

# Change your fate

**Avoid a future of financial ruin**

## **Hedging bets**

Align lawyer compensation  
with firm strategy

## **Achieving balance**

Adopt a flexible, team-based  
business model

## **Leading success**

Lead your firm into immediate  
and innovative change

**CASE STUDY**

# Achieving balance

Suzanne M. Cerra and Katherin Nukk-Freeman reveal how a flexible, team-based business model benefits fee-earners and clients

**KEY TAKEAWAY POINTS**

- 1** Obtain authentic and unyielding commitment from the top down and 100 per cent buy-in to have a successful flexible, team-based business model for every employee.
- 2** Create and maintain constant communication amongst individual team members and client teams to create seamless client service.
- 3** Develop and maintain internal systems to ensure your business model is successful (including competitive compensation packages, policies, performance expectations and evaluations).
- 4** Spend significant time on hiring the right people to ensure they are motivated, extremely conscientious and consummate professionals who will make client service their top priority.
- 5** Flexibility must go both ways: while the model allows for workplace flexibility, attorneys must be flexible with their time to service clients effectively.

**W**hen we started practicing law almost 20 years ago, we had a somewhat naïve view about how easy it would be to successfully balance the demands of the legal profession with our personal lives.

We began our careers and advanced to partnership at prestigious private US law firms in record time. We were passionate about the profession of law and our respective firms. We each served as hiring partner at our firms.

At about the time that we and our peers began having children, we began to notice the exodus of talented female attorneys from the profession and that our firms could not fill their seats quickly enough.

Ironically, for many of those women, they were opting out of the profession after their firms had expended significant resources developing them and just as their careers were taking off. We observed first-hand the significant amount of accumulated training and institutional knowledge that was walking out the door with these experienced attorneys.

Disturbed by this alarming trend, we began to examine it. What we heard from most of these women was that, despite working around the clock trying to juggle their children and thrive in their careers, they began to feel like failures because – although they continued to deliver the same high quality of work to their clients – their firms used billable hours as the primary standard for measuring their success.

Even for those women who were fortunate enough to work for firms that

‘allowed’ flexible work arrangements, there was always the unspoken pressure that this was a temporary accommodation that was not really condoned from the top down and the feeling that, unless and until they returned to full-time status, they were not considered part of the ‘A’ team. This was reinforced by the stark absence of people like them in senior-level positions.

While most of the women we spoke to were devastated about opting out, they felt the culture of the legal profession had left them with an untenable choice: to sacrifice their standards of excellence with either their children or their jobs.

It quickly became clear to us that the billable hour emphasis in our profession was driving out successful attorneys in droves. We set out on our own personal mission to create a new (and better) way of practising law.

**A new type of practice**

In January 2006, we started our own law firm, Nukk-Freeman & Cerra, based on a novel, yet very simple concept. We created a law firm model that would enable our attorneys to not only thrive in their profession, but also in their personal lives.

We wanted a model where flexibility, teamwork and support for each other’s clients and matters was the norm and where success would be measured by much more than just the billable hour. We did not create the model just for women, but rather for any attorney who wanted to have a more balanced and fulfilling personal life.

The components of our flexible, team-based business model are simple.



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### **1. Culture**

There is an authentic and unyielding commitment from the top down. Every attorney who comes to work at our firm understands how seriously we take our culture and must be philosophically committed to it. The model does not work without buy-in from the entire team.

Of course, it helps that we (the firm’s founders) are working parents ourselves; we each have three children under the age of 13 and are very involved parents. Because all the senior leaders at our firm share this perspective, our junior attorneys have living ‘proof’ of our commitment to our culture.

### **2. Internal systems**

We have gone to great lengths to create internal systems that ensure that our flexible, team-based model will be successful.

For example, we value and evaluate our team members primarily on the quality, efficiency and cost effectiveness of their work (not just the quantity), as well as the relationships they build with our team and our clients. We view all of our attorneys who live up to our expectations in these areas as indispensable members of our ‘A’ team.

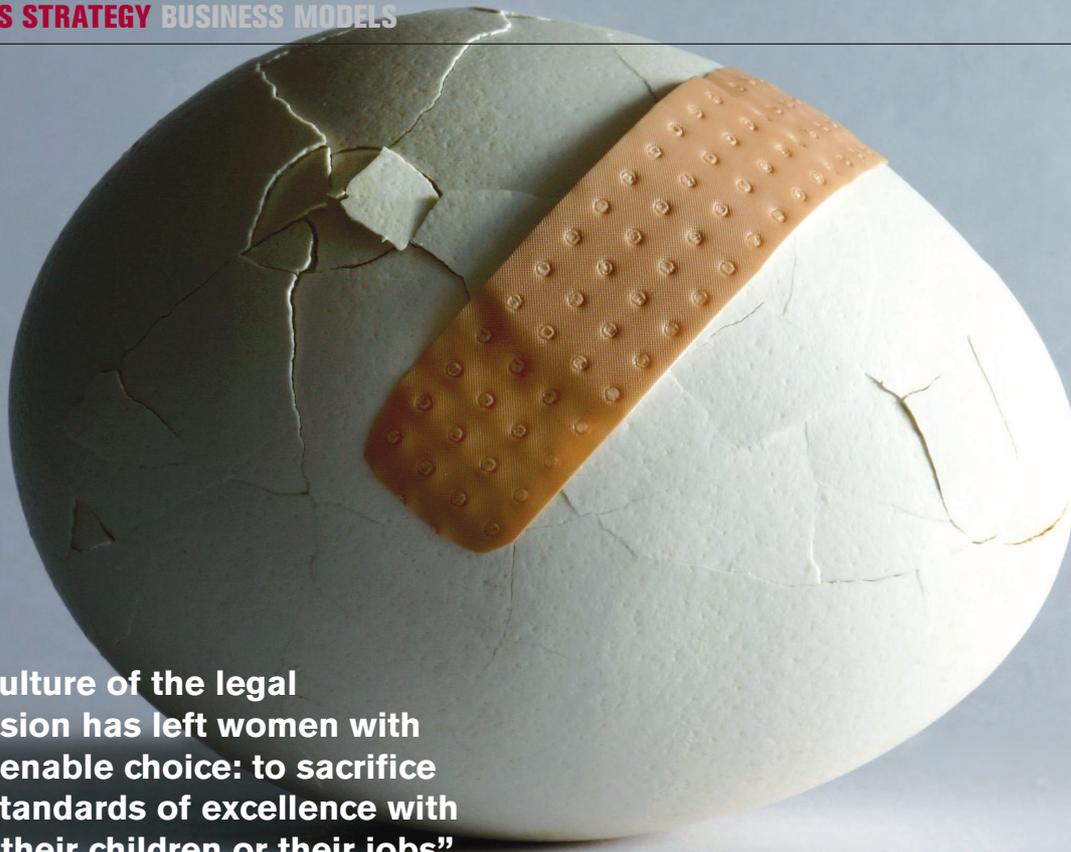
We also use a structured team approach to service our clients,

which allows our team to manage their personal demands.

Finally, we have developed an innovative and fair compensation model that gives people input on their work schedules, rewards people based on their output and eliminates tension between attorneys with varying schedules.

### **3. Hiring screens**

Our business model only works because of our focus on hiring the right people for the right positions. Since we offer flexible working arrangements to all interested attorneys from day one, the model requires that we hire extremely motivated



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and conscientious attorneys who are consummate professionals and make client service their top priority.

Our attorneys understand that flexibility must go both ways and that, for the model to be successful, they too must be adaptable and willing to accommodate the time demands and critical deadlines that are part of this profession.

While remote work access and our team structure eliminate the negative impact on fellow attorneys, everyone knows that regular schedules must always yield to client demands. Fortunately, we have found there to be no shortage of incredible attorneys out there who can make this balance look effortless.

**Talent retention**

Our firm's flexible, team-based model contributes to our success because it enables us to attract and retain top legal talent. Not only do we offer a compensation package that competes with the large New Jersey law firms, but we also offer flexibility and a unique culture that other firms do not match.

We encourage and empower attorneys, and we share and cultivate our unwavering firm values with each team member. The attorneys and staff at our firm know that we genuinely care about each

of them. They, in turn, really care about each other and are truly committed to the wellbeing of our firm and clients.

We have learned over the past few years that this level of commitment is something you cannot train, but you must develop by hiring the right people and fostering these sentiments through your culture.

Our flexible, team-work model and unique culture have rewarded us with unbeatable retention rates, as well as dedication and loyalty from our entire team to both the firm and clients.

**Growing the business**

The proof that our business model works is in its success. In fact, after operating within the confines of our model for a few months, we had an epiphany: our internal model was better not just for employees, but also for clients.

The firm has grown dramatically in just six short years, at a time when a lot of other firms were struggling. We have built the firm from two founders and one administrative assistant to its current team of 16 attorneys and ten members on our support team.

We have a strong list of clients and continue to attract top legal talent. We work as a team and have virtually no

attorney turnover: our team are happy to come to work every day and are appreciative of the supportive culture that is a way of life at the firm.

**A successful model**

Given the success our firm has had within this model, we take every opportunity we can to encourage other businesses – law firms and others alike – to consider a similar approach.

Because we see the benefits of our model on multiple levels and because we are truly committed to our tagline of ‘teaming with employers to build a better workplace’, we encourage like-minded businesses to commit to similar work environments so that they, too, can yield the same positive results.

When we reflect on the past six years, it is energising to see what a difference our business model has made in the lives of our clients, our employees and for us as founders of this growing firm. We encourage others to consider the positive impact our methods have had, and to break the mould in their own way. <sup>TM</sup>

*Suzanne M. Cerra and Katherin Nukk-Freeman are the founding principals of US law firm Nukk-Freeman & Cerra*