

The Work-Life (Legal) Balance: What Lawyers Truly Need to Know

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

Summary: Why isn't there a better work-life balance for attorneys? Blame the law firm culture.

Many lawyers tend not to know a thing about work-life balance.

Why? Because they're too busy working.

The truth is a work-life balance is crucial to *the life* of an attorney.

And if that balance is ignored or not even considered, the consequences could be dire.

The term work-life balance has been bounced back and forth in working environments for the better part of two decades.

Many believe the notion of a work-life balance first began when the millennial generation entered the workforce, and the demands of "perks" to initiate worker loyalty (on their part), spurred work-based amenities such as gym memberships, generous time off, and of course other normal perks such as health insurance and profit sharing.

Well, for all the grief that the Millennials receive as lazy and unmotivated in the workplace - which is a very poor judgment - this young workforce was on to something when their generation became associated with work-life balance.

Believe it or not, if it is true that Millennials brought about the notion of the work-life balance, they've saved countless lives and workers' sanity, if not, lives.

Too bad the notion of a work-life balance - whether it is or is not introduced by a millennial - has been so slow to make an impression on America's lawyers and law firms. If so, law might not be regarded as such an unpopular profession other than workaholics with unhealthy lives - if they have lives at all.

In an article that recently appeared on [Attorney At Work.com](#), the need for attorneys to have better work-life balance was examined.

As the article states, it isn't that attorneys don't want or are unaware of the meaningfulness of a work-life balance. The fact that a work-life balance doesn't exist for most attorneys is due to the struggle to achieve such a balance.

See also [Why You Can Never Stop Practicing Law for More Than a Few Weeks Once You Start](#)

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The First Problem May Be The Law Practice Itself

Dustin Cole, author of [Why Lawyers Really Struggle for Work-Life Balance](#), cites that the law firm structure itself is one of the main reasons attorneys find it difficult to obtain a work-life balance.

This is because law firms themselves have not significantly changed since their earliest days.

When a practice is small, it's easy for the attorney to keep track of and stay on top of a few files and stay in communication with a few clients. But as the practice grows, the typical response is simply, "I have more work to do, so I have to work longer hours."

So, the attorney keeps working harder, adds a couple of staff, and now has both more work to do and more people to manage. Unfortunately, the attorney typically has no managerial skills, nor a plan for growth, except to "work harder and longer."

Soon, working nights and weekends becomes the norm, along with waking up at night worrying about what didn't get done and getting calls from irritated clients.

"That's just what it takes to have a successful practice," many in the legal field will say.

Young attorneys with lots of energy and a "sacrifice now to succeed later" mindset work long hours, try to keep the expanding number of matters in mind and on their desks, and grow older. Over time, the energy and drive they have decreases. But the work -- if they're lucky -- keeps expanding, and every year it becomes harder to maintain the same pace.

So, with that, is it any wonder the profession has high rates of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, heart disease and suicide?

In This Profession, Success Kills

Experts state that the problem with the overworked culture with law firms tend to stem from law schools in that the institutions embed a "no boundaries" mindset about the [practice of law](#).

Big exam tomorrow? Big load of assignments? Work until the wee hours, pull all-nighters and take amphetamines to keep going.

Then, when a case wraps up, you go out for some celebratory, stress-relieving drinks afterward.

Of course, associates in large firms know this mentality continues into practice. Thrown an overwhelming load of work with a short deadline? Work once again until the wee hours, pull more all-nighters, start missing family time and personal life, go out for a drink after work to relax.

Well, to most attorneys, "That's just what it takes to succeed in the practice of law."

In most larger firms, associates are still working in a kind of extended boot camp, where it's "let's see who can survive the pressure." But for many, the alternative -- starting their own firm -- can be a nastier edition of the same game.

Struggling to make a living. Then seeing the work expand to take over their lives -- without an escape clause. They keep working harder as the firm grows, because "I'm making good money, my name is on the door and I have so much to lose. I can't give that up!"

Cole's article states that the path to achieving better work-life balance starts with refusing to accept that "this is the way it's always done it."

And it starts with asking a clear question: "How do we need to operate differently so I can have my nights and weekends back again?"

Six Steps Toward a Successful Firm and Successful Life

Successful lawyers learn new ways to operate their firms so they can keep building their practices while having a life. Cole suggests these six work-life balance steps for attorneys:

[Acquire better management skills.](#)

[Implement better technology.](#)

[Create and install better systems and procedures.](#)

[Develop better teams -- lawyers, paraprofessionals, support, contract staff -- and delegate more work.](#)

[Build a better market focus.](#)

[Deliver better legal services.](#)

Cole notes the placement of the element that is most lawyers' greatest pride: legal services, which is last. Why? Because the work of any firm is procedural and straightforward.

It's not rocket science.

And frankly, if you rarely need the rocket scientist, it's cheaper to collaborate with another firm than pay for such a specialist. Conversely, if you have a practice that is all rocket science, like appellate or [patent law](#), it's a different animal and much harder to grow.

So, to that end, the logic for that situation, according to Cole, is reversed. The most successful practices deliver more rocket science services because the market is larger, and the services are easier to deliver.

A Word of Caution

Most lawyers are cheap. They have a cash-flow mentality: "We can't afford that." They think of cost first and desired results second.

So even as they address any one of these six steps, they will tend to reduce their decision to the lowest -- or cheapest. Then, when early actions fail to deliver the desired efficiencies or revenues, they will discard it as a bad deal and adopt a "more work means more work" approach.

Attorneys who have successfully implemented a work-life balance understands the need to look beyond "costs" and focus on what that can increase profitability and improve everyone's well-being.

For example, in a rising market, successful attorneys never hesitate to hire a skilled paralegal because they know the paralegal will be a profit center -- they can and should bill about three times their salary.

Successful attorneys never hesitate to make a "capital investment" in people or technology because the goal is a long-term payoff of happier clients and better, more expedited work.

Lastly, successful attorneys never stop the quest for a better market focus and a better client base.

They don't get stuck in "Well, that's what we do."

They instead apply themselves to capital investment, which more or less means cost now, return later.

It's the difference between a "practice" and a "legal business."

Truly successful firms understand that to deliver the best legal services, to develop the best reputation and establish a strong client base, they must have a foundation of great business practices.

Or are attorneys today, especially young associates, too afraid to ask for a better balance?

While Cole in his article chalks a lack of work-life balance in attorneys up to [law firm culture](#), this article which appears on [FindLaw.com](#) states fear is what causes this imbalance in lawyers.

Many times, young lawyers who are told by their firms that work-life options are available without penalty still feel a disadvantage of them. Even though they are unhappy with their workloads, they don't want to choose alternative work arrangements until they have proven themselves in their firms.

Therefore, in some cases and in some law firms, it is often the older, more established lawyers - not the young M&A associates - who opt for the alternative work arrangements because they have already established themselves and are less afraid of pursuing a more balanced life.

In addition, even though alternative work arrangements are growing in popularity, many firms are taking their time implementing them, fearing the hassles they may cause in day-to-day operations.

Another problem with these options is that many firms look down on attorneys who choose them. For example, in law firms, lawyers who choose the part-time option are viewed as only being partly dedicated to their jobs and are not chosen for promotion.

In many firms that offer a part-time option, the option is not taken seriously; and lawyers end up with both a full-time workload and the firm's most undesirable work, which completely negates the purpose of opting for the alternative in the first place.

Because of these negative associations and hesitant attitudes, the positive effects of alternative work arrangements will not be seen on a national scale.

Conclusion

With discontent about overworking fairly widespread in the legal community, lawyers who want a better balance between work and life may soon set their fears aside in exchange for an alternative that makes their life a little more balanced.

And as far as firms that drag their heels in offering and honoring these alternatives may be passed over in favor of those that are sensitive to attorneys' needs, this may very well become the norm for many legal businesses going forward.

In short, as Cole's article states, "practice" and "business" are not antithetical. They're complementary. Collaboration is cumulative.