

Time Management Pays Off

Q. I am a third-year associate, and I recently returned from a three-month maternity leave. For the most part, the feedback I have received over the past years has been positive. Lately, however, two partners have expressed some dissatisfaction. In particular, they have complained about the timelines and, in some instances, the quality of my work. Unfortunately, I can appreciate their concerns. I think I have probably never been terribly well organized. But until now, my inability to work efficiently was never exposed. Before the baby, I could always stay late or come in on weekends to finish up a project. I no longer have that "luxury." What can you suggest?

A. Yes, your life certainly has changed, and you will have to make some adjustments. Before you buy a new calendar and start organizing your files, take a deep breath and think about how you define success.

Chances are your definition has changed since you became a mom. One way to gain insight into your definition of success is to make a list of your greatest accomplishments (those special times when you did something well, enjoyed doing it, and were proud when it was done). Use this list to guide you in setting your personal and professional goals.

Turn these goals into action plans by identifying all of the activities necessary to meet these goals. Then establish priorities and create "To Do" lists. Enter these in your calendar. Then think of your To Do list as a Bingo game and try to fill up your card each day by crossing off the items as you complete each task. Give yourself extra points for more difficult projects.

If you aren't already doing so, you want to create a "proactive" calendar. Most of us keep a "reactive" calendar with upcoming appointments and deadlines. We don't schedule time to prepare for the meetings and meet the deadlines. Unless you free up time on your calendar in advance, you will never have the time required to complete your important projects. But don't make the mistake of overbooking yourself. Be sure to leave plenty of open time every day so you can handle the unexpected crisis at home or at the office.

Now that you have a new part-time job ("Mom"), you will want to establish daily and weekly routines for your home and office. One routine you will want to adopt is a time for planning each day. The best time is probably during the first ten minutes after you arrive in the office. Other routines could include a time each morning and afternoon to review and return voice mail, E-mail, and faxes. By answering them all at one time you will free up more productive, "thinking" time in each day. Make a list of all other recurring daily and weekly tasks and schedule a time to accomplish them.

Now more than ever, you will want to keep careful time records. If you forget to record just one twelve-minute phone call each day, you will "lose" fifty hours of billable time in a year. That translates into more than one additional week that you will have to work to meet your billable hours goal!

You are wise to look at how you can better manage your time. Finding balance between parenting and practicing law is not something you will master in a few days, or even a few weeks. Don't get discouraged if it seems overwhelming at first!

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