Work-life Balance for Lawyers

Written by Nefra MacDonald

There's a debate amongst legal professionals around whether lawyer work-life balance is achievable, or what that even means. The Cambridge Dictionary defines work-life balance as "the amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy." Based on that definition, we can see the cause for debate.

Lawyers are notorious for their long hours and demanding workload. Our 2018 *Legal Trends Report* found that 75% of lawyers frequently or always work outside of business hours, and 39% of lawyers say that those extended hours have taken a toll on their personal lives.

It's no wonder that the legal profession is especially vulnerable to the pressures of time. Time outside of work and the office tend to be spent preparing for a trial, commuting, caring for children or other dependents, waiting to be called at a motion calendar, and more. You'll quickly realize that your personal time will no longer feel like your own—and it's not enough.

Also, firms that still bill by the hour will realize that time is too much of a finite resource. It's not shocking that the billable hour culture does not take too kindly to those wanting better work-life balance. This is because asking for better work-life balance as a lawyer may mean fewer billables and revenue for the firm.

Lawyer work-life balance and mental health

The impact of being a lawyer on mental health is now widely discussed, especially since the publication of the 2016 study by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs. Bar associations all around the country are encouraging an open conversation about addiction, depression, anxiety, and lawyer suicides. While there are many resources available to help lawyers explore lawyer wellness and mental health, the best ones will take into account the unique position lawyers are placed in.

The same is true for lawyer work-life balance. This makes defining the term in this context more complex than a simple ratio of time spent working versus doing things you enjoy. For lawyers, I would argue that work-life balance is about creating efficiencies in your work life to enjoy your work more. Creating efficiencies in your work will also free up time for more fulfillment in the waking hours where the rest of your life happens.

Can lawyers have work-life balance?

Optimistically, yes! Although realistically, this looks different for lawyers than it does for individuals in other professions. This is because the demands of your day as a lawyer will vary based on practice area, law firm culture, the structure of your family, and the kind of support you have both personally and professionally.

Since lawyer work-life balance is closely related to mental health and well-being, the key to achieving work-life balance lies solely with you. No one else can tell you what you need to nourish your mind, body and spirit, so coming up with your own definition is the only way to achieve that balance.

Work-life balance is a process, not a goal

Attorney work-life balance is also something that can't be defined just once. Rather, it will evolve and grow as your life changes. The important thing is that you're intentional in documenting what this looks like for you. Then, use that self-discovery to chart a course of action that's flexible, yet committed to your overall well-being and long-term mental health. Consistency is important here since the accumulation of small efforts on a daily basis can lead to big results.

To be successful, your mindset toward achieving balance is also important. Adopting two important mindsets—positive stress and growth—can pay dividends in how you process the ongoing work you're doing in this area. To dive deeper into this concept, read this blog post written by lawyer coaches Allison Wolf and Terry DeMeo, who do a great job of laying out 5 simple steps to improve mental wellness.

When the term "lawyer work-life balance" is being defined by the person ultimately responsible for creating it, the right balance for *you* is entirely possible. **Ultimately, the only way work-life balance is achieved for lawyers is by making it a non-negotiable commitment to yourself, and understanding that no two definitions of this term will look the same.**

How to achieve better work-life balance as a lawyer

Although the global pandemic we're facing in 2020 has put additional constraints on how we might normally tackle this problem, it's creating so much opportunity for us to permanently improve the way we live and work. It's a chance for us to think deeply and create a new way of living and working for lawyers that promotes well-being, while enhancing the services we provide to legal consumers.

Think about your personal and professional goals

The individualistic nature of lawyer work-life balance makes your thoughts and feelings on satisfaction and success a critical factor in achieving well-being. One approach that has been central to how I stay attuned to the concept of a balanced life is The Desire Map, by Danielle LaPorte. This methodology asks you to look at what's working and not working in your life, which reveals patterns and clarity on what you're longing for.

Start with some of these questions:

- What's working in my life currently?
- What's not working for me? Where are my pain points?
- What are some things I would like to change?
- What does a successful and satisfying life look like? How does it feel?
- What's in the way of me getting there?
- How can I take steps each day, week and month to feel more satisfied?

For me, going through this process helped me to reveal how I want to feel on a macro level, and allowed me to break down the steps I'm willing to take each day to get there. By keeping this as the centerpiece of how I process change and the volatility of life, I've been able to be a better advocate for myself in the things I say "no" to, and build resilience when things seem out of control. So ask yourself, "What am I willing to do to feel the way I want to feel?"

Be true to your personal and professional needs

Perhaps you've identified that you work better at home. Or maybe the time you've regained with no commute is now time you have to work out or cook dinner for your family. The good news here is that many law firms have fast-forwarded legal technology adoption. An increasing number of firms have either gone virtual or are thinking of going virtual. If your firm is considering re-opening, this may be the time for you to advocate for working from home on a part-time or full-time basis. Or if you're better suited for office life, you may be able to strike a balance between going into the office a few days a week and working from home the rest of the time.

For Maura Greene, an employment and litigation attorney in Boston, MA, flexibility for her firm has always been a top priority. In a virtual meetup for employment lawyers, she shared that cloud-based technology, clear processes, transparency in firm goals, and a few tweaks to their technology all led to her firm being able to transition quickly to work-from-home during a lockdown, which gave her staff flexibility as long as client's needs were met promptly.

Build a work schedule that works for you

Many of our days are beholden to whatever is on the calendar, which can be anxiety-inducing. If you're not a morning person, that consultation at 9am will require more energy than if that meeting was two hours later. If you typically feel fatigued around 3pm, having that hour as your only block to do a research or writing task isn't ideal either.

Daniel Pink, author and keynote speaker at ClioCon 2019, reveals the science behind how each individual should set up their daily routines based on the chronotypes he outlines in his book *When*. Unlocking the secrets to the best time to drink your cup of coffee, or do focused work on a motion can make a huge difference in your daily productivity and overall mood. Based on what you know about when you work best, try blocking off time in your calendar for deep work. You can also try communicating with your staff that the best time for client meetings is right before lunch.

Consider alternative work schedules and styles

If you've realized that full-time law practice doesn't work for the life you want, part-time or flex work is increasingly popular and is still a viable option to make money and have more control over your workday. You'll be motivated to be more productive in the hours you do work and will have time to balance the demands of the rest of your life.

Whether you work the traditional 9-5 or have more flexible hours, building in time for movement, nutrition, rest, and connection is also important for a more balanced lifestyle. For example, Patrick Palace, the owner of Palace Law in Tacoma, WA, incorporates yoga into his workday and attributes it to being a critical part of being an effective and happy lawyer.

At the end of each week, try looking at the week ahead and insert some time blocks for meals, a walk, yoga, or whatever else recharges you during a workday.

Take care of yourself to manage stress and anxiety

Making time for self-care can minimize the effects of lawyer burnout. While self-care will look different for everyone, getting adequate sleep, eating nutritious foods, and movement are essential elements in taking care of yourself.

Taking time away from work is also necessary. Attorney Kevin Vela, the managing partner of Vela Wood in Dallas, TX, encourages his employees to travel often. He says that travel gives his employees new perspectives that contribute to better lawyering.

When your practice is running efficiently, you're able to take vacations without worrying about things falling apart. A vacation, or even a staycation, can help to reduce stress and allows you to come back to work with a renewed focus. Letting your clients know that you'll be away from the office in advance can reduce the chances your vacation will be interrupted. Setting clear expectations with staff can ensure the firm will continue to run as expected.

If you simply can't check out of work for a week or more, using cloud-based technology like Clio will allow you to check in on your cases from wherever you are. Be sure to set boundaries for yourself on the amount of time you'll be working while you're away so you can receive the benefit of taking time off.

Set up your workspace for success

Whether you work from a home office or not, set up your workspace to work for you. Consider your personality, work style, physical needs, and what you need to be comfortable and productive as you assess your office space.

If you have the option, look into a standing desk or desk converter to reduce the amount of time you're sitting each day. A Mayo Clinic study found that sitting for more than 8 hours a day had negative health effects similar to smoking or obesity. This one change in your office space can make a big difference in your overall health.

An organized workspace is also critical to your well-being. Not only will you know where everything is, but you'll also experience a more organized mental state. As Marie Kondo says in The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up, "From the moment you start tidying, you will be compelled to reset your life. As a result, your life will start to change."

Organize client files with technological tools

One big culprit of untidy workspaces is paper. If your law firm is set up to handle client files using paper and premise-based servers, you're likely spending too much time searching for information and getting organized. Try digitizing your files using a scanner like Fujitsu ScanSnap, which integrates with Clio's unlimited cloud-based document storage. You'll be able to search for documents by navigating to the matter they belong to in a few clicks, instead of rifling through a pile of papers or disorganized filing cabinets to get what you need.

Additionally, utilizing processes to standardise systems is one way to save time and simplify your team's workflow. This can be done with everything from creating law firm letterhead to enhancing your client intake process.

Use legal technology to save time and automate tedious tasks

Cloud-based legal technology like Clio can help you reduce the amount of time you spend on administrative tasks, and has the added benefit of helping you run your business from a centralized, *virtual* place, which allows you to work from anywhere.

When a disaster strikes or a global pandemic forces a lockdown, lawyers who use Clio have the flexibility to run their firms remotely without a complete upheaval of existing processes. Cloud-based software like Clio can help you automate repetitive tasks so you can do more billable work, automate your client intake process and obtain electronic signatures, and grow your business more efficiently. With over 200 integrations, Clio reduces double entry between the vital software solutions law firms use every day, like calendaring, email, and accounting software.

Learn more about how Clio simplifies accounting.

Lawyers also reported that they spent 11% of their time configuring technology. Clio users have the advantage of a solution created for lawyers that often requires minimal setup time, a vast library of support tools, and real people available to help 24/5 if you're stuck. The investment made up front in configuring Clio for your firm has a long-term payoff in flexibility, productivity, and peace of mind.

Integrate mindfulness into your daily routine

The legal profession is stressful and full of challenges that can increase anxiety. The prevalence of mental health and substance abuse issues are well documented in the legal industry. Numerous studies have revealed that mindfulness and meditation can reduce anxiety and rewire your brain's "fight or flight" responses, allowing you to remain grounded in stressful situations. With regular practice, you can gain the skills to cross-examine negative thoughts, think more positively, and operate from a clear, centered place.

As a high performing attorney, there are moments when your thoughts can be overwhelming, especially if it involves a negative result for a client. Attorneys are also human, so there are times where issues at work and home are happening simultaneously. Mindfulness can help to diffuse a high-stress, "break the glass" moment through a few minutes of slowing your thoughts down using simple techniques.

Jeena Cho demonstrated the "5-4-3-2-1 method" of mindfulness in her Daily Matters podcast interview with Jack Newton. Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing that you can taste. By paying attention to your sensory experience, you can break your mind out of a cyclical thought that is making you feel stuck or anxious.

In her podcast interview, Jeena also discusses firms that have successfully created a culture that supports attorneys in their mindfulness practice and work-life balance. Law firms have implemented Mindfulness Mondays and brought in meditation teachers to help employees of the firm implement mindfulness. If you're a solo or small firm, Jeena also offers an 8-week mindfulness program for lawyers called "Mindful Pause" that you can enroll in for additional guidance and support.

Spend time on doing things you enjoy

Work-life balance for lawyers shouldn't just include taking care of business at home and work. It should also include activities that recharge you. Make sure you're looking at the full picture of your life. Take time to connect with family and friends, participate in outdoor activities, or binge-watch a new show. You can also put together virtual game nights with video conferencing software like Zoom, or try new activities like painting, baking sourdough bread, or growing some new houseplants.

Keeping your passions and hobbies alive is important to overall satisfaction. Attorney Chris Trebatoski runs Treblaw, LLC in Milwaukee, WI, and has been able to pick up salsa dancing 5-6 hours per week as a way to keep performance art in his life.

Consider going solo if you aren't a solo lawyer yet

If you're at a firm where the culture contributes to a lack of balance, you may want to consider going solo. Yes, you'll be taking on all of the management responsibilities of a law firm. It may seem risky to do given the current economic situation. However, the benefits are proportional to the risk—having more control over the way you run your firm and how you manage your time can give you balance you wouldn't be able to achieve by working for someone else.

If the current global pandemic has proven anything, it's that with the right processes, and technology like Clio, lawyers can work from anywhere. Our guide to working remotely is a great resource to help get you started.

We've seen thousands of lawyers go solo for the first time, and a clear plan and ideal outcome should remain your central focus. If (and when) things pick up, consider using freelancers to take care of some of the writing and other processes so that you have more time to focus on the things you love about being a lawyer and can scale your solo practice without the extra stress.

Shift the culture of stress at your firm

If you're not quite ready for solo work, and generally like the firm you're currently with, there are a few things you can do to shift the culture of stress for the entire firm's benefit. As a law firm owner or partner, these things can completely shift morale and productivity with your staff. If you're not already, try the following:

- Instead of judging others by the hours spent at their desk (or "logged in"), communicate work hour expectations and what success looks like at work. Consider whether there's room for deviation from 9-5 work hours if employees can be more productive during other hours.
- Improve trust between colleagues by improving communication and increasing transparency. In addition to the work hour expectations, try sharing what the firm's revenue targets are, and how those targets are set so that employees understand the impact their work has on the firm's success.
- Make it a firm policy to block out calendar times for personal commitments where necessary, and remove any judgment or stigma for having to do so.

If you're not in a position to make these decisions, advocacy is a big part of attorney work-life balance for lawyers, and this could be a good place to start.

Conclusion: Lawyer work-life balance is a journey

In exploring whether lawyer work-life balance is possible, we've covered everything from goal-setting to law firm efficiency. But the common thread throughout this piece is *you*. Being an advocate for yourself and your well-being is the only way you can achieve your vision of a balanced, well-lived life. If something isn't working, take steps to change it so it does.

If there's one other takeaway that I can offer, it's that balance is a constantly evolving process. What may work for you today may not work next year, as life unfolds in ways we can't always predict. Make it a habit to check in with yourself and how you're feeling regularly. Making small changes over time can also give you more of what you want. Being a work in progress does not make you imbalanced. Rather, it is a sign that you're willing to put in the work to optimize your life to meet your current circumstances with more joy.

Balance isn't achieved when you're working and playing in equal proportions. It's actualized when you're fulfilled in all aspects of your life, on your own terms.

About Clio

Clio is the global leader in legal AI, powering legal work across the profession, from law firms of every size to corporate legal teams, government agencies, and courts. Its Intelligent Legal Work Platform unites the business and practice of law, connecting the people, information, and processes behind legal work. Clio's AI brings the context together with legal sources drawn from Clio Library, a growing collection of more than one billion legal documents. Over 400,000 legal professionals in more than 130 countries rely on Clio to run their legal world. Learn more at www.clio.com.