

## Legal eagles help out Games star –

### EMPLOYER OF CHOICE: A SPECIAL ADVERTISING REPORT

FOR most of us, achieving work/life balance involves juggling a career and kids. For Rosie Hooper, athlete and articled clerk with law firm Allens Arthur Robinson, it means juggling a career and a javelin.

Ms Hooper, a finalist in the 2006 Commonwealth Games, is one of a large number of AAR employees taking advantage of the firm's flexible work practices to squeeze different life experiences into their days. And, like her, not all of them are working mums.

Some partners cut back to part-time work as they near retirement to fit in other interests. Others work reduced hours for health reasons. Sam Cadman, a senior lawyer in the litigation department in Melbourne, has worked part-time in order to pursue his passion in two bands, Fine Motor Skills and The Forgotten Ghosts (which released its debut album, Everything For A Reason, this month).

"We would always rather not see talent walk out the door. If it's possible to accommodate them, we would rather work something out than lose them," says Maryjane Crabtree, an AAR executive partner and chair of its Women@AAR steering committee.

Of AAR's 191 partners, 17 work part-time, as do eight of its 23 special counsel, 24 of its 221 senior associates, 12 of its 434 lawyers and 85 of its 448 corporate services staff. Rock bands and javelin throwing notwithstanding, most of AAR's part-time workers are women, and their usual motivation is that they have kids. And that is just fine.

Ms Crabtree says that 15 years ago it was commonplace for women to pretend they were speeding out of the office early to provide relief for a client, when in fact it was for the nanny.

"And I think in a lot of organisations people still mask why they are leaving," she says. "But it's important to be able to balance your home and work life and it's important to show by example that it's acceptable to do that.

"It's also important to be honest and transparent in your work practices. If we have a lawyer who is working part-time, we tell the client. We don't fudge anything."

AAR offers a range of options for part-timers, including working fewer and/or shorter days and making use of technology to work from home or elsewhere.

"We have a lot of part-time workers already and we're working now to get a broader range of flexible work options," says Ms Crabtree.

Recognising AAR's efforts, last month the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) named the firm an Employer of Choice for Women for the fourth consecutive year, one of 99 businesses to receive the citation this year. To make the list, a business must comply with the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act and

meet a number of other criteria, including that it have policies in place that support women across the organisation; have effective and transparent processes; educate its employees on their rights and obligations regarding sexual harassment; and have an inclusive organisational culture that is championed by the chief executive, driven by senior executives and holds line managers accountable.

This year, EOWA erected six more hurdles, including that the company must offer a minimum six weeks paid maternity leave after a year's service, enable female managers to work part-time and provide a pay equity analysis of its male and female employees. AAR's pay equity gap at every level is below the 17 per cent required to meet EOWA's original employer of choice citation requirements and significantly below the industry average of 23 per cent, says Ms Crabtree.

The Women@AAR program was set up in 2003 to help the partners understand, and address, why proportionately few women were progressing to partnership level compared with the number joining the firm as graduates.

"It is a specific program looking at the issues that face women in the workplace generally and at our particular workplace," says Ms Crabtree. "Our greatest area of need was targeting the retention of senior employees."

One of its initiatives was a mentoring program matching senior women lawyers with external mentors from McCarthy Mentoring, which is run by academic, management consultant and public affairs advocate Wendy McCarthy. About 50 AAR women have gone through the program.

Another was to set up networking committees to bring together women of all levels at social events.

"The point of these is to increase the bonds between the women themselves, so they develop a strong identity as a cohort of women within each office, and help them develop networking skills and client relationship building skills," says Ms Crabtree.