



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Working Weekends and holidays

To be clear, this article is going to deal with, and encourage, some rather inhumane truths about practicing law in law firms. I cannot tell you how many associate careers I have seen ruined by the wrong attitude when it comes to working weekends and holidays. While you may consider working in a law firm “just a job,” if you telegraph that message to your superiors, you will be in trouble quite quickly. In order to really thrive in a law firm, your work must be far, far more than just a job. There is no better way to let your superiors know that your work is more than just a job than working weekends and holidays. To get ahead, you must do this. You certainly do not need to work every weekend and holiday. Nevertheless, this should not be something you make a major effort to avoid.

Paradoxically, it is generally the youngest and most promising associates on paper whose careers take a hit due to their work ethic. Presumably, they think that they are immune from having to work hard because they can coast on the merits of what they did in the past. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the necessity of working weekends and holidays. I understand that this message may seem overly harsh-and for a young associate it does sound harsh. Nevertheless, unless you are working weekends and holidays as an attorney, your career with most serious law firms will be pretty short-lived.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, you should be working weekends and holidays as an associate because (a) it is a privilege to have work, (b) there is only one way your firm makes money, (c) clients do not care about your weekend, (d) there are only a certain number of admission tickets to the partnership, and (e) you will not always be expected to work weekends and holidays.

A. It is a Privilege to Have Work

Whether you realize it or not, if you are in a law firm with a lot of work, you should consider yourself very fortunate. The fact that a law firm has a lot of work means that the firm is doing something right. The presence of work means that the firm is generating money to pay your salary. The presence of great amounts of work means that the firm is probably getting repeat work from having done a good job with its current clients. The presence of work also means that the firm likely has opportunities for you to advance. You could not be luckier than to be in the position of being in a firm with a lot of work.

As someone who has been a legal recruiter for a long period of time in good and bad economic cycles, I have witnessed and spoken with hundreds of associates who were laid off by their firms or “downsized” because there was not enough work. I am talking about numerous talented young attorneys. Believe me, when the work goes away, these associates are not happy. Everyone in a firm gets nervous when there is not enough work because

Working Weekends and holidays

this means his or her jobs are in jeopardy.

There is also the potential situation where your firm may not have a lot of work, but you do. This is even better. If partners are seeking you out and giving you a lot of work, this means that they like your work product. If partners like your work and give you more work, you are being recognized and are in a position where you have added job security. Partners are not giving you excessive amounts of work to punish you. They do this to reward you.

If you are asked to do work on a weekend or holiday, keep in mind that there could be inverse problems much worse than this: (1) the firm does not have any work to give, or (2) the assigning partner thinks someone else's work is better than yours. Having work is a privilege.

B. There is Only One Way Your Firm Makes Money

If your firm is like most law firms, there is only one way it makes money: by you billing hours. The firm does not make money when you are at a family gathering on the Fourth of July. The firm also does not make money when you are doing shots on Saturday night with your friends at a sports bar. The firm only makes money when you are billing.

PAGE 2

As an associate, you likely have no idea of the economics of your firm. You do not know what the office space costs, what the furniture in your office and throughout the firm costs and what the firm's obligations are for salaries for associates and staff, partner draws and more. You simply have no idea. Regardless of what your firm's obligations are, your firm needs money (and lots of it) to survive. If you help your firm make lots of money, you will be contributing to its survival.

But the larger reason you should be concerned with your firm making money is you. When partners and other decision makers evaluate you, they will be concerned with how many hours you are billing and how hard you are working because this is how they make money. If you were a law firm, would you rather have an associate taking up a desk who bills 1,500 hours a year, or an associate who bills 3,000 hours a year. Clearly, the harder working associate is going to be favored.

You need to bill hours and work hard in order for your firm to make money. This is essential. When it comes right down to it, your relationship with your law firm hinges on your ability to make them money. The law firm does not care if you do this on a holiday, or on a weekend.

C. Clients Do Not Care About Your Weekend

I am sometimes astonished when I speak with associates in law firms that are upset about working weekends. The reason I am so upset is because I am putting myself in the shoes of one of their clients. In a large law firm, clients typically have major problems and transactions that the attorneys are working on. Whether it is "bet the company litigation", a major bankruptcy filing, or defending an important patent, the matter is likely to be extremely important to the client. The client needs attorneys who take its legal matters just as seriously as they do.

If you have issues with working weekends and holidays on important and time sensitive matters for clients, I have a question for you: "Why are you an attorney?" Attorneys exist to solve the problems of others. As someone in this role, you hold a great deal of importance for your clients. Your clients need someone who is not afraid to work weekends and holidays.

While you may think that the argument here is that you should only work weekends and holidays on "pressing and time sensitive matters" for clients, the inverse is also somewhat true. Clients want to feel that their attorneys have their back covered at all times. Clients are paying a lot of money for the work you are doing. If

clients think that you are important enough to them that you are working on the weekends, they will be impressed and feel you are working diligently on their behalf. Clients also want to feel that the work you are doing for them is the most important thing on your agenda. Working weekends and holidays makes them think this.

D. There Are Only a Certain Number of Admission Tickets to the Partnership

There are only a certain number of people that your law firm can admit to the partnership. Due to this, your law firm will be seeking to find reasons to not make you partner when the time comes for you to be considered. Notice I used the word "not." Law firms are generally seeking reasons to exclude you from consideration from partnership because the number of spots they have is so limited. In a major New York firm with 40 associates in an entering class, for example, it would be exceedingly rare for more than 1 or 2 of these first year associates to ever make partner.

One of the strangest things about working in a law firm is that once you get competent in your work, most law firms will not give you a lot of encouragement. If you work much less than others in your class, the law firm might not even say anything to you. This makes asking you to leave or not making you partner much easier to justify in the firm's mind.

PAGE 3

When you are working as an associate inside of a law firm, you need to do everything within your power to stand out from your peers if you want to beat them in the race to being a partner. Working weekends and holidays when others are not is a very easy way to achieve this. You need to demonstrate your commitment to the firm and your work in order to get ahead.

E. You Will Not Always Have to Work Weekends and Holidays

Those who expect you to work weekends and holidays almost certainly did the same thing before they became your supervisor. In fact, they probably were among the hardest working associates at the firm. Because they did this too, they see absolutely nothing wrong with you doing the same. In order to rise, you must bond with your superiors. You can do this by showing them that you are sharing the same experiences they once had.

As an associate, you are beneath partners and more senior associates on the totem pole. You also presumably do not yet have children and the myriad responsibilities that come with this. You are also younger, which means you have more energy for the work. (At least, this is how the firm is thinking.)

When you get more senior and if you survive the initial "hazing," then you will presumably make partner and have others to work weekends and holidays. For the time being, though, you need to realize that this is part of the job and, due to your seniority, you should be working weekends and holidays.

Conclusions

While much can be said against working weekends and holidays, you need to understand that this is something that is important to your firm, your clients and your own advancement. If working weekends and holidays is offensive to you, perhaps you should consider another career outside of a competitive law firm. Certainly, there are firms where weekends and holidays are not expected at all. Nevertheless, because the message working weekends and holidays sends to your clients and your superiors, you need to understand that it is something that will only help you if your objective is to get ahead.