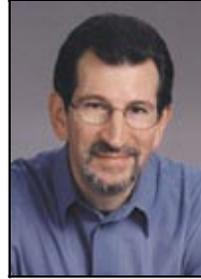


Trying to Balance Work and Family

By Irwin D. Karp

In a recent issue of the *ABA Journal e-Report*, lawyers provided their children's comments on their parents' jobs. One lawyer described a day when her child care person was sick and she took her young daughter to court, leaving her with a bailiff while she had a hearing in the judge's chambers. When the lawyer went to retrieve her daughter, the bailiff was laughing and told her that he asked the little girl if she was going to be an attorney like her mom when she grew up. The girl answered: "No, I'm going to be something where you always have dinner on time."



Having dinner on time every night is a fantasy not likely to be fulfilled in any profession today, but the competitive and demanding nature of practicing law makes balancing work commitments and family obligations a particularly daunting challenge. It's no wonder that work-family balance is a goal for many lawyers. The quest for billable hours, client demands, family obligations and desires, and the need for precious "down time" all clamor for your attention.

Maintaining a successful practice that does not come at the expense of healthy family relationships and personal satisfaction can be a perpetual challenge. Meeting this challenge will require regular assessment of your priorities, and conscious effort to reflect those priorities in the way you spend your time. This article specifically does not use the term "work-life balance." I always cringe when I hear that phrase since work is an integral part of life-not something separate and apart. We should strive for total balance, by paying attention to all areas of life: work, family, social, spiritual and personal. As one of the pioneers of modern time management, Alan Lakein, said, "Time is life . . . (and it is) irreplaceable".

Achieving the appropriate balance means different things to different people, depending on time of life and stage of career, family obligations and personal needs. Lawyers face conflicting pressures between billable hour requirements on the one hand and events like a child's birthday party on the other. With greater numbers of women in law, and more men wanting greater involvement as fathers, issues of balance between work and family assume even greater importance.

A well-balanced life can lead to greater productivity as greater satisfaction outside of work can lead to sharper focus in the office. Working longer and harder beyond a certain tipping point increases stress, which in turn can be counterproductive. In short, time away from work can make you more fulfilled as a person and more productive at work. We need to learn how to put parameters on work, so we can spend an appropriate amount of time with our families. What constitutes "appropriate" will vary depending on your situation, but if either your family or your work life is out of kilter, it will affect the other.

If part of a couple, you may have to balance your work load with that of your spouse to keep your household running smoothly. There are a growing number of single parent households, and lawyers at the peak of their career may have aging parents to care for at the same time young children are at home. Family members with special needs-illness or disability, infants or the elderly-may create extra time demands for brief or extended periods.

Women are working at all levels of the legal profession in growing numbers. And although some progress has been made, studies continue to show that most of the household and child care responsibilities fall on mothers, regardless of their professional status. Rarely are domestic burdens and obligations split right down the middle, and often there is a shifting of roles as careers change and children grow. Here are some tips for individual attorneys striving for the appropriate balance that meets their own circumstances and needs.

Decide on your goals and values for both work and family

First, spend some time reflecting upon and honestly determining what is really important to you. This may seem like a simple exercise, but if you find you are consistently short-changing those areas of life

you claim are important, you might discover your real priorities are different from what you had believed them to be, or you may need to reorder your priorities.

We often make the mistake of thinking our priorities in life remain static, and then feel frustrated when we find ourselves in a new stage of life where what is required of us doesn't allow for us to be true to our old priority list. Priorities and goals shift at different stages of your life, depending upon the needs and number of people in your family. A regular review of your priorities will help you stay in balance.

When facing competing demands and desires, it's actually hard work to determine your real priorities. In the pursuit of money, we all make choices that don't leave us with enough time for what we truly want. You may love your work and work hard at it, but don't want to do that at the expense of relationships with your family and friends. Balance requires some compromise, as you juggle between your competing priorities.

How much weight would you assign income, work satisfaction and success, and how much weight on time spent watching your kids grow up? You can have both, so long as you accept that one may encroach upon the other, and set boundaries that enable you to achieve your weighted priorities. You will be better able to make the choices that help you achieve balance when you are clear about your hierarchy of values.

Recognizing that priorities and needs for balance change with your circumstances will help you make the choices you need to make on a daily basis so that over time, you are fulfilling your goals in a way that is consistent with your values. Are you starting your career or approaching retirement? In a solo practice, small or large firm? Married or single? Are your children very young or adults out on their own? Recognize that while the early years of a career entail tremendous time sacrifices, you can choose to downshift when you have a young family, and that it is possible to have a late-career burst when kids are grown. Knowing that no stage is "forever" will help you live a life in balance; one where you look back without regret at a career, family and personal life well lived.

Seek out a situation that meets your goals

It's a given that work as a lawyer is high pressure and stressful. A great number of working hours are expected and the time demands are often made worse by lack of control over the timing of assignments. The benefit of the bargain is above-average income; while the burden is time away from loved ones. Do you need a baseline revenue stream to support your lifestyle? In most surveys, workers would gladly exchange less time on the job for less money if offered the option.

Some firms give only lip service to issues of work / family balance and some walk the talk. If time with family is one of your goals, then seek out firms that offer part-time options or flexible work arrangements.

If you are a solo practitioner, you have the flexibility to determine your hours, but as the sole breadwinner for the firm, if you don't work, you don't eat. If you are in a two-income family and can maintain a lifestyle that does not substantially exceed the income of your partner, this can be ideal for lawyers whose family needs don't fit with the demands of a high-stress law firm.

Working from home some of the time can cut commute time and therefore leave more available time for both client work and family responsibilities. Even if your work hours are very long, spending some days telecommuting can help you maintain balance and flexibility in life.

Schedule family time in your calendar

The State Bar of California Lawyer Assistance Program's Wellness Guide notes that "attorneys often need to be reminded to schedule time for personal needs such as time with family. . . ." Scheduling family time in your calendar is a large step in the direction of achieving balance.

Managing your time to meet family obligations doesn't mean you shouldn't work hard. It doesn't mean that there won't be crunch times where the see-saw tilts toward work. There are times where you need to work around the clock and when you have reason to expect your family to understand. But it's important to try to keep your work life from invading your family life wherever possible. If you must bring work home, do it after the kids have gone to bed. If you have scheduled a meeting with your child's teacher, or promised to go to the school play, don't run to answer the phone at your desk as you're walking out the office door. Keep your appointments with family, just as you would with a client.

Look at your calendar regularly to determine your major work projects and your important family

events (kid's birthday, anniversary, etc.) Make sure that you start your work project early enough so you're not faced with missing the family event because of your procrastination. This scheduled time with family should be sacrosanct.

Make efficient use of your time at work

Make a commitment at the start of the day to leave work by a certain time. Figure out what you need to do that day and attempt to minimize interruptions as much as possible. Commit to being more productive during the day. Focus is the best self-management tool. If you are driven to accomplish because you want to make it home on time for dinner with your family, you will become more effective at work.

Setting boundaries can increase your personal productivity. Do you want to chat with a buddy about a social event, politics, etc. or do you want to forego that social interaction so you can leave on time? Can you shorten the amount of time that you spend in meetings or casual conversations?

Efficiency is the key. If you want to get out of work "on time" to get home to help your kids with their homework, have dinner with your spouse or partner, or see a movie with friends, you need to gauge how much work you have for the day and get on with it. Minimize the interruptions, get focused, and eliminate extraneous unproductive activities. It's not a question of being anti-social at work it's a question of meeting your priorities.

Try to leave work at work

This is a tough one. The more that you have planned what you need to do the next day before you leave work, the greater will be your ability to focus on your family once you're home. Be present with your family. If you must work at home because of a pending deadline or overload, try to put a time constraint on it. Try to turn off the technology when at home. The technology that enables us to work remotely has also tethered us to the office since we're now "available" all the time. A break from work permits you to recharge your energy.

Reassess whether your work/family balance achieves your goals

Take stock every so often and perform a due diligence review of your situation. Are you meeting your goals? If not, are there any steps that you can take to meet those goals? Or, do you need to change your goals? The point is that none of us are forced to do things. We do have some choices.

There is no magic bullet here and achieving the balance that's right for you is up to you. Being conscious about your goals and trying to make your use of your time fit those goals affords the hope of achieving the balance between work and family that you and your family desire. Achieving balance is an ongoing process and takes attention. How you choose to spend your time, which is how you choose to spend your life, is a question that only you can answer.

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