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Finding the Right Work-Life Balance as a Young Lawyer

BY SHAUNA L. QUIGLEY

Special to the Legal

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” This famous line in one of my favorite movies, “The Shining,” embodies what I, along with many, strive for: balance. Though some may argue that balance is overrated, I don’t agree. I feel most fulfilled when I am both productive in my professional life and present in my personal life.

However, as a young lawyer, I have found that balance is a luxury I might not yet be able to afford. In order to be equipped with the knowledge and training I need in order to be a successful attorney, I must put in time outside of work: reading Joanne Ross Wilder’s “Pennsylvania family law practice and procedure handbook,” seeking out other guide books related to the practice of family law in Pennsylvania, and taking continuing legal education (CLE) courses. But those hours spent furthering myself as a professional eat into time previously dedicated to my wife and loved ones.

My family understands why I need to put in long hours at the office, but when I am home and still working, it is understandably more frustrating for them. There have been many strained conversations late on weeknights or on Saturday mornings when I am trying to enjoy my free time with my wife and family, but it is clear that my head is elsewhere.

After taking time to determine how I can both develop myself as a lawyer, and also as a new husband, dog dad, friend and son, I have learned that while I may not currently be able to have perfect work/life balance, it is something I can achieve later if I work hard now. And, in order to maintain my personal relationships in the interim, I can make small sacrifices of my own that allow me to be present with my loved ones, while also putting in professional development hours on my own.



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At the turn of the new year, I reevaluated where I could find small pockets of time and where I could be more efficient with the hours I already have. Long commutes often eat away at people’s free time. In my case, I live in Philadelphia, and work in Doylestown. That results in an hour-long commute each way. This was something I was prepared for, as I accepted the job knowing that my wife and I have plans to move out of the city in the near future, and we agree that the advantages of working in Doylestown at my firm outweigh the disadvantage of enduring a longer commute in the short-term. The longer commute also doesn’t usually bother me, as I relish the quiet drives that allow me to listen to music and podcasts about politics, sports and movies. Still, those two hours add up to 120 minutes when I would either be leisurely eating breakfast with my family, or arriving home in time to take the dog out on his evening walk. If I’m not going to be at home at the dinner table or at my desk in the office, it’s important to be productive during this time.

With COVID-19, many CLE courses have been conducted remotely and the libraries of older courses are available online. I have set the goal of listening to recently recorded CLEs during two of the 10 one-hour long drives that I make each week. While I am not always eager to lose out on the quiet hours that allow me to transition from my work-to-home life, I recognize that in order to improve as a young lawyer, I need to be the one sacrificing small pleasures, and not asking my wife or family to. What’s more, some CLEs can be slow, and it’s easy to become distracted.

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The beauty of the car is that I have nowhere to go. As I grasp the wheel in the familiar 10 and two position, I am able to retain the majority of the practice tips and ponder how I can apply these skills in my own practice. On the mornings and nights, I listen to these courses, I get out of the car feeling motivated and accomplished, knowing I am exiting the vehicle with more knowledge than I entered it.

Other hours that add up include time I previously spent watching television late at night, or sleeping in on weekend mornings. Instead of turning off my brain late on weeknights when my other family members have gone to sleep, I can turn off the TV and take out my procedure handbook, and no one is the wiser. The Michael Scott from “The Office” might miss my full attention on those nights, but it is better than my wife. The same can be said for Saturday and Sunday mornings that I used to spend sleeping in. Instead of sacrificing daylight hours on week-ends with my head in the books or my nose in the computer, I can amass productive time on early weekend mornings, and then feel ready to be centered and focused on my family once the sun rises.

In addition to learning where to find these small pockets of time for professional development, I have learned that another key to achieving some kind of balance is the ability to remain flexible.

The practice of law is difficult and stressful. I am reminded daily that the profession of law itself is angry. We, as attorneys, fight every day for our clients, and it takes a personal toll. Family law attorneys also often see clients at their worst. Our clients’ foundations have been shaken and people are scared. Many will do the unthinkable to get what they want. When confronting a lot of negativity and divisiveness at work, it’s easy to take that home with you.

I have learned firsthand that my family doesn’t appreciate those leftovers at the dinner table. Thus, I have found that it is important for me to try to end my days and weeks on a positive note. Sometimes that means not hitting the goal of listening to a CLE on my drive home if it’s more important for me to calm down. Other nights, it has been a quiet day and my mood and brain are ready to take on more. It’s important to remain flexible in order to achieve the ultimate goal of furthering myself as a professional while also maintaining a healthy home-life with my wife.

Ultimately, I have found that one of the most important parts of a successful balanced life at this stage in my career is communication. At certain points in the work cycle, balance is more possible than others. As long as I am doing my best with the time I have and making my own sacrifices rather than demanding them of my family, my loved ones are understanding of the fact that the work I put in now will pay off later. It is my responsibility to use that time productively and make sure it is a good investment. I am a better lawyer when I have a healthy personal life, and I am a better husband when I am proud of the work I am doing in the office. •