

## Work-Life Balance

# The duality faced by female lawyers | Barbara Green

By **Barbara Green**



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(February 4, 2019, 9:21 AM EST) -- Can female lawyers have it all in 2019? It's a good question. The fact that we are still asking it in 2019 says that we're not out of the woods yet, but we are farther along the road to a better work-life balance than we were in prior years.

Equally important, work-life balance has ceased to be an issue for just female lawyers, who in prior decades left the profession in droves after the birth of their second child. Work-life balance appears to be a significant issue for many young lawyers getting into the profession today, *men and women alike*. I know many fathers who struggle with juggling the demands of fatherhood and the competing demands of building their practices.

I am a commercial litigator with about 20 years of experience under my belt. Being a lawyer is not a 9-to-5 job. Neither is being a parent. And here lies the problem. The main issue is time, which is a finite commodity for everyone: there is only so much you can accomplish.

That said, being a mom is the hardest job out there. While I have faced my share of challenges as a lawyer, I frequently struggle with the "right" responses to parenting my children.

At the beginning of your legal career in private practice, there are expectations with regards to both billable and non-billable hourly targets. If you achieve admission into the partnership, there are additional responsibilities. On top of the demands of the career, there are partnership obligations that need to be balanced with family obligations. As can be expected, lawyers are expected to participate in the running of the law firm. For me, this involves sitting on various committees and mentoring our summer and articling students. And while I certainly love my children and I am fortunate enough to love my job, all of this takes time.

This duality — time practising law and time tending to family — creates problems in work-life balance for lawyers. I see plenty of fathers who are actively involved with their children: taking them to medical appointments, Gymboree, play dates and hockey practice. But in my personal experience and observing this more generally, many child-rearing responsibilities still fall to mothers, especially when the children are very young.

For my first maternity leave, I took off six months. For my second maternity leave, I took off nine months. I did not apply for partnership at my firm for about a decade, mainly because I had young children at home who needed me. That was my reality. I just did not want to miss those early years with them.

Next, lawyers are expected to build their book of business. It takes time to find clients who need your services and to understand their businesses. Every year, I put in hundreds of hours to build my practice; and these are non-billable hours that I have taken away from my family and social life. It works this way for all lawyers in private practice, men and women.

Not only are lawyers never trained in how to run a business, we are not taught in law school how to market ourselves effectively. We have quite the learning curve and we each have to figure out what works for us.

Historically, lawyers have built their book of business with long golf games, or season tickets to hockey, basketball, or baseball. I shy away from participating in those events with clients and contacts, as I cannot keep up a conversation about statistics for any of these sports.

I do enjoy attending networking functions such as lunches, dinners, parties and conferences. I love developing one-on-one relationships with my clients and contacts in this way, both men and women. I network all the time. Work often comes from unexpected places.

I keep in mind that in a law firm, lawyers from other practice areas are great referral sources. Many lawyers have their own books of business and can introduce you to their clients. So, I network with my colleagues at my firm. And, of course, when you do good work for clients, they can become referral sources, too.

For me, marketing and networking are not chores; they are enjoyable experiences. Some client relationships have even developed into amazing friendships that I really value.

In reflecting upon my life and my career, here are three pieces of advice I'd give my younger self:

1. Go into the legal profession with your eyes wide open. You're not going to be able to be there every night for your kids and at the same time you're not going to be out there every night networking with other lawyers, clients and prospects. You're going to be somewhere in between. Ask yourself if you're willing to make those personal sacrifices in order to advance your career. Looking back, I wish I had known what I was getting into; I would have been better prepared.
2. Give yourself a break. There will be times in your career where you're going to have to coast. You can't be the perfect lawyer all the time; you need to pick and choose your battles. And don't beat yourself up for not being a "perfect" parent. Do the best you can and congratulate yourself on your successes. Remember, you're working so hard to make life better for your family and (hopefully) because you love what you do. It helps to work in a law firm with partners and colleagues who understand that. Over the years, the lawyers at my own firm have been very supportive of my family life. I am fortunate in that regard.
3. Take care of yourself. Maintain your physical fitness, eat a healthy diet, take vitamins, get enough sleep, take vacation time, and have a social life that helps you stay centred and whole. It's hard to be on top of your game when you're exhausted mentally and/or physically. It's like when you're on an airplane and the steward is explaining emergency procedures: put on your own oxygen mask first and then assist those around you. Taking care of yourself gives you confidence in looking and feeling good, and that can only make you a more effective lawyer (and happier person).

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