

Make Time for You, Too

Finding the Right Balance

By R. Matthew Cairns, DRI President-Elect

As I write, it is a Sunday morning. Tracey is headed to the grocery store, Maddie is on her way to softball practice, and Beth is probably still in bed at college, having just turned 20 yesterday. Branches from winter storms need clearing, compost needs rotating, the garage needs sweeping, a great book needs finishing. I should go for a run, and I would like to watch a whole lot of basketball. Ironically, I am at the office thinking about work-life balance.

This thinking seems in vogue nowadays, particularly in the continuing discussion of why women, who make up over 50 percent of law school graduates, make up far less than that percentage of law firm partners and an even smaller percentage of law firm leaders. Another place we are seeing increased discussion of the balance issue is in the realm of psychological research on lawyer depression. “Lawyers present a paradox to those who study well-being, because it is a profession full of smart, highly educated, and affluent people one would think have the world at their feet, but as a group suffer from rates of depression and anxiety far higher than the general population,” says Dan Bowling, a recent presenter at a DRI conference who teaches at Duke Law and in Penn’s graduate school of psychology. I confess that finding the right balance is something that I have and continue to struggle with, and I suspect that many of you reading this “On The Record” have, too.

Let’s break down the problem a little. There are 8,760 hours in a year. The American Medical Association literature indicates that “sleep deficiency” is anything less than seven hours per night, so that reduces your available hours to no more than 6,205 hours a year. Subtract 1,800 billable hours, plus another 1,000 for other work-related hours at the office, plus another 500 for marketing and CLE, and you have 2,905 hours left for yourself and your family per year, or 55 hours per week. That sounds as if it is a lot, but how do you use that time? Getting up and out the door in the morning, commuting to and from work, taking a trip to the gym, eating dinner with your family, helping with homework, and getting kids to bed all cut into that 55 hours. Although not all are bad deductions, as you can see, pretty soon you may face a deficit. The ramifications of this are profound and something that should concern all of us.

So how do we deal with all this, because it should not require an “either-or” proposition. Work is not evil and non-work is not Shangri-La. Some view sleep as the

“cousin of death,” and they sleep less to accomplish more in a day. This, however, can result in cardiovascular disease, anxiety symptoms, moodiness, depression, and alcohol use, not to mention your head hitting the desk and finding a paperclip stuck to your forehead. Others sacrifice rewarding work to make time for other aspects of their lives and end up resenting both sides. Still others choose to sacrifice family, rationalizing that by working they are giving to their family and fulfilling their purpose in life, and they sometimes end up divorced, lonely, or depressed, having a heart attack, or just plain miserable. I am sure that other ramifications too numerous for me to imagine or list exist, since we confront the situation as distinct individuals.

Step one in dealing with this is recognizing that a problem exists. This should start at the top—in your firm and in your family. Firms should still insist on productivity and work product excellence, but they need to recognize that having overworked, miserable partners and associates will not build a business model for success. If it continues, you will have colleagues debilitated by depression, or you will find yourself visiting partners in the hospital, or you will have your talented associates and junior partners moving across the street to a better situation—and you will lose business because you will not have the ability to give your clients what they expect. Families need to recognize that lawyering is demanding. Your family needs to understand that in your chosen profession, it takes a lot of time to become expert, win cases and—if it is your goal—make partner. But at the same time, your family needs to understand that having a tired, cranky, overworked, or constantly-working-even-while-on-vacation parent, spouse, or partner is a recipe for disaster at home and insist that such dysfunction is unacceptable.

Step two is recognizing the need for balance in you. For the first time this year, my annual business plan included a “self-care” component. It was not elaborate—read one non-work book for pleasure per month; work out three times a week; run a distance race once every three months; do not miss Maddie’s sporting events, if at all possible; only work one day per weekend. Do I meet these goals? Not all of them, but having them helps me keep my focus on what else, in addition to work, is important in life. I have also recognized that sometimes you cannot do it alone. I have turned to my partners, my

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family, and a professional to help me focus on stress issues and my “Type A” tendencies. Having the ability to ask for help is a strength, a skill, not a weakness, nor is asking for help something to fear. Finally, I am learning to leave my mobile device alone when I spend time with my family or have set time aside for myself. Clients, while expecting great service, generally will understand and appreciate that you will get back to them after you have had a chance to reflect on their questions. They will generally understand that no one does their best

thinking instantaneously while at a stop light, on the beach, or at a Nordic ski race.

Step three is creating a culture of awareness and support in the profession. DRI has held programs and made speakers available to discuss substance abuse in the profession. Our newest Substantive Law Committee—Women in the Law—plans to tackle the dilemma women face as they are sometimes forced to choose between career and family, among other important topics. The Law Practice Management Committee has this on its radar, and we can expect future programming on the topic. And above all,

the mere existence of DRI helps all of us by providing a community of colleagues and friends to talk with, help, and from whom we can find support.

My briefcase is half empty, which is the same as saying that my glass is half full. As I plow through the paper, I know that I will be able to get home more quickly. I encourage everyone to do the same. Make time for work, but make time for you—we are fathers, mothers, spouses, partners, coaches, den mothers, children, neighbors, and friends, as well as lawyers, and we cannot forget that. 