

How To Create Work-Life Balance As A Busy Litigator

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (May 13, 2022, 12:35 PM EDT) -- Every litigator has stories about working through the night to prepare for trial, but too many long days and nights and too few vacations can start to take a toll, potentially leading to stress, burnout and added pressure on family and other close relationships.

With demanding court deadlines and the immense responsibility of having a client's welfare in their hands, how can litigators take a step back to ensure they have time to relax, unwind and reconnect with the people they care about?

Successful litigators told Law360 Pulse there are a few strategies they have found, including trusting and empowering teammates to take up the slack when they need a break, taking advantage of slow periods to step away and unwind, and communicating time off well in advance and then sticking to those boundaries when the time comes to leave.

"You really have to make it a priority," said Dykema member Michael P. Wippler. "It's so easy to get sucked into work. But if you want to make family, vacations and your health a priority — just do it. I know a lot of people who just don't."

Here, six successful litigators share their advice with Law360 Pulse on how to achieve work-life balance.

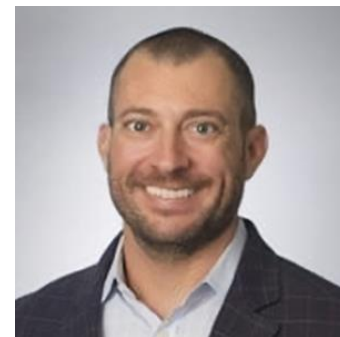
Cede Control and Trust Colleagues

Wippler says he's learned over the years to trust the people he works with, knowing that they are incredibly smart and that while they might not do something exactly the way he would, they'll still do it well.

"A lot of lawyers are control freaks," he said, but learning to rely on colleagues more has been one big way he's been able to carve out more time for himself and his family.

Another important way of ceding control is letting go of the need to monitor everything going on at work on a given day and insisting on constantly being "in the loop," according to Foley & Lardner LLP partner Christopher Ward.

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CHRISTOPHER WARD
Foley & Lardner

"I am definitely one of those people, and that is why as I have grown in my career, I am increasingly emphasizing building great teams of people as part of my client service strategy and practice," Ward said.

Great teams include not only smart and talented people, but people who know one another's preferences, values and personality quirks, so they can be well-positioned to lend a hand, he said.

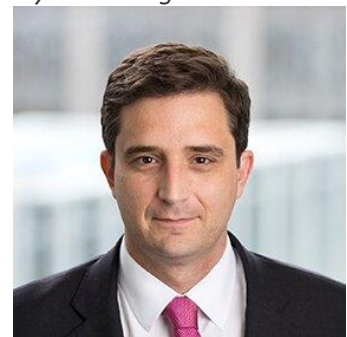
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Teamwork and letting go of control extends beyond work and can also ring true in attorneys' home lives, where they may be attempting to be everything to everyone.

When she needs to spend more time at work for a trial, McKool Smith principal Jennifer Truelove says she has learned to ask for additional support at home, whether from in-laws or a close friend.

"I've also learned to let go of perfectionism when I'm at home," Truelove said. "It's okay if the laundry isn't folded right away and my house won't make the cover of Architectural Digest ... because what is important is being present with my children and husband."

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JOHN ZACH
Boies Schiller

Take Advantage of the Lulls

Trial work often involves periods of intensity followed by quieter periods, and one important way for litigators to find work-life balance is to take advantage of those lulls, according to Boies Schiller Flexner LLP partner John Zach.

"While no one is going to get it right all the time, being decisive about seizing opportunities to ease up on work during appropriate periods is the key to striking the balance," Zach said.

Working on three trials over the past nine months, Zach says he proactively carved out time to prioritize his family commitments, which included taking his son on college tours, going on vacations with family and introducing a new dog to their home.

"Looking at the schedule, you can see where there are spots to get away," he said. "So while we were preparing motions in limine, I took a trip because the team could handle the drafting and I could provide input while away."

Cooley partner Cullen Speckhart says she too focuses on seizing opportunities to get away when they present themselves.

When she had two trials at the end of last year, she identified a few days during that time period that would be less busy, where she didn't have to be up speaking in front of the court, and "jetted off" for a long weekend with her family, finding a location to visit on short notice.

"I found it relaxing and pretty exciting," Speckhart said. "And my daughter thought it was fun too."

Carrie Cohen, co-chair of Morrison Foerster LLP's investigations and white collar criminal defense group, says she proactively works to create those lull periods by requesting important court dates to not fall when her children have breaks from school so that she can spend more time with them.

"I often have been pleasantly surprised at how accommodating judges can be to a request by me not to schedule a trial right after a holiday or school break or in late August before my kids return to school, as doing so ensures vacation cancellations and loss of critical time with my family," Cohen said. "Of course, there have been times when my request has drawn the ire of the court, but I am willing to take that risk in order to preserve the balance."

Learn to Communicate Boundaries

One key factor in creating work-life balance is learning to set and communicate boundaries, according to Ward.

"The first [key for me] was giving myself permission to set some boundaries and be OK with the idea that I am truly permitted to take some time off, let clients know that I plan to do so, and give them a connection to a team member who can help out in my absence," he said.

According to Speckhart, setting boundaries is something she only learned how to do after several years of practicing law.

"I think it's especially hard when you're younger and not only do you want to overperform for your senior partners and clients, you also have this tendency where you think you can work 24/7 and not burn out," she said. "I've run up against burnout myself. Saying 'no' is a matter of necessity. I got too close to those consequences and don't want to go there again."

She says she'd advise younger attorneys to speak up and not be afraid of anyone criticizing them for taking the time and space they need to stay physically and mentally healthy.

Truelove also pointed to the importance of learning to say "no" when needed.

"One of the biggest soft skills I've developed was to say 'no,'" she said. "By deliberately carving out time and putting it on my calendar, it makes it easier to sometimes say 'no' to other things that come along."

Cohen says she hopes to model healthy behavior around boundaries to the attorneys who work under her at the law firm as a practice group leader.

"As a first-chair trial lawyer, I try to lead by example and share with my teams that I am unavailable at a particular time for a meeting because one of my kids has a lacrosse game or I am meeting my mom at a museum," she said. "By creating that transparency, I hope that members of my trial teams know that family and personal interests are extremely important and that they need to prioritize them along with their work responsibilities."

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Morrison Foerster