

ACHIEVING PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE BETWEEN FAMILY AND CAREER

Clear goals, an open mind, self-honesty are key to finding work-life balance

» by Leo Valiquette

Earlier this spring, Brenda Hollingsworth, a partner at law firm Auger Hollingsworth, was named Professional Businesswoman of the Year by the Women's Business Network. We asked her, as a new member of the Chamber to share her thoughts on achieving work-life balance as a professional woman, or man, for that matter.

"The theme I draw from these points is that flexible work hours, rather than fewer work hours, are the most important tool to making a successful practice co-exist with a successful family life," Hollingsworth said. "The key to finding that flexibility is in having an open mind to the type of work you want to do. Some positions/practices lend themselves to flexibility some don't - pick one that does!"

» DON'T TAKE THEIR WORD FOR IT

As an employee, what your employer says about work-life balance is less important than what actually goes on. Try to determine if there are employees in positions similar to yours who have children and speak to them before accepting an offer. If you are going to be the first employee with children, (I was in this spot once) be aware that you will be an experiment for the firm - if you are someone who does not like to shake things up, this may not be the place for you.

» TAKE CONTROL

Regardless of whether you are an owner or an employee, how much autonomy you have over your own client files will play a big part in how successful you can be at achieving work-



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Brenda Hollingsworth
Partner, Auger Hollingsworth

life balance. If you set your own goals and targets for file completion, you can manage family time better. In contrast, if someone else manages your schedule and dumps files on you at the last minute, it can give rise to a lot of stress where you risk disappointing your family and yourself.

This sounds obvious but it isn't. Often people in the profession feel that they are at the mercy of their firm and cannot ever get real autonomy unless they are a corner office partner. But the truth is, it is possible - and not just for women, either. My husband, a high-level criminal defence lawyer, very rarely misses one of our kids' hockey games. Having the right focus and building your own client base so you are in charge of your own files are key to autonomy, whether you work as an employee or on your own.

» CHOOSE YOUR SPECIALITY WISELY

When choosing an area of focus for your practice, be aware that some specialties have more emergencies and more irregular hours than others - a wisely chosen specialty makes a big difference. Personal injury law is intense and there can be a lot of sad stories but there is not going to be an injunction served at 5 p.m. on a Friday. While trial time is very busy, the workload is manageable during relatively normal business hours, or can be done in the evening when the kids are in bed. By contrast, commercial litigation is much less flexible.

» CLARIFY YOUR OWN DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

It is important to not get bogged down by

someone else's definition of success. Making partner at a national firm in Toronto or London or New York is not the only way to achieve success. Like everyone else at law school (and other professional and business schools), I was indoctrinated into thinking that certain jobs were prestigious and certain jobs were not. If you narrow your mind that way, you discount career options that may help you achieve the work-life balance that you seek.

That's not to say that there are not big firm success stories on the work-life balance front - there are. But those have been hard-won victories for which not everyone wants to battle.

» WHY NOT WORK FOR YOURSELF?

If you cannot find a job that lets you have it all, make your own! Most professionals are trained in skills that lend themselves to self-employment. A little flexibility and imagination go a long way to building your dream practice that is both intellectually satisfying and allows you to attend your child's choir performance during the tulip festival or work out from time to time.

While the hours are not shorter, and you have a job running your business in addition to your actual client work, you have enormous flexibility which, in my view, is the top factor in achieving work-life balance. You set the time you work, the amount you work, the amount of money you make, the number of files you accept. With all of the technology available, there are many low-risk, turnkey ways to enter self-employment. [v](#)