plays golf and is able to take several vacations throughout the year. Recently, she has taken up the piano.

Legg also cites the monetary benefits of firm ownership. “Working for yourself enables you to not have to work as hard to make as much,” she says.

Legg is also an active member of the Women’s Bar Association, serving as a board member and chair of the Career Development Committee. Additionally, she is chair of the membership committee of the Washington Metropolitan Corporate Counsel Association.

“I believe that more women are starting their own business or choosing to start home-based practices because they want to try to have it all,” says Legg. “This is definitely a more realistic possibility than at a large firm.”

With all of these advantages, business ownership appears to be a great option for a working mother. But don’t be too quick to make this conclusion, says Legg.

“Sometimes, I feel like Atlas holding up the world,” laughs

Legg. During downturns in the economy, for example, she says she has worried about whether or not she would be able to keep the office doors open.

“There is definitely more stress with the job,” admits Legg. “Everything is up to me.”

Also, Legg emphasizes that legal entrepreneurs must still set boundaries in their life, saying that she has to make an effort not to take on too many responsibilities.

“People are always asking me to donate my time, and it’s important that I honor my commitments,” says Legg. “I can’t do this if there is too much on my plate.”

Like Dunner, Legg is quick to give credit to her experience at a large firm, calling it a “necessary evil for one’s legal career.” In fact, she encourages others to spend at least three to four years at a large firm to gain “valuable training experience” before taking the solo career path.

“The large firm experience helped me to be a better lawyer,” Legg says. “It still validates me today.”

And don’t be afraid of failure when going out on your own, Legg urges, saying that most entrepreneurs are not usually successful in their first few tries.

“Overall, my work is fun,” says Legg. “It is not only about winning. . . . I work at making people happy, and this makes me happy.” ■