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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## LESSONS FROM LAWYERS: ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

When Anne-Marie Slaughter's article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," appeared in *The Atlantic* this last summer, the link was quickly plastered on my friends' Facebook pages and circulated in e-mails discussing "work-life balance." Ms. Slaughter's personal story of leaving her senior-level position at the State Department to return home to her family in Princeton, New Jersey, led me to think about my own life and future. Only two years out of law school, I am hoping to enjoy a long career as an attorney while still having a full life outside the office. The question for me is how I will integrate a demanding client-services job while still meeting personal obligations to my family, my community, and myself.

To answer this question, I spoke with lawyers who had diverse and varied histories – single, married, with children, without children, big firm, small firm, government lawyers, and in-house counsel. The only common denominator among the individuals I spoke with is that they have more work experience than I do. I had expected that the advice given to me would differ depending on the person's life path, but surprisingly, common themes emerged. In this article, I have attempted to summarize the advice that was given to me in hopes that it might also help other lawyers.

### View Life as a Chapter Book

There will be moments in life that require you to focus intensely on work. In the middle of a trial, you might miss the nonprofit's board meeting or your daughter's volleyball game. At other mo-

ments, perhaps when a family member is sick, work will need to take a back seat. In these times of great demand from any part of your life, things might seem out of balance, but this does not mean they are not successfully integrated. As one general counsel told me, you have to look at life as a chapter book. In any given chapter, the emphasis might be on work, family, or your own health. When you look on your life collectively, however, and see all the chapters together, there will be a cohesive and hopefully balanced story.

### Focus on the Things That Only You Can Do

One of the orientation programs I attended when I started at my firm discussed how to use legal secretaries. The firm explained that, generally speaking, associates should not spend their time loading the printer paper or inserting a partner's handwritten edits into a brief, as these are tasks that a secretary can do better and faster. The associate should concentrate on matters requiring a law degree.

Having recently been a law student, I have been accustomed to doing everything for myself because money was tight and my time was cheap. As a lawyer, my time has quickly become more valuable. Just as lawyers at the office should be efficient with their time and rely on their secretaries, in their personal lives, lawyers might have tasks that could be better handled by someone else. From household help to delivery services to friends and family, relying on others can make you more efficient with your time. Thinking about

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what you need to do and what you can allow others to do for you, both in the office and at home, will allow you to maximize each day.

### Set Your Expectations

Successfully integrating work and personal life involves establishing expectations and choosing paths in the profession that enable you to meet those expectations. As an attorney in private practice, it is unlikely that you will have consistent hours that allow you to leave the office every day at 5 p.m. If you and those in your life expect a consistent schedule, disappointment may be inevitable. If predictability is important, however, government and in-house positions may be more suitable.

To set expectations, you also need to define success for yourself. For some, success might mean getting the partner's corner office and being able to afford private school tuition for your children. For others, success might mean living on a smaller salary but being home every night for dinner. Success does not have to be the same for every lawyer. Indeed, if every lawyer were striving to achieve that corner office, the world would be a less interesting place, with few quality public defenders, legal-aid attorneys, and in-house counsel. The variety of what one can do with a law degree is part of what makes this profession great.

At the London Olympics in 2012, Michael Phelps walked home with four gold and two silver medals. For any other Olympian, such a performance would be phenomenal. Yet, based on Phelps's winning eight gold medals in the Beijing Olympics in 2008, commentators noted that it seemed as if Phelps had lost his touch in 2012. When asked about his performance, Phelps admitted that he might have given up a bit of swimming perfection in London to enjoy life out of the pool for a couple of years following the Beijing Olympics. In other words, his definition of success in London was not the same as it had been four years earlier.

Not only does Phelps's story highlight that different chapters of life have different focuses, but it also shows how defining success affects the decisions you make. If you define success as being the most renowned lawyer in your field, you will likely spend many hours training and perfecting your skill, like

an Olympic athlete. You may have to sacrifice your personal life to achieve that goal. But if you redefine success to mean four gold medals instead of eight, you, like Phelps, might have time to enjoy some success outside of work as well.

On a related note, many of the firm leaders I spoke with stated that having passions and commitments outside of work makes an attorney a better lawyer. Not only are those individuals more focused and productive when they are working, but they also have connections that lead to new client relationships. Being in a client-services business, sometimes lawyers are hired based on whom they know. A lawyer who has many contacts outside of the office is likely to be more successful in business development than the lawyer who spends 100 hours a week alone in his office.

### Set Your Boundaries

Being a lawyer will take as much of your time as you give it. If you are willing to work all day, into the night, and every weekend, many legal jobs will unapologetically take that time. It is the individual lawyer's responsibility to set his or her own boundaries.

Lawyers I spoke with also recommended establishing your personal "non-negotiables" early in your career. These are personal obligations that you will not compromise. For example, you may elect to be home every night for dinner, even if that means working from home late into the night. One lawyer told me that she puts those non-negotiables into her calendar and treats them just like client obligations. For example, if you have a meeting with Client A scheduled at 4 p.m., and Client B wishes to schedule a conference call at the same time, you probably would not cancel on Client A. Instead, you would find a different time for the call with Client B. The same can be true if "Client A" is visiting your mom at the nursing home. If you are consistently willing to put personal obligations behind work, it will be difficult to ever meet those personal responsibilities. One attorney I spoke with wished he had had the confidence to say "no" to assignments and had been more protective of his personal time when he was in private practice. This is not an easy task, especially as a young lawyer trying to impress supervisors. If the pace you are currently

operating at is unsustainable, something must change, and it is the attorney's responsibility to manage his or her time and turn down assignments when necessary.

Good employers might help monitor boundaries to some extent. For example, one managing partner noted that if she sees that an associate's hours are exceedingly high one month, she will talk with the associate to see if he needs help. The managing partner told me she prefers those high-billing months to be the exception rather than the rule for any single associate so that he or she does not burn out. Even if you are fortunate to have a supervisor who tries to protect you from burnout, the ultimate responsibility for your personal time and mental health rests with you.

### Reach Out for Help

As you take responsibility for setting boundaries and preserving personal time, experienced lawyers also reminded me that you should reach out for help when you need it. One lawyer relayed a story about a colleague who told her how stressed he was by having to balance work with taking care of his ill parent. The attorney he confided in was not only able to help him manage his workload, but as it turned out, she had been through a similar experience with her parents and could recommend a professional caregiver. Lawyers are often reluctant to ask for help for themselves, but if the struggling attorney had never reached out for help, balancing his job with the demands of his personal life would have been much more difficult.

Many attorneys shared stories of relying on co-workers to help in a time of personal difficulty. The circumstances for each were different, but the message for all was the same – these lawyers genuinely liked the people working beside them. If you do not know your co-workers outside of the office, invite them to coffee or lunch. If people get to know you outside of the office, they will be more likely to support your life outside of work when you need it.

### Find a Job You Love

Finally, the lawyers who seemed most happy with their life in and outside of the office truly enjoyed their job. For some, it was the intellectual challenge. For others, it was the thrill of rushing to complete a last-minute filing or the excitement of performing in

front of a jury. It is called "work" for a reason, and everyone has stressful, frustrating days. Because of the diverse opportunities a law degree provides, you can seek out a legal job that matches your expectations, passions, and skill set. If you love what you do, integrating your profession with your personal life is much more likely to be a success.

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