

# Living well while living large

It's likely not surprising that the work/life imbalance that we at OLAP deal with all too often starts with work – or at least the public view of work. There's a widely accepted ethos in the legal community, at least in public, that lawyers are all grown-ups and understand and even welcome the challenge and sacrifice that come with a busy law firm practice. In public, they'll scoff at 'New Age' notions of work/life balance or self-care and tell you that if you can't take the heat, get out of the boardroom.

In private, however, when partners and fellow associates are out of ear-shot – perhaps at home with a sympathetic spouse or on the telephone with a counsellor at the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program – more and more lawyers voice a different view.

## The current landscape

The practice of law carries with it unique challenges, regardless of the firm or firm size. Most counsel endure:

- billing and collection pressures;
- legal adversaries out for blood;
- competition among associates;
- the constant pressure to remain on top of the ever-evolving jurisprudential landscape; and above all,
- extreme time pressures.

According to a Canadian Bar Association-Ipsos Reid survey, 68 per cent of lawyers surveyed have difficulty achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives; 84 per cent said time demands are the greatest challenge.

In another survey, nearly half (48 per cent) of supervised lawyers from all practice sectors agreed with the statement: "I feel stressed and fatigued most of the time."

To be sure, work/life balance is a subjective game. Two associates, working at precisely the same pace, may have diametrically opposing opinions of the work they're doing and what type of 'life' that represents. Many legal practitioners simply love the work and can't get enough of it. Long hours at the office mean doing more of what fuels them. Others, however, scratch and claw their way through each day. They can't wait to get their work done so that they can finally have a moment's peace – a respite from the grind. Undoubtedly, the majority of counsel find themselves somewhere in the spectrum between these two poles.

## Where you stand depends on who you are

There is no global solution to finding balance in work and life. The only common aspect in everyone's experience of balance is the utter lack of commonality. Each person must strike that individual balance based on his or her unique values, preferences, needs and goals.

So where are you on the work/life spectrum? What values do you bring to the table? At your core, what's most important to you? When you look back at your life and career at age 80, what will that person think of the life you're now living?

This last question, often referred to as the Future Self exercise, is a telling one. Lawyers generally find themselves where they are, on a treadmill to somewhere, not entirely conscious of the purpose or ultimate goal of the whole exercise. A quick way to spring into consciousness about the road you're on is to check in with your Future Self.

What most people find when they visualize a conversation with that person is that the Future Self has a more expansive, less judgmental view of the purpose in their lives and what truly is fulfilling to them. One lawyer's Future Self may tell her to give herself a break and not be so hard on herself. She may give her a perspective on the relative importance of money versus spiritual or social pursuits. Warren Buffett, the second wealthiest person in the world, recently told an audience of university students that to him, the true measure of success is the number of people who genuinely care about and respect you when you near the end of your life.

Another lawyer's Future Self may look at the long hours spent on complex, challenging projects with passion and verve, and reflect on how that pursuit will stand that lawyer in good stead at the end of a long, rewarding career. The key is that when one strips away the immediate concerns of face time in the office or this month's billable hours goal, one can more clearly see the true motivation for one's trajectory in life. One can take a longer view, more attuned to who one is and how one wants the professional and personal life to unfold.

The key piece of the puzzle lies in knowing yourself. It strikes some as ridiculous to suggest that a person would not know him or herself. Who else would know what makes them tick, what excites them, what scares them, what fulfills them, if not themselves? Furthermore, lawyers are some of the brightest and most creative and accomplished members of our society. If anyone has the requisite brain power necessary for self-awareness, it's lawyers.

And yet, when you ask people about the lawyers they know – family members, friends, high school or university

classmates, etc. – aside from almost universally being impressed with the accomplishment of becoming a lawyer, those non-lawyers reveal how so many of the legal practitioners they know are unhappy or even unwell.

Ultimately, it is the firm and not just the associate that suffers. Catalyst Canada, in its recent report on flexibility in Canadian law firms, found that 62 per cent of female associates and 47 per cent of male associates say they intend to stay with their current firms for five years or less. Further, both women and men reported the same leading factor in choosing to leave their current firm for a new one: an environment more supportive of family and personal commitments, as well as more control over their work schedules. Catalyst found that associates with positive perceptions of their firms' work-life cultures intended to stay with those firms for a longer period of time.

On the other hand, when a firm invests time and money in new associates, only to have them leave at the very time that they are about to reap profits for that firm, the cost is measurable. Catalyst calculated that an associate's departure costs a firm an average of \$315,000. Clearly, the firms that heed these retention warnings foster not only a healthier work environment, but also a healthier bottom line.

### What you can do

No matter what the work environment, associates seeking less stress and more

balance and fulfillment can, on their own, take steps to attain this goal. And the options available are as varied as the types of people using them.

Some of most widely accepted suggestions include:

- eating a well-balanced diet;
- not skipping meals;
- drinking lots of water;
- engaging in regular aerobic activity;
- practising relaxation techniques such as meditation and deep breathing; (When you're under stress, before speaking, take three deep breaths and then exhale. Deep breathing can be like a 'reset' button.);
- reducing or eliminating the use and/or abuse of alcohol, tobacco/nicotine or caffeine;
- monitoring the use of prescription drugs to guard against either physical or psychological dependence;
- getting sufficient sleep and rest to allow the body to recuperate;
- learning to say 'No!' to demands that are too much and knowing where that line is;
- doing something nice for someone else on a daily basis without them knowing about it and without expectation of reward;
- maintaining a gratitude journal or some other regular reminder of the good things in one's life; (Lawyers tend to

focus on the negative. In fact, many are paid to be pessimistic);

- taking regular vacations;
- maintaining a strong and active family and social network with frequent interaction;
- pursuing interests and hobbies.

Chances are you've simply skimmed this list with minimal thought: That desensitization is an integral part of the human mind's survival mechanism. It protects us from being overwhelmed and over-stimulated. However, desensitization can also numb us to obvious truths. We see so many self-help lists that we stop truly taking in the content.

So now read this list again, as if it was the first time. Take a breath, think about the ideas, internalize those suggestions that may resonate with you in your life and will steer you to living well while living large.

---

*Doron Gold is a case manager at the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program (OLAP). He is a lawyer and certified personal coach with a private coaching practice working primarily with lawyers. He can be reached at the OLAP offices at (toll free) 1-877-576-6227 or in the GTA at 905-238-1740.*

*cont'd from page 36*

(3) indicating if there are specific times when you'll be available for a return call.

Doing these three things will help the person understand why you called and, depending on the circumstances, enable him to get back to you with the information you require, even if he must leave a detailed message in your voice mail. If used properly, voice mail is an excellent

way to eliminate the time-waster of phone tag.

And, to those of you who restrict people to leaving 60-second messages: Please do us a favour and configure your voice mail so that we can leave you a longer and more detailed message.

Now, for the most important part of the entire column: Clearly and slowly state your phone number. Most people say their

number at speeds approaching Warp 5, with the result that it is unintelligible. Slow down and take a deep breath between each digit. Okay, maybe not quite that slow, but you get the point.

---

*Dan Pinnington is director of practicePRO, LAWPRO's risk and practice management program. He can be reached at [dan.pinnington@lawpro.ca](mailto:dan.pinnington@lawpro.ca)*