



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Finding Work/Life Balance

Yes, indeed. The eternal question. The oft-asked inquiry of young and old attorneys alike: How do I find a work/life balance? Whether you are a first-year associate or a ninth-year, it is likely that you have posed this question to yourself, your mentor, your law school career center, your recruiter, and your cat.

The reason you have posed this question to so many – and likely still remain unsatisfied with the answer – is that there is no perfect answer. Finding a work/life balance is less about asking how to find it and more about questioning your priorities and ascertaining what really matters to you in your life - and being brutally honest with yourself in your response.

Writing an article which sets forth a series of steps attorneys might take to feel fulfilled and balanced is useful but, in my opinion, not as important as sharing what it feels like to go through the process of finding your own answer. Thus, I will attempt to break this article down into two parts:

Part I will explore those options which exist to help you create a work/life balance, and

Part II will explore one person's search (my own) for the answer to the aforementioned question.

Part I

Choose your practice carefully. If you haven't done so already, choose carefully. Take note of the work habits of fellow associates in whichever practice area interests you. Talk to them about their own work/life balance, their professional lives, their careers, and their home lives. Anyone who has ever enlisted in the armed services will tell you that before they enlist, they review their options and the demands those options might place upon them. Review your options. The life of a patent prosecutor can sometimes be very different from the life of a patent litigator.

Undertake pro bono work. You've heard this before. It's true. Pro bono work is, for most attorneys, an intensely rewarding experience on a variety of levels. Most firms allow their associates to pick the "type" of pro bono matter which best suits their background and interest level. Thus, you commence work on a matter which, from the outset, is close to your mind if not your heart. Pro bono further allows one to hone and develop those skills which might otherwise not be properly focused upon, such as client relations and legal strategy. Pro bono client relationships are also a breed apart. In my almost six years of practicing, only my pro bono clients said thank you. That meant something then; it means something now.

Stay late only when you have to; Leave early when you can. Do this. I know it's hard. Do this. There is no need

for you to be there past 6 p.m. if (a) work is slow; (b) no clients are looking for you; (c) your partner is on vacation; (d) the senior associate is also on vacation; and/or (e) your hours are met (or will be met) for the month. This is not about “treating yourself” to a break; it is about recognizing that you are a mature professional.

When you go home, go home. What does this mean? When you leave for the day, try to leave your work thoughts and concerns at the office, to the extent you are able. While this is not always possible, it IS possible at least 70% of the time. Trust me; you’ll see. This is especially true once you become more senior and have a better grasp of what needs to be done and when. A former colleague absolutely refused to answer any phone calls or return e-mail messages after 9:30 p.m. (Remember, I’m talking about New York City, where 9:30 p.m. is still early). At first, his “strategy” did not seem to be working. After two weeks, however, the calls slowed down. After four weeks, the e-mails slowed down. After two months, the calls stopped and the e-mails came to a gentle crawl. Smart colleague. He was able to spend more time with his family at night and clear his head for an hour or two before bed. As a result, he was no longer frantic at work and no longer distracted at home. Both the firm and his family benefited.

Explore a hobby. Yes, yes, yes. It is possible to have a hobby and have a legal career at the same time. You will be a better practitioner, and person, if you have interests outside the firm. Don’t underestimate this truth. Don’t mock it. As a third-year attorney, one of my closest friends, a 2400+ billable hour type, decided it would be “good for her practice” to learn how to tango. I laughed; we all laughed; you are likely laughing. Every Wednesday at 6 p.m., she would leave the firm to pursue the “art of the tango.” Now, she is laughing. She remains at the same firm we all started with while the rest of my class is gone. She is now a prominent practitioner, well-respected in her group, her department, and the firm; and she is known for her cool nature under pressure.

Go Part-time or Accept Flex-Hour Status. I cannot tell you how many people leave their jobs or switch firms without pursuing this alternative. If you think you have the courage to leave your firm, you have the courage to ask the management whether they will consider you in a part-time or flex-time position. If they say no, then leave and you will have lost nothing. If they say yes, congratulations! Obviously, by accepting a part-time or flex-time position, this may mean that you will be asked to step off the partnership track or held back in your year. If you reject such notion(s), leave. You still win because you have asked the question, you have made an informed decision, and you have moved on. If, on the other hand, you deem the sacrifice worth it, then stay and enjoy your new part-time existence. Every person I know who has asked this question, including myself, received a positive response. Of course, this cannot always be the case; however, where such option is allowed, it is a life-changing opportunity.

Moving to another firm. If the above options do not assist you in finding a work/life balance, moving to another firm or legal group are both viable possibilities. Don’t overlook them. Whether or not you believe it, large, top-tier firms do not operate in the same manner as small, boutique firms. Each firm has a different personality; each group has a different motivation; each head partner has a different style. Having helped so many candidates move from one legal environment to another, I see first hand every day how changing firms can mean a lifestyle improvement and a better work/life balance. All law firms are NOT the same.

Part II

Having said all of the above, I will explore the process of finding a work/life balance as undertaken by one person: me. I am a firm believer that the process is just as important as the end result.

First attempt: pro bono. As a mid-level associate at a top tier New York firm, I was told by many that achieving a balanced life involves pro bono work. Yes, for some this is the antidote, and it is a wonderful, selfless antidote. For others, it exacerbates the problem. Myself - I took on a landlord-tenant case which turned from one tenant into seventy tenants and from one negotiation session into a full-fledged trial. My client billables were being

sacrificed on trial preparation, my senior partner mentor was calling to ask me what I was working on (and why), and my hours went from 9 a.m. - 8 p.m. to 9 a.m. - 11 p.m. Obviously, a pro bono assignment of such magnitude was not the answer. So in true type-A style, I accepted another, smaller pro bono assignment. This was a more manageable matter, helping starving artists obtain contractually agreed-to royalties. It was manageable; it was interesting; and it was rewarding in a “hey, I’m a people-person” kind of way. Alas, it did not lessen my hours, alleviate my general restlessness, or help my balance. It just made me wish I was an artist. Not good.

Second attempt: Don’t accept face time. Stay late when you have to, and leave early when the work is slow. Nice idea. I couldn’t make myself leave early - ever. As a matter of fact, when I did leave early, I went home coatless. You see, I hung my coat on my chair in my office so that, if anyone walked by, it would look as if I were still at my desk, working late into the night. Not only was I coatless and cold, I also felt guilty for leaving early. Sad. Again, this works for some people; it did not work for me.

Third attempt: Hobby. Okay, I found a hobby. I joined a triathlon training group. I started off strong, leaving every Monday evening at 7 o’clock to train. Then, I started training at the gym closer to the firm (it was easier). Then, I started doing leg lifts under my desk (it was closer to the actual work). You get the picture. Come March, the only triathlon I was running was the one from my desk to McDonald’s and back - I could do it in 12 minutes.

Fourth attempt: Part-time. In the last year of my practice, I accepted a part-time corporate position within my firm. My firm was understanding, and I agreed to a substantial pay cut. The only problem was my hours did not change. They did not change because of my feelings of responsibility toward my clients and my need to give them my best - whether that meant at going home at 3 p.m. or working until midnight. I couldn’t tear myself away from the work long enough to attempt to achieve a balance, even when I was getting paid less.

What I finally came to realize was that after two years of trying everything, the one thing I did NOT try was looking inside myself and seeing myself for the person I really am. I discounted my knowledge of myself. I discounted my type-A tendencies, my need to give 100% to clients, 100% to my family, and 100% to my firm all in the span of 24 hours. I discounted my reality and instead played with false scenarios, never really quantifying the two key issues: (1) What are my priorities, and what really matters to me in my life? and (2) Am I willing to do what is necessary in order to properly integrate those priorities and make my life more balanced as a result?

At the end of my journey, I will tell you what I learned. I learned that I love my job, but I love my family more. Even more than that, I love myself the most - selfish but true-and I love working hard, very hard, but having control over my own life. Unless I had such control, I would never be “balanced” the way I need to be. Knowing the truth but rejecting it for seven more months, I finally realized that the more I considered it, the more I could not see myself working in a law firm or even in-house. However, I could see myself in a position where I called the shots, I could get home by 7:00 p.m. for my family, I could help my clients, and I could stay on top of the legal industry. I am now a recruiter for the East Coast legal market. This was not an easy decision, and I wouldn’t recommend it without a good deal of soul searching. It was my decision, and it has been enormously rewarding. It has balanced me.

Everyone has a process that he/she must go through before finding a work/life balance. Some explore the options explained in Part I. Some change departments, practices, or firms, and some move on to a different legal-related path. The possibilities are endless; the options, innumerable. At BCG Attorney Search, we know first hand how it feels to seek a balance, and we are dedicated to helping our candidates find such a balance in their lives.