



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler and Adam Narva

Striving for Professional Mediocrity

Accepting mediocrity in yourself is the only real way to achieve balance in your life. If you are a lawyer in private practice and you want to practice law while raising a family, then you need to be a mediocre lawyer.

In fact, if you want to have any outside interests while engaged in the practice of law, then mediocrity is your only choice.

My analysis is based purely on the laws of nature. There are only 24 hours in a day. If you spend 14 of them practicing law and commuting to work, other important things in your life will not get the attention that they need.

I have also reached this conclusion because the practice of law rewards complete devotion. You can always do more to research an issue, fine tune a brief, or identify additional risks your client might face when entering into a deal.

I strive for mediocrity in my own work and family life. I'll never run a marathon, but I exercise regularly. I'll never be the country's top grossing legal recruiter, but I make a comfortable living. I rarely work 12-hour days, but when a client needs something, I try hard to be responsive. I also participate actively in my children's schools, eat dinner with my family most nights of the week, and make time to read and play piano.

Of course, I do not work for a law firm. I do not even practice law. So why am I advising associates to be mediocre? Mediocrity is hardly the way to impress the partners at your firm.

How is it possible to be mediocre and be a great lawyer at the same time? How can you keep your law job and still have a life? I would like to offer some practical suggestions on how you can have it all—or at least almost have it all.

How to Achieve Mediocrity and Still Keep Your Job

If you went to a top law school or did very well at a second-tier school, mediocrity will not come easy to you. After all, working hard is what got you where you are. You identify yourself as a professional, and you derive some sense of self-worth from doing a great job.

Initially, however, you do not have to worry about doing a mediocre job. As a young associate, you will not have time for mediocrity because being mediocre is an earned privilege in the practice of law.

1. First impressions are critical. You need to earn the right to be mediocre. Giving anything but your best effort when you are a young lawyer is likely to have bad consequences for your career. In life, first impressions are very important. In a law firm, making a bad first impression on a partner may have irreversible consequences on your career—at least at that firm. Pay your dues when you are a junior associate. The good will that you generate as a young lawyer will make it easier to set limits in the future.

2. Learn to “just say no.” As you become more experienced in practice, partners will learn that you can deliver a great work product in a timely fashion. They will know this because they have worked with you. As you begin to implement your plan for achieving mediocrity, you need to begin saying no to certain work assignments. The key is that you must continue to do a great job on the work that you do agree to take. Rather than staying in the office until midnight every night or cutting corners on everything you do, do a great job on some things and say no to other things. Don't do shoddy work. Just take on fewer assignments.

3. Learn to manage your clients and the partners who assign you work. When possible, check in with clients and partners frequently to see when work is coming. This will give you a better chance to plan your time and avoid late nights in the office. Nothing is more disruptive to the work/life balance than work-related emergencies. Make a habit of finding out the real deadline. Once you have gained the respect of a client or a partner, he/she will be more understanding when you have other work and non-work priorities that you are trying to juggle.

4. Avoid high-stakes work that is time-sensitive. Stay away from high-stakes, time-sensitive corporate and litigation work. Try to limit the number of times in a year that you get staffed on an IPO, a TRO, or anything that just can't wait. Ask to avoid working with clients (and, if possible, partners) who tend to wait until the last minute before giving you work.

5. Learn to delegate. Learn to delegate those tasks that you do not need to do yourself. Take the time to figure out which tasks you can delegate. Anything that is likely to repeat in another transaction or litigation matter is a good candidate for delegation. Once you have invested the energy in training a paralegal or junior associate to take on these added responsibilities, you will reap the returns in future matters.

6. Think critically about your assignments. You can always spend more time researching an issue, drafting and revising a contract, or negotiating an agreement. Try to allocate your time according to the importance of the issue. Not every matter that you work on demands the A++ attention that you are accustomed to providing. If your client does not care a lot about a particular issue, then move on to something more critical. If the potential financial exposure for the client is low or if the actual risk of something occurring is truly de minimus, then do not over-lawyer the issue.

7. Take a pay cut. If you work in an environment where you find it impossible to say no or not right away, then you might want to consider leaving your large-firm job and joining a firm that has smaller clients, smaller cases, and smaller deals. If you are used to working with the most sophisticated clients, this may seem like settling for work that is second-rate. In some ways, it probably is. But in many other ways, it is probably the same work, minus a few zeros. I speak with many large-firm refugees who are quite happy to work with smaller clients so they can go home at a more reasonable and predictable hour.

8. Shut off work when you leave the office. Turn off the cell phone when you can. If you make yourself unavailable, then you are less likely to be interrupted. You will not be providing superstar 24/7 customer service, but most clients do not actually need this kind of service anyway.

Conclusion

You can't have it all. Law is a demanding profession. If you want to be a superstar in your firm, don't expect

to be at home for dinner at six every night. Don't plan to take up a new hobby or be at every one of your child's soccer games.

But with some effort, you can reach a compromise that will enable you to be a pretty good lawyer and, more important, a well-rounded person. Some of your peers and some of the senior partners you come in contact with will think that you have settled for mediocrity. But you will know that you have chosen to lead the life you want to lead.