

Up & Coming Lawyers 2007

Mae O'Malley

A parent-perfect practice

By Nora Lockwood Toohar
Staff writer

San Francisco attorney Mae O'Malley's decision to jump off the legal fast track has ended up providing an innovative alternative for other attorneys seeking to balance legal careers and families.

O'Malley, 34, was working as an in-house counsel when she became pregnant with her first child.

"I decided I needed to find a way to practice law that was more conducive to raising my kids the way I wanted to," she said.

She began working on a contract basis for in-house legal departments so she could spend more time with her family. After seven years, O'Malley, who now has three children aged 1, 3 and 5, had built up such a large client roster that last September she started her own firm to match other attorneys on a contract basis with corporate clients.

The firm – Paragon Legal Group – specializes in technology licensing and corporate transactions. It already has 25

attorneys and a dozen clients, and expects to post about \$1 million in revenue in its first year.

"The business just took on a life of its own. It's a testament to the demand for the service," O'Malley said.

Corporate clients hire Paragon's attorneys to staff-up during peak times, such as quarter-end crunches; to fill in for in-house attorneys on maternity or medical leaves; or to help with large transactions, including mergers and acquisitions and complex licensing deals.

Clients like the flexibility and low cost of hiring contract legal help.

"There never used to be a decent option for when attorneys from a legal group went on leave," she noted. "It used to be you'd have to have a big law firm help out as much as possible at a high billing rate. Now, they have the option at \$100-plus an hour to have somebody go on site, fill a seat and work in that employee's place."

Attorneys like the arrangement because it gives them flexibility for raising families or simply having more time off.

"A lot of attorneys are discovering it's a great situation," she said. Although the arrangement does not include health benefits, the work is financially rewarding and the attorneys have control over their own schedules.

Attorneys can work full or half time on assignments that last two to six months. Many of the half-time attorneys are mothers with young children.

"With the contract placement, they don't go overtime," O'Malley noted. "After the assignment, they can take as much time off as they want. Mothers will take summers off with their kids, or men will take three months off."

O'Malley graduated from Stanford University in 1994 and from the University of California at Berkeley Boalt Hall School of Law in 1998. She worked as an intellectual property litigation associate in the San Francisco and Tokyo offices of Morrison Foerster for two years, then in-house for several tech firms in the Silicon Valley before going out on her own.

Now, as the head of her own law firm, O'Malley is consider-



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ing expanding the firm's practice areas to include litigation. She's already been asked about expanding into markets in other parts of the country, but said that for now, she wants to remain in the northern California area.

Her goal, she said, is to build the firm without losing its focus.

"I feel like I've got to stay true as to why I started this business in the first place – to offer other women a sane life," she said.

Questions or comments can be directed to the writer at:
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