

# Best Practices

## Quality of Life: Flexibility is Key to Balancing with a Thriving Law Practice

By Eileen H. Libutti



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How do you balance a busy family life with a thriving law practice? There are no easy answers, but above all else, be flexible. As the managing partner of an aggressive group of litigators in New York City, and the mother of 4-year-old twins, I can say that I'm not sure there is such a thing as work/life balance. Sleep deprivation, yes. Emergency room visits and working on my laptop at 5 a.m. to meet a deadline, sure. The perfect balance all of the time? I don't think so.

On the afternoon that I agreed to write this article about work/life balance, I received a call from our beloved sitter. My daughter's ballet class was getting out at 5 p.m. My son's gym session ended at the same time. Slight scheduling glitch. They're at opposite ends of Tribeca, and I had issues at work that needed attention before the next morning. Unable to catch a cab, I ran 1.1 miles wearing very fashionable high-heeled pumps with briefcase in hand. My son was still elated to see me. His instructor – not so much. At 11 p.m. I logged back on to my computer and finished my work day.

My opinions about work/life balance have changed over the course of the last 20 years, and I expect they will continue to do so. In my twenties and thirties, work was my life. Of course I would squeeze in dinners, workouts and parties, if possible, but work was pretty much first and foremost. Nights were available for work, client dinners or networking events. Work was my *raison d'être*. Although to others it

might sound limited, sad or pathetic, at the time it was quite rewarding. My firm's success and my own little victories, whether it was bringing in a new client or a favorable verdict at trial, were fulfilling. There's a lesson there for all employers. Letting your associates own their victories, whether it is a motion they've won or an article they've written, giving them autonomy on the one hand, and as much support as possible on the other, will lead to happy, fulfilled and motivated attorneys.

As Albert Einstein once said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving." That's so true on every front. That is how I look at work/life balance. While at the office, or in Court, keep it moving. Stay focused. Get as much covered and as much accomplished as possible. Make decisions and go with them – sound decisions, well thought out decisions, reasoned decisions. Trust your judgment, and then go. If you're doing the right thing honestly, expeditiously and efficiently, things tend to work out. Get things done. They may not get done in the perfect fairy tale way you had envisioned, but if you keep it moving, it seems to work out well at work, and well at home.

Protecting your private time? Not really happening. Not if you want true balance. It is better to stay plugged in and hear your iPhone ringing or your Blackberry buzzing than to disengage and wonder if you are missing something. Just like my world at work will have to wait a minute if my son is being carted off to the emergency room, I can slip out in

# a Busy Family Life



the middle of my daughter's ballet class or a vacation day to handle an office snag or a client in need. Flexibility is the key. A flexible firm gets an array of benefits from appreciative attorneys. Loyalty. Hard work. Commitment. A flexible attorney is going to benefit as well.

At a "Flex-Time Lawyers" meeting hosted by Deborah Epstein Henry in New York, I met a professor from Yale University whose words always resonated with me. She said, "If you want your firm to be flexible with you, you need to be flexible with them." If you're planning

on working part-time, if at all possible, you should have full-time childcare coverage. The idea seemed impossible to me at the time, but her reasoning was sound. Brilliant, actually. There will be times when your sick child won't allow for your ordinary Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule. You expect your firm to be flexible and understand. Likewise, there may be times when a temperamental Judge, client or adversary won't allow for your ordinary Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule either. Just as you expect your firm to be flexible, shouldn't you be?

Have some fun. Find the joy. In your day-to-day work, be steady. In your run

to the preschool, don't panic. Enjoy the ride. The end result, whatever that may be, may not come. If you like what you do, great. If not, find ways to derive satisfaction and fulfillment. The kids, your spouse or partner, whatever it is that you do when you're not wearing your work hat, do the best you can. Things aren't always easy. Develop a sense of humor. Schedule things that you love to do, and squeeze them in. Not everything, not all the time, but sometimes.

We do the best we can to move it forward. It may not be "perfect." The homemade cookies may be from a mix, the bed may get made as your getting in it. Just use the time that you have to really focus and get it done. If you have 20 minutes for the gym, grab it; stay plugged in and maybe you can stretch it to 40 minutes. Work hard. Be efficient. If you're up at 5 a.m. make good use of your time by grocery shopping or returning some e-mails. As they used to say in my Bar review class, hit it and move on. Don't look back, do your best and move.

My last bit of advice might seem obvious but potentially the hardest to obtain. A good nanny, a spouse or a partner, and a Nana or Grandma who are willing to roll up their sleeves, is critical. Nobody can stand on the sideline if work/life balance is the goal. By the way, I haven't had time for one of those "Flex-Time Lawyers" meetings since the twins, nor have I played golf. Balance is balance, something has to give. 