

Women Lawyers Lives In Balance

Ideas For Managing Personal Lives and Professional Careers

By John W. Olmstead, MBA, Ph.D, CMC

Back in the distant past – 30 years ago - I have vivid memories of what law firm senior partners of that era now call the “good old days”. These times were characterized by:

- n Lawyers, predominately white male, that worked 2200+ billable hours per year and could be found in the office all hours of the day and night, seven days a week.

- n All lawyers could be found in the office on Saturday morning – regardless of whether they did any real work – the firm could count on these lawyers putting in their “face time” and seeing their bright and shining faces on Saturday morning.

- n Young associate lawyers that had as their main mission in life a desire to become a partner in the firm in which they started their career and remain there forever.

- n Lawyers that were primarily motivated by money and future partnership in the firm.

- n Hard work was *the order of the day* – not necessarily smart or productive work. The best way to increase income was to simply work harder.

- n Lawyers that would dedicate all of their time and energy to the firm

in order to accomplish the above.

“The newer generation may be on to something – lets work smarter and not necessarily harder. Time is becoming more important to people than money.”

To the dismay of these “good old days” senior partners times have indeed changed. Today’s law firms are saturated with the most diverse workforce this country has known since our great-great grandparents abandoned field and farm for factory and office. At no previous time in our history have so many and such different generations with such diversity been asked to work together shoulder to shoulder, side by side, cubicle to cubicle. Law firms today are constituted by:

- n Four generations of lawyers working side by side.

- n A larger number of women and minority lawyers.

- n Women now constitute – 45% of associates; 28% of counsel; 26% of non-equity partners; 16% of equity partners in law firms.

- n 58 year-old baby boomers who

don’t want to retire and are no longer willing to put in 70 hour work weeks.

- n 28 year-old generation X and Y men who want to be better and involved fathers than their fathers were, and need flexible work.

- n Technology that allows lawyers to be more productive and work remotely resulting in less required face time at the office.

- n Empty offices on evenings and weekends.

- n Lawyers that don’t want to become partners.

- n Lawyers that want to work part time.

- n Lawyers that want more out of life than work and money.

Today, lawyers from all demographic groups are realizing the importance of balancing their personal and professional lives.

Work-Life Balance is the Order of the Day

Many old-timers long for the “good old days” and feel that today’s younger lawyers are not motivated and dedicated to hard work and the practice of law. However, it is now becoming evident the true extent of the damage that has been caused by unbalanced lives. The newer generation may be on to something – *lets work smarter and not necessarily harder.*

Recent ABA surveys and studies demonstrate that attorneys are becoming more and more frustrated by:

- n Not enough time to enjoy family and life
- n Working harder and making less
- n Missing out on life and family
- n No time to pursue and develop personal and professional interests
- n Not spending quality time with spouse and children

Attorneys are experiencing dependency and other problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, divorce, and suicide.

According to ABA studies almost half of surveyed lawyers feel that they do not have enough time for themselves or their families. Almost three-quarters of lawyers with children report difficulty balancing professional and personal demands. The number of women who doubt the possibility of successfully combining work and family has almost tripled over the past two decades. Only a fifth of surveyed lawyers are very satisfied with the allocation of time between work and personal needs. A desire for more time to meet personal and family needs is one of the major reasons lawyers consider changing jobs, and it is a more important consideration for women than for men.

Our law firm clients tell us that personal and professional life balance is their greatest challenge. *Time is becoming more important to people than money.*

Career Burnout Facts

According to a study conducted by the National Association of Law

Placement:

- n Absence of work-life balance is among the factors leading to attrition.
- n Attrition at 19% in 2005 – highest since NALP began studies in 1996.
- n No sign of attrition declining.
- n Losing a fifth-year associate comes at an estimated cost of \$300,000 to firms.
- n Even when not working, lawyers find themselves thinking about their cases.
- n There is a greater desire for work-life balance among Generation X (born 1965-77) and Generation Y (born 1978-89), compared with those of earlier generations.

Impact On Careers of Women Lawyers

Women attorneys, usually due to child rearing and other family responsibilities, were the first to have to fight the battle for work-life balance and were the first victims that experienced battle scars. These battle scars have included:

- n Two thirds of highly qualified women professionals, including lawyers, have either left the workforce or languished on the sidelines.
- n According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett sixty percent (60%) of highly qualified professional women have had interrupted careers (nonlinear careers) and they have taken off-ramps and scenic routes from their career highway/road to success. These women have had a hard time conjuring up continuous, cumulative, lockstep employment – which is a condition for success within the confines of the white male competitive model. *Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping*

Talented Women on the Road to Success (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007)

- n Thirty Seven (37%) of women leave careers for a period of time.
 - Time spent outside workforce average 2.2 years
 - 93% try to get back on the career track
- n There is a negative stigma of work-life policies in law firms such as:
 - Telecommuting
 - Job sharing
 - Part-time/flexible jobs

As a result of this stigma women quit their lawyer jobs rather than apply for policies that are on the books but considered a “kiss of death” to one’s career.

- n Ninety three (93%) of off ramped women professionals want to rejoin their professions – but only 74% manage to do so. Among these only 40% return to full-time mainstream jobs.
- n The penalties of time-out. Women lose 18% of their earning power when they took an off-ramp.
- n Women enter law firms in numbers equal to those of men, but leave the firms in numbers far higher than men.
- n In prime earning years (10-25 years experience) women constitute:
 - 20% of equity partners
 - 24% of most junior equity partners
 - 16% membership in highest governance committees
 - 5% of managing partners nationwide

There Is Hope For Change

While women, have been the initial

victims of professionals desiring to implement work-life balance, others including retiring boomers and generation X and Y males also desire better balance in their lives as well. These groups are increasingly taking off-ramps, scenic routes, and timeouts. The core problem is the white male competitive model and its lack of flexibility. So - in the future women may not be fighting the battle for flexibility alone.

The prime motivator for action in law firms may be the coming talent shortage that is rapidly approaching. Law firms will be forced to make the best use of all of the talent they can get their hands on. Demographic and other structural shifts in the workforce will provide a sense of urgency for law firms to make full and proper utilization of the lawyer talent pool – including women. As stereotypes and stigmas are removed the following work arrangements will be commonplace in the future and will be used by employees without fear of punishment or negative reprisals:

- n Compressed workweeks
- n Flextime
- n Reduced-hour schedules
- n Short-term seasonal arrangements
- n Job sharing
- n Telecommuting

Ideas for Managing Personal Lives and Professional Careers

Firm Level

Firm leadership needs to recognize the importance of stepping up to the plate and begin creating a sense of urgency for change. Everyone in the firm should become a part of the process. Here are a few ideas:

IDEA #1: Embed Work-Life Balance Policies and Practices into

the Firm's Culture:

1. Create firm goals and measure accomplishment.
2. Top level partners should walk the talk and demonstrate that there are no negative stigmas, consequences, etc. for taking advantage of flexible work arrangements. Have a senior level partner participate and use a flexible work arrangement and makes its use known to all.

IDEA #2: Educate partners in the firm on the business case for removing negative stigmas of flexible work arrangements, improving lawyer retention, and managing lawyer talent.

IDEA #3: Get buy-in, especially from top level partners.

IDEA #4: Identify potential obstacles and deal with them.

IDEA #5: Generate short-term wins and build upon them for future initiatives.

Individual Level

Attorneys need to make changes as well. Here are a few ideas at the individual level:

IDEA #1: **First and foremost - Develop the courage to ask and have the determination to say no.** Create your life balance expectations for your clients and your superiors in the firm. When interviewing for a new job or position let your future employer know your expectations – upfront.

IDEA #2: Create A Personal/Professional Life Plan.

Establishing personal and professional priorities and making correct choices is crucial. You must begin

by determining what's important in life – make a list of what's truly important in your life, establish boundaries and priorities, and formulate a plan. Typical elements that should be on your list include:

- n Physical Health
- n Spiritual
- n Nutrition
- n Stress Management
- n Family
- n Friends
- n Financial
- n Professional Relationships
- n Efficiency at Work
- n Professional Development
- n Hobbies and Outside Interests
- n Your Work Life

IDEA #3: Use and work your plan.

IDEA #4: Resist the temptation to go to work for a culture that is not in support of work-life balance if that is important to you. **Say No.**

IDEA #5: If work-life policies don't exist in your firm – build a case for them. Don't be afraid to ask. If they do exist – have the courage to use them.

IDEA #6: Work smarter – not harder. Improve your time management skills.

IDEA #7: Tend to your physical health. Insure that you address prevention and treatment of diseases, weight control, physical fitness and stress management. Schedule and keep annual physicals. Exercise daily.

IDEA #8: Take time for yourself and family. Take vacations.

IDEA #9: Define what is important to you and define your personal-professional life balance boundaries.

IDEA #10: Enjoy life and get involved in activities other than the practice of law. Pursue hobbies and other interests.

Remember – the most important thing you can do is - have the courage to ask and the determination to say no.

Good luck on your journey.

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Additional articles and information is available at the firm's web site:

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