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Has Work-Life Balance Become a Modern Myth?

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Of the Legal Staff

Practicing law and raising a family today is certainly fulfilling and rewarding, but it remains filled with the elusive aspiration of work-life balance. Why do we continue to subscribe to the mythical notion that successfully doing it all necessarily means balanced?

Female attorneys, who make up 31 percent of Pennsylvania's lawyers, are constantly striving to achieve this balance, only to discover there's no one-size-fits-all solution. During my decade-long career, I have realized that the phrase "work-life balance" oversimplifies a complex concept and is misleading. It implies that women can engage in demanding careers and raise children in perfect rhythm.

Truthfully, as female lawyers with children, we are constantly shifting and realigning our priorities, multitasking and finding ways to cram more into an already overscheduled existence. This is not necessarily a bad situation. On the contrary, being able to do the work that one is passionate about and also raise a family is having the best of both worlds. But, it presents a challenging and stressful undertaking each day.

Let's do away with our need to use the euphemistic phrase "work-life balance" to describe this demanding feat, and instead be candid and forthcoming about what is required to have both a challenging legal career, while being an involved parent: namely, boundless energy and commitment to both endeavors and presence of mind.

While there are certainly no one-size-fits-all answers, here are some practical tips to navigate a demanding personal and professional life:

- **Keep it Separate.** As we all know, the availability of technology allows for advanced multitasking, but, when done excessively, it can become counterproductive. Be present in the moment by keeping work life at work and

home life at home. When you are with your children, put your BlackBerry down, stop obsessing about work and focus on them. Similarly, when you are working hard to meet a filing deadline at the office, don't get distracted by your long, personal "to do" list that you need to tackle after work that day.

- **Don't Overbook.** All of us wish we could be in two places at one time, and oftentimes our overbooked calendars reflect this. Become adept at skillfully scheduling your professional activities to ensure there's no crossover with other commitments. It's important to set limits and be strategic about the extra activities you commit to. Consider scheduling lunch meetings to avoid conflict with your kids' activities and carpooling duties. Double booking just leads to broken promises and disappointment.

- **Ask for Flextime.** Flextime is gaining strength. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics article published last December titled, "A time to work: recent trends in shift work and flexible schedules," "nearly one-third of wage/salary workers have flexible schedules on their primary jobs."

Approach your firm about having a flexible schedule, which can allow you to attend during-the-day school activities and spend more time with your children before they head off to bed, etc. As a mother of twin 10-year old children, I've been lucky to have such a schedule — allowing me to pursue my professional passions while spending meaningful time with my kids and enjoying life.

- **Be Flexible.** Recognize and accept that work-life balance is a fluid concept and does not necessarily mean perfect equilibrium. Do not be overly rigid and try to allocate an equal number of hours each day for both work and family. Instead, allow your priorities to change as circumstances dictate. Being flexible and prepared to quickly realign priorities will alleviate unnecessary stress.

- **Take a Deep Breath.** Oftentimes you feel like your flextime can translate into overtime. We all understand that to be truly

present as a parent, and fully engaged as a lawyer, one must wring more hours out of any given day. We can work many hours at the firm, rush home to cook dinner, drive the kids to soccer or basketball practice, help them with homework, put them to bed, etc., only to stay up into the wee hours of the morning preparing for the next day's expert depositions in a products liability case, or writing a certification brief in a complex class action case. Take a deep breath, and accept that at times you will undoubtedly encounter days that are overwhelmingly hectic and demanding and know that you'll get through them one step at a time.

While doing both is enormously challenging, the dual roles of attorney and mother serve you well. In my case, while advocating for clients whose children have been harmed by defective products or suffered cognitive impairment from toxic exposures, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to have two healthy, thriving children. Similarly, being a mom has given me even greater compassion and commitment to helping my clients, particularly injured children.

The rewards and accomplishments on both fronts are enormous. Having both is ideal, as the journey is fulfilling and challenging — even if not always balanced. •

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