

The 'Motherhood Advantage' in Law: Time to Flip the Script

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As women, we've long been sold the myth that motherhood is a professional disadvantage. The term "motherhood penalty" describes the biases mothers can face—being passed over for promotions, perceived as lacking professional commitment or as less capable simply because they are parents. But we believe it's time to flip the script. Motherhood is not a liability but a source of unique strength—the "motherhood advantage."

Women often take on the primary role in parenting, facing the greatest challenges, and studies show mothers encounter unique obstacles in the workforce. These ideas apply to anyone balancing family commitments with a demanding career.

The Reality of Motherhood in Law

We are both experienced lawyers—a counsel and partner at an A-List firm with two decades of collective experience and national practices. We're both mothers of young (and very cute) children. We've experienced firsthand how balancing a demanding legal career with motherhood is a crash course



Courtesy photos

Jessica Lewis, left, and Sonia Sujanani, right, of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr

in executive functioning skills, building resilience, and emotional intelligence. These qualities are essential for effective leadership and client advocacy. Thankfully, our firm and peers support women and parents, yet the legal profession at large fails to recognize the immense value of motherhood. We think it is time for that to change.

Rewriting the Narrative: From Penalty to Advantage

For too long, legal organizations have adhered to the view that lawyers must sacrifice

family for success. Long hours, relentless work demands, and a rigid commitment to the profession are the expected norms. If firm work is challenging, raising young children is exponentially demanding. Yet, mothers are pulling it off. We are constantly in awe of our mom friends and colleagues who—day in, day out—juggle case deadlines with school pick-ups and negotiate settlements while handling family emergencies.

Instead of penalizing the short-term consequences of this balancing act, we believe the more uplifting approach would be to view mothers as taking the ultimate crash course in executive management. Time management, resilience, empathy, relationship building and multitasking are invaluable skills mothers cultivate every day—qualities making them more capable professionals and effective leaders. The ability to excel under pressure, to prioritize in the face of competing demands, and to demonstrate empathy and resilience, are the same traits that make for exceptional lawyers. And as we are told almost every day, our kid-dos won't be young forever. An investment in working mothers is a no-brainer as a long-term business decision.

Emotional Intelligence: Leading With Empathy

As lawyers, emotional intelligence is essential. The ability to read a room, adapt to a client, assess a judge's openness to an argument, and empathize with concerns are key differentiators. Mothers naturally develop these skills. Whether by managing a toddler's tantrum or soothing a child's anxiety, we become experts at navigating complex emotional dynamics. These skills directly translate into our legal

practice—especially when dealing with high-stakes negotiations, difficult opposing counsel, clients experiencing corporate crises, and emotionally charged cases. The emotional intelligence mothers bring to the table helps build trust, which is invaluable to building deep, lasting relationships with clients. Emotional intelligence leads to better client retention, overall job satisfaction, and organizations that build community.

Working mothers also make terrific mentors. Despite balancing work and family, they still somehow carve out time to provide invaluable guidance to those rising through the ranks. We have personally benefited from mentorship, and we are committed to paying it forward. We believe women must help each other thrive by supporting one another's career ambitions, sharing advice, and ensuring those who come after us have a seat at the table. It is undisputed that mentorship is invaluable to creating firm community and improving retention and morale.

Resilience and Grit: Thriving Under Pressure

Resilience is often discussed in the context of law, where high-stress cases and long hours are the norm. Motherhood is the ultimate training ground for resilience. Remaining calm in the face of chaos—whether an urgent case deadline or a sick child—is an attribute mothers perfect daily.

Motherhood cultivates an ability to bounce back from setbacks, persevere under pressure, and keep moving forward despite exhaustion or uncertainty. It provides us with a sense of purpose and taps a deep well of strength. In the fast-paced world of law, this mental toughness is invaluable. Whether helping a

client navigate crises, maintaining focus in a tough trial or overcoming setbacks in a case, the resilience developed through motherhood strengthens our capacity to succeed when the stakes are high.

Building Bridges: Motherhood Enhances Relationship and Community Building

Women are often natural community builders yet their ability to network and build relationships is frequently undervalued and not recognized as “rainmaker” material. As more clients, opposing counsel, and regulators are women, female lawyers are uniquely positioned to connect with them on a personal level, empathizing with their challenges and experiences. This shared understanding fosters better communication and collaboration, strengthening relationships and presenting a powerful opportunity for women to become influential business developers. A mother’s ability to nurture relationships and build community is an untapped asset for firm growth, loyalty, and success.

Multitasking and Time Management: Prioritizing What Matters

Mothers instinctively juggle multiple priorities. For us, it’s not just about balancing client meetings with case deadlines, but also managing personal commitments like school events, meal planning, and family logistics. This daily balancing act sharpens our time management skills, making us highly efficient, organized, and adept at prioritizing.

In law, the ability to multitask and manage time effectively is crucial. Lawyers who can navigate a crowded schedule, deliver results without compromise, and handle competing demands are better equipped to serve clients

and drive firm success. Mothers excel at this. The time management skills honed at home—where every minute counts—directly impact our ability to perform at the highest levels at work. Rather than the typical model which might penalize mothers for their competing demands, we believe the experience of balancing so many priorities in a working mother’s early-to-mid career teaches efficiency, delegation, and executive functioning far more effectively than a management training course.

Working mothers also bring a high level of efficiency to the table. The time spent juggling tasks at home—getting children to school, managing extracurriculars, and making sure everything runs smoothly—instills focus and productivity that directly benefits our legal careers. Adept time management and task prioritization is essential in law firms, where competing deadlines and complex projects demand efficiency.

Creating a More Inclusive Legal Profession

The shift from “motherhood penalty” to “motherhood advantage” is not just a conceptual change—it’s a practical one. Individuals and organizations must recognize that motherhood doesn’t diminish a woman’s ability to lead, advocate, and excel. It enhances it. To unlock this potential, we need to support it.

Flexible work schedules, inclusive parental leave policies and supportive work environments are essential. It takes more than just lip service to diversity: concrete policies and communities that support and follow them help women thrive as mothers and lawyers. For example, WilmerHale has parent-neutral and inclusive leave policies. Our peers—male and female—often take their entire allotted leave.

This inclusivity has developed a community that honors and promotes workplace equality between both parents. We both took our full parental leave. And we're honored to support our male colleagues in doing so as well.

When law firms create cultures that support working mothers, they unlock a tremendous wealth of talent and leadership potential. The investments organizations make in family and parental leave, flexible schedules, and other temporary accommodations should be viewed as a "motherhood investment" supporting working parents while they take the executive course of balancing a career and motherhood.

Those who are supported and promoted in this endeavor will emerge to see both their children and their skills grow immeasurably—a win-win for working mothers and organizations.

The Future is Inclusive and Empowered

The "motherhood advantage" is a reality, not a myth. Mothers bring an unmatched skill set to their firms and clients. From emotional intelligence and resilience, to multitasking, the skills honed through motherhood directly translate to success in law.

It's time to bid goodbye to the "motherhood penalty" and embrace the "motherhood advantage." We believe legal organizations that do so will see the benefit of more diverse and resilient leadership, and reap the rewards of building a stronger, more empathetic, and more innovative practice. The future of law is inclusive, and it's time to flip the script.

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