

Lawyerly Transitions: From Student to Lawyer to Adult

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According to several law school statistical studies, the average age of law school graduates in the United States is 27 years old. The average age of marriage in the United States currently sits at 27 years of age for women and 29 years of age for men. Further, over the last 43 years, the average age of a first-time mother has increased from 21.4 years to 26 and the current average age of a first time father is 27.4 years old. Finally, the average age of a first time home buyer in the United States is 31 years, a trend that is increasingly being pushed back with longer schooling and higher student loan payments.

These statistics, while varying across location, occupation, and many other factors, shed light on the current transition that a new lawyer faces upon graduation from law school. Not only is a new lawyer tasked with passing the BAR, finding a job and then building a client base, but new lawyers are often simultaneously thrust into new marriages, new parenthood and new adult responsibilities.

In an age where law students have often been in school for two straight decades, it is routinely the case where a law student transitions to becoming a lawyer before actually transitioning into adulthood.

I often joke with my colleagues about my “life checklist” and my rush to check every box. In July 2012, as I was studying for the BAR exam, I was a bachelor, living with a fellow classmate in St. Paul. Fast forward to January 2016, and I’m now married, with a beautiful 18-month old daughter, and I own a home with my wife. My life has been a crash-course of transitions throughout this period and by no means am I done learning. In the constant triage that is being a new lawyer, being a new parent, being a new husband and being a new homeowner, I’ve learned several lessons to help manage many of these short and long-term transitions.

The Idea of a Work-Life Balance is Misleading

Intrinsic in the idea of a work-life balance is the assumption that these two things are disjunctive and that while you are at work, you are working, and while you are at home, you are living your life. New lawyers quickly realize that this is not the case as work tends to follow a lawyer home and home tends to follow a lawyer to work. Any attorney operating under the assumption that work stops when you close the office door is setting him or herself up for failure. Whether an attorney is in the office or on vacation, clients will still correspond, deadlines will still weigh on the mind, and cases will still need attention.

Instead of attempting to balance the two realms of work and life, many attorneys find it more helpful to view this balance as a continuum or spectrum. Through this visualization, an attorney never excludes both work and home, but operates within a sliding spectrum that sometimes requires more attention to work and vice versa. One of the biggest challenges for

new lawyers is learning where on this spectrum the attorney needs to be at a given time. It is this exercise of judgment that many veteran attorneys still struggle with in determining if a call or e-mail requires an immediate response, if a responsive letter needs to be put together or if the attorney can forego immediate action and continue focusing on the task at hand.

As lawyers, we are in a unique position to perform many of our daily tasks remotely and with flexible scheduling. We can leave the office early but still respond to voicemails and e-mails; we can remotely access our firm computer from nearly any computer in the world; and, most importantly, we can determine when and if we are actually going to review correspondence or perform other tasks while out of the office. It is this flexibility that we often take for granted or, alternatively, grow to loathe because it means work is always at our doorstep. Examining this flexibility through the lens of other professions, though, shows that it should be embraced instead of hated.

Many other professional careers require personal attendance or uninterrupted attention throughout the course of the day. Most doctors cannot meet patients unless he or she is in the office; a stock broker is not afforded the luxury of ignoring the daily stock exchange; a real estate agent is regularly present for client meetings and showings; and a flight attendant has to go when and where the airline decides.

It is this flexibility with which new lawyers need to exercise judgment at the beginning of their careers. The flexibility of the cell phone and its ability to receive e-mails, review pleadings and call clients provides the ability to work remotely but also has the ability to become an obsession. Single-handedly the cell phone has the potential to disrupt any work-life spectrum by creating a black hole through which an attorney is easily consumed even while at home with family or friends.

Maintaining Balance is Key to a Healthy Work and Home Life

My first three years of practice consisted of some substantial transitions, including getting married, buying a home and having a daughter. One struggle that my wife and I continuously discussed was working from home after the work day was complete. Always concerned about marketing, case management and billable hours, I would routinely check my phone every fifteen minutes and promptly return any voicemails or e-mails. I knew that I was missing time with my family but I also knew that I could not enjoy my family time if issues were outstanding.

After some extensive trial and error, we finally found a system that allows for uninterrupted family time while also providing flexibility for evening work activities. When I return home from work, I check my phone in the garage and deal with any emergencies that may have arrived. Upon entering the house, the phone goes straight to the bedroom on silent and is not checked again until after we put our daughter to bed. This way we can focus on spending time together as a family, including our family dinners. After putting my daughter to bed, I check the phone and respond to anything that requires attention. Then it's back to silent as my wife and I have a few hours to ourselves. Before bed I check one more time and can rest easier knowing that nothing is outstanding.

This likely will not work for everyone but it is a task and schedule that works for our family. As new lawyers we are often consumed with work for a variety of reasons. It may be a large influx of work, high billable hour requirements or the need to build a solid client base, but regardless of what the reason is, it is important to have time to decompress. My wife and I set up our schedule to provide for more family time but this need still applies to new lawyers without a mortgage, spouse or child. The stress of work can be all-consuming and in order to have a long, successful legal career, personal maintenance is necessary to avoid burning out or oftentimes the severe health ramifications that consistent stress can cause.

Successful Marketing Requires Personal Interest

Marketing should not be a cause of stress for new lawyers. A main focus for a new lawyer is recognition through building a client base that will ultimately help sustain case-loads and meet billable hour requirements. Where many new lawyers go wrong, though, is inserting themselves into marketing opportunities in which they have no interest, feeling an obligation to participate in any type of marketing event. A new lawyer without an interest in a marketing endeavor is rarely successful as the lack of interest permeates throughout the new lawyer's interactions.

The key to successful marketing is to engage in activities that interest you. Other attorneys and the public recognize passion and interest and will respond positively to the new lawyer's efforts. A new lawyer should examine his or her hobbies, qualifications and the types of clients with which the new lawyer would like to work. An old adage is that there is no such thing as bad marketing. However, for many new lawyers with a spouse or family, some marketing opportunities may not be fruitful and, in fact, may be detrimental to the new lawyer's personal relationships.

Just as building a client base requires time and attention, so too does building and strengthening relationships. By focusing marketing opportunities on the new lawyer's personal interests, it not only provides the new lawyer a comfortable atmosphere in which to market, but such a marketing focus also provides the new lawyer a more personal connection which, in turn, may also provide an opportunity for the new lawyer's spouse and/or family to be involved.

New Lawyers Need to Become Financial Experts, Quickly

New lawyers graduating from law school and getting their first attorney position are in a unique financial situation. Many times the new lawyer is getting the largest paycheck he or she has ever received, but this paycheck coincides with the largest debt obligations the new lawyer has ever seen.

Financial responsibility is absolutely necessary for new lawyers hoping to be successful in both their professional and personal lives. There is enough stress inherent in the legal profession without having to worry about over-extending and not being able to make payments. The American Bar Association calculates the average debt of law school graduates attending private schools at \$122,158. Factor in undergraduate costs and new lawyers are often responsible for over \$200,000 in loans due just a few months after passing the BAR exam.

Payments on these loans regularly overtake mortgage payments, despite the several different repayment options.

It is important for new lawyers to examine their loans and determine what type of repayment fits their needs. Standard repayment, income-based repayment or graduated payments all have benefits and shortcomings but it is important to review all of the options as paying blindly can easily lead to financial hardship.

It is also important for new lawyers to be frugal. Upon graduation a new lawyer may want to buy a home, buy a car, take a trip or splurge on any other wants that were not feasible during law school. It is especially difficult when working at a firm where established attorneys have the discretionary income to purchase the items and live the lifestyle that a new lawyer envisions upon graduating. Unfortunately, with such substantial student loans and multi-decade repayment terms, a new lawyer needs to focus on fiscal responsibility in the present to ensure financial security in the future.

Ask Yourself: Where are the Soles of My Feet?

The legal profession is fast-paced in itself but it is made even faster by increasing home obligations. Days, weeks and months fly by and I'm often left reflecting on how quickly my life has changed without me noticing it. A common mindfulness exercise is to think about the soles of your feet and where they are located at that specific time. When thinking of the soles of my feet, I find it nearly impossible to think ahead to work obligations, pending financial obligations or even looking into the past. It is an exercise to place yourself in the immediate moment.

This is a wonderful exercise for the new lawyer when the obligations of work and home begin blurring the lines. It drives home the fact that home life can easily be overtaken by work or that efficiency at work can be quickly jeopardized by the stresses at home. This exercise helps center the individual to make the most out of the limited time we have in our lives for both work and family.

Conclusion

Being a practicing lawyer is a difficult profession. We are all drawn to it for different reasons and we all stay in it for different reasons. We are thrust into the role of lawyer many times before we have had an opportunity to work on being a responsible adult. We are left in a situation that is, at its core, a sink or swim life lesson. A new lawyer graduates with substantial debt, into a time in our lives where we are often looking to start a family, buy a home and build a self-sustaining practice. It is important that new lawyers do not gloss over the time and attention each of these goals require and, it is even more important to focus on the time and attention others in our lives need as we struggle with the balance of our professional and personal lives.



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