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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

WORK-LIFE BALANCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALE LAWYERS

Work-life balance is a significant challenge frequently faced by lawyers today. This is true regardless of age, experience, nature of practice, and gender. While male and female lawyers often experience and respond to these challenges in different ways, both struggle in trying to effectively strike a balance between the demands of their work and the rest of their life. Earlier this year, we interviewed three male attorneys to get their individual viewpoints on their challenges and successes with work-life balance. Below are their responses.

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What is/are your biggest challenge(s) in the area of work-life balance?

Attorney #1:

My biggest challenge is finding a way to put in enough time and energy for everyone who demands it – my family, my work, and myself. Someone inevitably always loses out. On a practical level, it's about having to prioritize and make difficult decisions, often on a daily basis. For example, some days I may see my kids for only a few minutes or not at all. Some days I don't have the energy after a 12-hour day to be a great husband. Some days I can't get all of my work done or be there for my colleagues because I have sick kids, doctors' appointments, or personal commitments. And some days and weeks I

can't find time to exercise or have proper "down time" because of the above. It's a constant source of stress, especially knowing that I'll never be able to do it all, all of the time.

Attorney #2:

Work-life balance has been a rallying cry for many lawyers in the Portland legal community for some time. Perhaps this is because Portland combines a laid-back West Coast lifestyle in a livable city offering some of the best outdoor recreation in the world. Portland definitely attracts professionals looking for a place to practice law and enjoy life. In fact, my search for work-life balance is what ultimately led me to Portland.

But what I have learned, and what has been my biggest challenge at the same time, is that work-life balance takes hard work. In other words, you have to earn it. Of course there are rare exceptions, and some people are "lucky" enough to find a job with low expectations, low responsibility, consistent well-paying work, and unending flexibility. For those of you out there with a job like that, enjoy it. However, most lawyers will find a magic talisman before they find such a job, and even if they did, they might not be truly happy with such a job. Most lawyers are driven people who want to feel a sense of accomplishment in their work.

I have found that achieving a work-life balance takes effort, planning, and support from your family and friends. With hard work and dedication, it is possible to meet not only professional goals but also life goals.

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Attorney #3:

I see two big challenges. The first is to define at a specific point in your career what work-life balance you seek at that moment and whether it is achievable. The second, at any given time, is how to maintain that work-life balance when unforeseen crises throw a wrench into the fragile clockwork of work and home.

While recently listening to a public radio biography of a career diplomat, I was struck by the realization that each of us has to decide within our career paths what work-life balance we desire and what steps we'll take to create and maintain it. Certain career paths are less family-friendly. In the case of the diplomat, the individual spent significant periods away from family while posted to war-torn regions. So it is important throughout one's career to do a gut check: Am I on the right path? Do I have the balance I seek? Have I made a choice to sacrifice on the family front in order to prioritize career advancement and opportunity? Some may choose to define their life through their work, so their work will generally take precedence over family and personal time. Also, there may be times in one's career when work is prioritized, first and foremost, for some period – a project, a trial, a step on the ladder, or a posting, for example – but overall work-life balance is broader and varies over time. The challenge is to decide what the balance should be for your own physical, mental, and relational health. Part of this process is self-analytical, and part is your receptivity to the input of your loved ones. One challenge is defining the balance over time and working to achieve it.

This leads to the second biggest challenge: one's lack of control over time and project management. In my practice, much of my casework is crisis-driven, and it is very difficult to plan day to day, let alone week to week or month to month. Not knowing which case or client will need immediate attention or detailed attention, and how much or for how long, impacts planning and commitments on the life side of the equation. Simply put – it's difficult to plan for the work requirements and preserve time for life commitments as well. When a crisis arises, it requires intensive intervention and time. It has a cascading impact on overall time management as other obligations are pushed aside or delayed, and this impact is felt at work and at home. Over my career, I recognize that I can't control the

crises, but I work hard to foresee some of them. I have found a strategy to ease some of the stress associated with the crises: preemptive planning. If a crisis should arise, who is my backup? – friends and family for family obligations and co-workers to help with work demands (e.g., cover a meeting or hearing on another case) so I can attend to the crisis. When thinking about preemptive planning for family obligations, I consider which of them are “must” do's. For those that are essential, I try to build in a few layers of backups to cover the crisis situations.

What two or three things do you currently do to maintain or improve your work-life balance, and how do you feel these help you?

Attorney #1:

First and foremost, I absolutely focus on my kids when I'm with them – whether for a quick minute before bed, in the morning, or for a full day on a weekend. I try to put the phone aside (although not always successfully) and be with them. I try to do the same with my spouse, who also works nearly full-time. For personal balance, I exercise and try to get “down time.” This is primarily commuting to work by bike, which is something I enjoy and look forward to, and which also gives me “alone” time – if only for 20 minutes each direction. I do yoga as much as possible, which is normally once or twice a week. I also try to find time each night to either read or watch “mindless” television – something to just release the day's stress.

Attorney #2:

First, I work extra hard and strive to achieve my professional goals. I also work extra hard to have quality time in my life outside of work. Often these goals are in conflict, and sometimes work goals win out. Still, I set my work goals high so that I can feel successful in my career. I would not be happy if my professional career were at a standstill, or if I let my skills become dull and dated. At the same time, I set clear life goals in a way that I can evaluate whether I am being successful with them. It is important to remember that having a good work-life balance does not mean you never put in extra time at work – but it does mean that sometimes that extra time lets you be the soccer coach even when practice starts at 5 p.m.

Second, I utilize my support network to help me meet my life goals, just as I do my work goals. In the same way that I rely on my law partner to help develop my legal career, I rely on friends and family to help me reach my life goals. Most importantly, I communicate my life goals to my support network so that I am accountable to them.

Third, I remember that there are three parts to work-life balance – life, work, and “me.” I never realized the importance of “me time” until I started to take some. Of course, this time needs to be balanced just like life and work, but it is invaluable.

Attorney #3:

I am careful to schedule individual time within work and family schedules. In doing so, I get the support of my family for this time and reduce the likelihood of hurt feelings, unmet expectations, etc. It feels good to have not only my family’s okay, but also their encouragement to take some individual time. I also enjoy the time more because I know my family commitments are covered and I don’t have to worry. My personal activities are focused on physical and mental well-being – tai chi, road biking, hiking, and watching sports. The latter two have a social component, so I’m able to catch up with friends or my brother. These activities help maintain mental well-being and provide an outlet from daily work and family commitments.

Do you have any future work-life balance goals? If so, how do you think your life would be different if you were able to accomplish these goals?

Attorney #1:

Frankly, I’ve given up thinking I’ll ever find true balance. I simply don’t think it’s possible to be a full-time partnership-track litigator and to also find true balance. At some level it’s also a matter of perspective. I think my life is fairly balanced in that, despite very stressful days full of scheduling, coordinating, and work, I consider myself a fairly involved dad and a good husband, and I am blessed with a healthy, happy, and successful family. So although I don’t consider myself to have full “balance” in my life, I think my family and I do the best with what we have. It isn’t always ideal, but we find balance in the ways we can.

Attorney #2:

One of my goals is to always remember that work-life balance is not an excuse to be lazy or expect others to carry my load – it is never an excuse not to work hard. Once I let go of the misguided notion that anyone who works hard is sacrificing work-life balance, I was able to start setting and meeting goals for my life outside of work. Almost immediately my happiness improved. Right now, I am focusing on being “present” with my family (concentrating on them rather than work while I am with them). This is a constant struggle for me, but even small improvements have shown big rewards.

Attorney #3:

One significant goal of mine is to be more aware and mindful of work/life/family “fatigue” – that is, knowing when the balance is off kilter and how to right the ship, so to speak. This requires a two-prong strategy – first, planning time off for regular vacations and, second, creating opportunities for short breaks in between – anything from taking an afternoon or day for mental health or even an hour away from the office for coffee.

I’ve also found that getting time away from the office for myself means I need to have an activity plan; otherwise I risk slipping into family commitments, such as household chores. If I’m able to more consistently set aside time for individual care, I will feel more balance, increased productivity and accomplishment with work, and less stress across the work/family continuum.