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Work/life balance is vital to success for young lawyers

Thu, Jan 13th 2011 12:00 am

By **MATT CHANDLER**

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For many companies, young employees are more than workers. They are long-term investments.

Nowhere is that concept more true than in the legal profession, where firms often recruit students who are still in school. They train them through internships or clerkships and, in some cases, have multiple years invested in them before the individuals are even ready to practice law.

So what steps do Western New York firms take to protect their investment? And what are some preventive measures to make sure that today's 26-year-old superstar attorney doesn't become a 30-year-old burnout?

On one hand, law firms must serve clients, bill hours and grow their business, so pressure is simply part of the deal. For the modern generation, however, social and family time is important, too. How do their two worlds mesh? And what do area firms do to help make it all work?

Tom Cunningham is managing partner of Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola LLP. He said for many young attorneys there, it's their first experience working in a professional setting and they should expect a period of adjustment.

"We have them work with older attorneys who have been through the transition from law school to the firm," Cunningham said. "One of the things we emphasize with our younger attorneys is developing good organizational systems and time management systems. We teach them how to organize their days."

He said he knows what law students hear about: unattainable billable hours requirements, mandatory weekends, 18-hour workdays. His firm, however, works hard to dispel those myths and to maximize the productivity of new associates without burning them out.

"We teach them they have to organize their personal lives in a similar way to their job," he said. "I remember there would be attorneys 15 years ago that would have to cancel their vacation with their family because they had a trial. And really, in our firm, we tell our attorneys that's inexcusable. You have certain obligations to your family, and if you organize your personal life the same way as your work schedule, you can avoid missing those important family things."

In the past, local attorneys have discussed the atmosphere in Buffalo as being more conducive to raising a family and maintaining one's sanity than in other cities. That is certainly the case at Rupp Baase, according to Cunningham.

"We have reasonable billable hours requirements. We're not like a New York City firm that might require 2,200 hours a year," he said. "However, some things are going to be unavoidable. Our clients' interests have to come first and we explain that to our young associates, but there is a balance to be had."



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Across town at Damon Morey LLP, Sherri Mooney leads the associates committee, where she regularly interacts with each of the firm's 24 associate attorneys.

"We work with the associates, whether it is getting them acclimated, dealing with day-to-day issues, whatever it may be," she said.

Damon Morey's methods of dealing with new associates has evolved through the years, she said. Now the firm is in a good place in terms of recruitment and retention of young attorneys.

"I think we got a little better with working with recruiting, so we set up firm expectations of what is expected of new associates," she said. "But we also worked to demystify the life of an associate at a big firm."

Mooney said by clearly outlining expectations and offering a comprehensive orientation, Damon Morey offers associates a clear vision of their future there. Like other firms, it offers new associates a mentor to help them get established and learn the ropes. That comes with a twist, however.

"Our mentoring program isn't a traditional one," Mooney said. "We actually set them up with someone from a different department, and we try to hand-pick the relationships as a way to aid in the success of the young attorney and to give them just someone to talk to besides their supervising partner."

While protecting its investment in the associate and ensuring their professional success is critical, some firms take things a step further. Gary Schober, president of Hodgson Russ LLP, cited the importance of hiring, training and grooming successful attorneys, tying it to the history of the nearly 200-year-old firm.

"We all know that someday our time will come to a close," he said. "It is our mission - it is our responsibility - to make sure that when that day arrives and we walk out the door, we hand the law firm over to people who are adequately trained and have the capability of running our law firm through the next generation."

While Schober echoed the sentiments of his industry colleagues in terms of nurturing and guiding the younger set, he took a pragmatic approach to the matter.

"There is only so much you can do to protect a young lawyer from the pressures of practicing law," he said. "It is a service business with clients who demand a great deal from their attorneys. And it is a business that requires many sacrifices to be successful."

Schober said Hodgson Russ makes every effort to reduce those stressors, for the good of all involved.

"Our job is to make sure we are adequately staffed to meet clients' demands," he said. "Another thing we do is to reduce associates coming in on weekends when there is nothing really to do."

He called it one of his pet peeves: a senior attorney who expects the young associate to think they have to come in on a Saturday "just because you are a lawyer," he said.

"I feel strongly - and have felt this way for a very long time - that if a client needs something, I will do it whether it is a Saturday, Sunday, nighttime, so be it," Schober said.

"But I don't want anyone at Hodgson Russ to be in the building just because they think that is expected of them," he said.

"If there is work to be done, you better be here, but we don't do things just for show, like in some firms."

That approach, according to Cunningham of Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola, is the key to success for young attorneys.

"A lot of it comes down to how they approach the job," Cunningham said. "Come in early, work hard while you are here, don't take extra-long lunches and you should be able to enjoy those things you want to do in your downtime."



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Up-and-coming attorneys offer a glimpse into 'real world' of law

Thu, Jan 13th 2011 12:00 am

By **MATT CHANDLER**

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Law school may be a great place to learn the book side of the legal industry, but for graduates transitioning into the "real world" of life at a law firm, reality can be a far cry from classroom law.

With legal knowledge firmly in hand, how do young attorneys manage the pressure of gaining a foothold in a firm and assimilating an office setting? How do they address the demand of billable hours for the first time while striving to build a client base and all the while maintain their sanity?

We asked several lawyers to tell us how they managed to avoid the pitfalls and achieve a balance between their careers and their personal lives. Here is what they had to say.

Carrie Appler

Goldberg Segalla LLP

Age: 33

I'm lucky enough to have an employer that offers the option of working part-time, which I've done since my oldest daughter was born. Working part-time has allowed me to continue to develop my legal skills while giving me the needed flexibility to care for two young children. To me, there are two keys to balancing career and family: (1) open communication with your employer and (2) support from family. I am in the fortunate position that I can be candid with my employer if there is an assignment that I just cannot take or a deadline that will be difficult to meet because of family obligations.

I try to limit those conversations, however, so my employer knows that I take my job seriously and that I don't view my part-time schedule as an easy excuse to turn down an assignment if I think it might require me to work a day that I don't typically work.

My department is also team-oriented - someone is always willing to help pick up the slack. On the other hand, there have been times when I've had to rely on my mother or sister for child care on a day that I'm not typically working so that I can finish a legal opinion, file a motion or meet some other deadline.

Most important, my husband steps up when I need extra support with our girls, like when I have to go into the office early or work late. I'm very lucky; he's almost mastered putting a ponytail in our daughter's hair.

Kimberley Georger, *Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola*

Age: 30

Work/life balance is a skill that young attorneys have to learn right alongside deposition strategy and persuasive legal writing. From what I have heard, the longer you practice law, the trickier it becomes to find equilibrium between work and everything else. For my part, I have been admitted to the bar for two years, and I am learning how to find and maintain a comfortable work/life balance.



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This past year, I began to lay down some rules for myself to help me find balance. I have only two rules so far, but they help me define the boundaries between my work life and my personal life and move more easily from one to the other.

Rule No. 1: Family comes first.

In cases where a work emergency and a family emergency conflict, I will pick my family. I know that my colleagues will support me at work.

Rule No. 2: Don't feel guilty. I refuse to feel guilty for missing a baby shower or a dinner out with friends. I am an attorney; working hard is part of the job description.

Law school doesn't prepare young attorneys for the demands of litigation. I was lucky to be raised by a woman who balanced motherhood with a successful law practice. She made it look easy. From her, I learned that balance and stability are an integral part of the practice of law.

As I progress in my career, I will continue to strive for a healthy work/life balance.

Christina Holdsworth, *Damon Morey LLP*
Age: 26

There is no question that a legal career is a demanding one, just as we were told as law students. That said, it is certainly possible to find the proper work/life balance.

I was provided with a helpful practice tip early on: Set aside one day early in the week where you plan on staying late and being productive. Having a full, productive day early on really decreases the stress you may encounter during the week - both expected and unexpected. In addition, when I foresee a week of late nights and big projects, I switch my usual schedule around and have my downtime and gym workout in the morning, as compared to the evening.

When conflicts arise between work life and personal life, there is no question that work takes priority. However, I have found that many partners are incredibly understanding and accommodating.

It is important, as a student or young lawyer looking for work, to find a firm that values the work/life balance and emphasizes the importance and understanding of that balance. I have been fortunate to have developed strong working relationships with my supervising partners. Having a strong relationship with the partners ensures that someone is looking out for me and not allowing me to take on more than I can handle.

Overall, I feel that with proper time management and good working relationships with partners and co-workers, the demands of a legal career are much less daunting.

Jason Ulatowski, *Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola*
Age: 28

While demanding at times, life as a law student often provided frequent breaks during the week to pursue personal interests. Law school may teach you how to think like a lawyer, but it does not teach you how to live as a lawyer.

Life as an associate eliminated the luxury of downtime during various points of the week; imposed stricter constraints on my time; and required me to strike a balance between my professional and personal lives.

My goals as a young associate were to meet and exceed our firm's expectations, all while following the advice of partners and senior associates to still "have a life." Finding time for that required me to evaluate and organize my personal interests to determine what interests were most important and to find a way to fit these interests into my schedule.

If I wanted to play sports or exercise in the evening, I was willing to work on the weekends to complete assignments. If I wanted to go away for the weekend, I made sure that I stayed late or came in early to finish tasks.

At this time (no family), my career generally takes priority over my personal life. I still, though, make time for my personal life to ensure that my career is one aspect of my life and not my entire life. I found that pursuing personal interests such as soccer and coaching not only helps me to achieve a life/work balance, but also helps to relieve stress and to enhance my productivity at the office.

Christopher Fattey, *Hodgson Russ LLP*

Age: 32

My key to maintaining an acceptable work/life balance is managing time and expectations. Obviously, effective time management is crucial to this balance in any profession. A day is only 24 hours long, and accomplishing what you need to accomplish in that day requires planning and discipline.

My biggest struggle in this regard is avoiding the temptation to spread myself too thin at work, at home, in the community and with other extracurriculars.

As my family and legal practice have grown, I've had to prioritize, and unfortunately there have been some casualties (e.g., I am no longer a regular at 11 p.m. men's league hockey games).

Managing the expectations of my family, clients and colleagues is often easier said than done. It is easy to promise the world with the best of intentions, but no one wants to be surprised with a missed deadline or family event because I've neglected to manage expectations. To prevent that, I try to be realistic with my time and my abilities and, if they become necessary, to have difficult conversations as soon as possible.

Even with effective time and expectation management, conflicts (and not just legal ones) are a reality in the life of a lawyer.

My rule is that family always comes first.

I think that technology and a stellar assistant make this rule easier to apply. Also, I am fortunate to work at a firm that understands that family life and professional success are not mutually exclusive.