Bridging the Gap Between Policy & Practice

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How have you made flexibility a priority and a success through your schedule?

I've always believed in personal "check-ins" and reevaluating goals through different points in my career. One of the most important times I did a check-in was while I was completing my Ph.D. in Chemistry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I asked myself where I wanted to be and how was I going to get there – being a bench chemist was not consistent with those answers. So two weeks after defending my dissertation, I started at the George Mason University School of Law and became a student associate at Sterne Kessler in May 2002. That fall, I switched to the evening program and continued as a student associate at the firm throughout the academic year. I couldn't turn down the opportunity for the fantastic work experience and the chance to work with such awesome people.

Working during the day and attending classes at night was my first exposure to flex and exemplified part of the balance I was looking for. I graduated from George Mason in three and a half years, and I started as an associate at Sterne Kessler after graduation. I knew flexibility was going to be a key component to my success, and I've been on and off of some type of flex schedule for the past 14 years at the firm – including as an associate. For the past two years, I've been at about a 75 percent reduced hours schedule.

I chose to work reduced hours because my husband works full time, and we have a three year old daughter. My hours in the office aren't formally set, but I adapt according to my husband's schedule and my clients' needs. I try to be home in time for dinner and bedtime and preserve the weekends for my family. Flexibility keeps me grounded and keeps things in perspective. To work effectively, there has to be plenty of communication between me, my family, the firm, and my clients. This helps me stay organized and meet my deadlines.

How have clients and the firm contributed to your flex success?

I don't think my clients know I'm working flex. At the end of the day, meeting their needs is the most important thing – not how or where I do it. As long as they have a good product, they're happy. My goal has always been to give clients timely and top quality work – my schedule has never hindered that.

The firm has also been a major supporter of my success as well. I receive the same types of projects and challenges now as I did when I was working full time. Again, communication is key. I'm open with my team and let them know if I have a conflict so everyone is on the same page. I'm very comfortable with letting people know my availability. I also believe that open communication is a two-way street; as long as people are open about their availability, I try to schedule around their conflicts too.

How has flexibility contributed to your business development and sustainability of working at a large firm?

By working reduced hours, I have more time to focus on business development. I travel to meet with clients, originate new business, and to market myself and the firm. When I first made partner in 2012, I was working a full time schedule and in the middle of litigation. It didn't make sense for me to be on flex. Once the litigation was over, I had time to reflect and check-in again. It was then that I made the choice to go on a reduced hours schedule so I could focus on business development and my family.

My flex schedule is intentional and integral for business development. My clients are literally all over the world, and I try to touch base with them in person at least once a year or every other year at the most. These personal touches require a lot of time, and my husband has been so supportive of this by being the single parent during these periods.

Looking back, what would you tell your first year associate self?

I'm very happy where I am and with the choices I've made; I wouldn't change anything about my career. Junior associates need to understand there are always paths available – you just have to find what will work for you. This is why constant personal check-ins are so important, especially when you reach a life or career milestone. What was great for you two years ago may not be the best option for you now. If you stay silent, you won't be happy. Most other people won't know what your specifics are – only *you* do. Sometimes taking that leap of faith is the best choice. Yes, it's scary, but it may be the best thing ever for you!

How do you pay it forward, and how do you recharge your batteries?

Spending time with my family and running are my recharge activities. Sometimes I combine the two and take my daughter out for a run with me. Mentoring, not just the younger associates, but everyone in the firm, is one of the best ways I can pay it forward. I believe in fostering personal connections and establishing strong relationships personal with my firm family, too.