

Balancing Act



The partner track at law firms is notorious for wreaking havoc on associates' family and social lives. But is that still true? Are Mitchell alumni maintaining some balance?

Gina Sauer '90, career coach and marketing director for The Esquire Group, a recruitment firm, vividly remembers a couple she knew while working as an associate 15 years ago. They were both litigators, up for partnership, and their nanny quit unexpectedly. Their solution was to divide each day into alternating segments, allowing one "face time" at work while the other was home — including a 3–8 a.m. shift! She comments that such insanity is less common now because associates currently on the partner track are often members of Generation X, who are bringing work-life balance to the forefront.

Daniel Berglund '03 and Damien Riehl '02, associates at Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi with small children, typify the trend. Berglund makes time in the morning to jog with his dog and hang out with his daughter, though he arrives at work later. Riehl leaves the office in time for dinner and works later at his home office. He writes, "The flexibility that comes with legal practice is more conducive to raising a family — knowing I can work sometimes from home when my son can't go to day care."

Not all alumni are equally sanguine. Tiernee Murphy '01 says, "If anyone tells you having a family life won't interfere, they're not being realistic. Something has to give." She left the partner track for a part-time assistant attorney general position, allowing her to cut back hours without giving up trial work. Typically, she spends Wednesdays at home, but by paying for full-time day care she can be at a trial, if necessary.

John Marsalek '03 of Dorsey & Whitney comments that while partners in his firm are understanding about family obligations, clients are less so. He finds himself weighing the importance of family events against professional commitments, but says it helps to communicate early about potential conflicts. Last year, when his wife's concert performance conflicted with an intense negotiation, he mentioned the plan in advance, and everyone got an evening off.

Representing the partner viewpoint, John Degnan '76, with Briggs & Morgan since 2003, believes firms must be open to different employment arrangements with lawyers to achieve more diversity. "In order to make that work, firms and the individuals involved have to be open to creative arrangements that work for both," he says. He urges associates to interview carefully to make sure they understand what is expected of them and then think about whether that fits with their life goals. "Be ready to work hard but still maintain a balance with your personal life," he says. "That is a constant tension for all busy lawyers."

By all reports, associates on the partner track still struggle with maintaining a work-life balance. Berglund notes that many young lawyers feel any time spent away from the firm is time they should be billing, which is hard on family life. However, many associates have alleviated some of the stress by seeking law firms that allow flexible schedules and telecommuting. And some have found a better work-life balance through creative measures—moving the family meal to breakfast rather than dinner or bringing their kids to work on the weekends, for example. Finally, almost all the associates *Mitchell on Law* contacted spoke of the need for a good support network—a spouse, partner, family, or friends who understand the demands of the partner track. ✕

— Cynthia Miller

Please let us know if there are subjects you would like to see explored in this Partner Track column and/or if you would be willing to share your perspective. Email magazine@wmitchell.edu.

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