



Women-Owned Law Firm Makes the Case for Work-Life Balance

Michelle Wildgrube interviewed with law firm Carpenter & Cioffi P.C. when she was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. She was hired within the hour, and she worked three days a week before going on maternity leave.

Wildgrube was looking for a firm where she could excel as a lawyer without sacrificing her family life. The Schenectady, N.Y., firm encouraged her to do so. She worked flexible schedules while her children were young and gradually increased to full time. Today, she is a principal of the firm, now known as Cioffi, Slezak, Wildgrube P.C. (CSW).

Wildgrube's is just one of many such stories in this firm owned by four women attorneys. At CSW, lawyers and staff put in the same hours as their peers elsewhere, but some of those hours might be at home, at a child's hockey practice, or at an elderly parent's doctor's visit. The concept has allowed employees, particularly women, to thrive, and has given the firm an excellent reputation in the region.



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– Michelle Wildgrube

Key Takeaways



Strive for work-life balance for all employees.



Maintain a collaborative team environment to fully support client needs.



Get to know clients beyond the professional level to achieve long-term loyalty.



Their ideas reinvent.



They're committed to their ideas.
And we're committed to them.

Her Ideas  Start Something *Priceless*[®]
Learn more at key.com/women

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Advocate | Connect | Empower

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Addressing a problem

In 1995, Howard Carpenter and Cristine Cioffi tackled a problem in the legal profession. The rigidity of most firms hurt the personal lives of lawyers and staff and prevented women from advancing as quickly as men. “We wanted to create a model where we could get our work done, maybe at different times of the day, different days of the week, and be able to still provide excellent services to clients,” Cioffi says.

The model appealed to lawyers, paralegals, and support staff craving work-life balance. “We found early on that we got highly qualified people who wanted to do their

job well and at a certain level, with flexibility so that they could be with family or take care of a parent who was maybe aging and needed additional help,” Deborah Slezak says.

Not only did professionals gravitate toward the firm, they stayed long-term. Low turnover meant that lawyers could establish themselves and build relationships with clients. That attracted Nicole Clouthier when she interviewed seven years ago. “I thought, there’s really something special here. This is what I wanted for the rest of my career,” says Clouthier. The mother of two became a partner in 2019 together with Lauren Sharkey, also a mother of two. “Even as a new associate with no family obligations, I knew working at CSW was an investment in my future, both professionally and from a work-life balance perspective. I knew the firm would support me (and my clients) if I decided to grow my family one day, and that was important to me,” Sharkey stated.

Why it works

Experience, accountability, and teamwork are key to the firm’s success. By focusing on estate planning and administration, elder law, commercial and residential real estate, and business and corporate law, the firm addresses client needs throughout their lives. “We work with people who are sometimes at stressful parts of their lives and seeking support. It’s important that they know that we’re human, too,” Wildgrube says.

Clients appreciate that their lawyers might be going through experiences similar to their own, and that creates a connection. It’s not unusual for lawyers to work with generations of families.

The firm initially struggled with employees who didn’t quite understand flextime. Added protocols and more careful hiring processes alleviated the problem. “We now have a workforce that embraces the system and understands what it takes to make it work.” Wildgrube says.

CSW uses a team approach to client service. If a lawyer is not scheduled to work on a certain day, someone else is available to answer a question or solve a problem. “Our clients are sometimes under stress and they don’t necessarily want to wait a day to get a response from our office, which is why having a team approach is key,” Clouthier says.

A case for the future

As CSW's reputation has grown in and around Schenectady, so has its size. The firm currently has eight attorneys and 16 staff. A new downtown location accommodates the mid-size firm and enhances CSW's visibility in the community.

Ongoing education ensures the firm remains at its peak. "The goal is to stay on top of all of the developments in law, but also to continue to develop staff and paralegals and attorneys so that we continue to have a sustainable firm," Wildgrube says. "I think it's important that you have people behind you who are going to be coming up."

CSW has a strong platform on which to build its future. The firm has received many awards for its service, including the Enterprise of the Year Award from the Schenectady County Chamber, the Carol Knox Family Friendly Award from the Capital District Women's Bar Association, and the Susan Rosenthal Women in Business Award from the YWCA. With help from Mastercard's women-in-business program, CSW gets added support to reach its goals.

Being a champion for other women

In addition to CSW's supportive work environment, the partners say they benefit from networking with like-minded professionals. "There is a really solid group of

women attorneys who do what I do in this area, and we meet up regularly," Clouthier says, adding that competition is not an issue. "I'm always willing to stick my hand out and pull someone else up who may be starting or is struggling or just needs a sounding board for ideas," she says.

The firm's longstanding relationship with Key4Women has been instrumental as well. "Key4Women was there to show us a model of what could be done," says Wildgrube, who often shares what she's gleaned with her clients. "I can see stories of entrepreneurship and business models. I catalog away the information and then bring it out when a new businesswoman comes to me." Members of the firm have participated in the Key4Women forum in Albany for the past two years to network and share success stories.

The nurturing environment at CSW is something Clouthier wishes she had when she started out as a lawyer. "One of the things I like to bestow on newer female attorneys is confidence," she says. "In a field that has traditionally been dominated by men, it's important for women to add their perspective. We encourage that every day our associates do the same." Look for a firm that respects your personal life as much as it does your professional skills and support your fellow professionals along the way, the partners agree.

The support you need

For more Key4Women resources to help you reach your goals, visit key.com/women, or [email us](mailto:key4women@keybank.com) at key4women@keybank.com.

Would you like to weigh in on future topics? Please take our [survey](#).

For more information about CSW Law, visit www.cswlawfirm.com.

