

STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN BIGLAW

By: Kirkland & Ellis

For many lawyers—especially those in large firms—work-life balance seems like an elusive goal—impossible to reach with billable-hours requirements and client demands. And, the move to remote work in the wake of COVID-19 has blurred the lines of work and personal time even more.

However, with the right support and planning, balance is possible.

“As excited as I was to start working at Kirkland, I was worried that I would not have enough time for myself. ...I admit being a lawyer in BigLaw is a lot of work, but also worthwhile,” said Los Angeles IP Litigation Associate Argie Mina.

“Luckily, at Kirkland, when I’m not working, I am able to be fully present with my friends and family. The positive relationships I have with my team along with the firm’s culture of open communication help me facilitate balance and boundaries between work and my personal life,” said Mina.

Far too often, work can take precedence in our lives. A lawyer’s desire to succeed professionally can often surpass the need to care for their own well-being. By setting priorities, making a plan, communicating with their team, and relying on the resources around them, lawyers can maintain a well-rounded life and avoid burnout—which is more important than ever during the pandemic.

“Through my relationships with mentors and others at the firm, I’m realizing that work-life balance is something that all of us are working on and have to be very intentional about,” said New York Restructuring Associate, Prentis Robinson III.

“Being intentional with my time, taking advantage of firm resources to assist with personal and professional stressors, and seeking guidance from partners and senior attorneys have all helped me stay committed to my craft while striving to maintain a fulfilling personal life,” he said.

Below are some key recommendations from Kirkland attorneys that have helped them achieve career success and work-life balance in BigLaw.

Set Aside Time for Yourself.

“Our profession requires a great deal of creativity of thought, sharpness, and mental agility,” said Dallas transactional partner Michael Considine. “Even on my busiest days, I like to step back and go for a walk or exercise.”

Lawyers are driven and always aiming to do their best work, but between the demands in your work life and home life, it can be hard to take a moment to decompress. Finding time for yourself is critical, and in the long run, it will make you a much more effective lawyer. Whether it’s going for a run, meditating, reading a book, taking a photography class, or grabbing dinner with friends, participating in activities outside the firm will provide opportunities to recharge.

“Kirkland offers a variety of well-being resources to help us find this balance, including a mindfulness app and online classes that remind us to take those breaks. We always encourage the associates with whom we work to find time to recharge,” said Considine.

With work and home being one in the same for many during the pandemic, making time for yourself is essential. Make a point of carving out time throughout the day to step away from your workspace and work computer—even if just to go on a walk through your neighborhood or cook dinner with your family. Reserve time at night during which you don't use your work computer but instead focus on personal time.

Maximize Your Firm's Resources.

There are only 24 hours in a day, and when you are knee deep in diligence or are up against a filing deadline, your personal time is limited. Luckily, many law firms have a host of innovative perks and resources to help make attorneys' lives easier. Preserving your time by taking advantage of these benefits is an acknowledgment that your personal time is valuable and important.

Many firms offer resources and benefits to help ease your day. Can't find a sitter for your child's day off? Use the firm's backup daycare option. Unable to go to the doctor? Use the firm's telehealth benefit. Benefits will vary by firm—take time to understand your firm's offerings, and don't be afraid to use them—that's why they are there!

Kirkland, for example, offers its lawyers a 24/7 global concierge to help with everything from planning a virtual birthday party to finding a good plumber, picking up gifts to returning clothing rentals, and more. Kirkland lawyers dedicate so much to the firm—they should be able to enjoy their free time rather than be consumed with their to-do lists.

"Kirkland Concierge has been an extremely helpful resource and has helped with every step of planning (and rescheduling) my wedding and honeymoon, including researching and contacting numerous vendors, searching for flights and hotels, and compiling itineraries for several vacation destinations," said Washington, DC, Environmental Transactions Associate Michelle Sliwinski.

"Kirkland Concierge has allowed me to delegate many time-consuming tasks to professionals, saving me countless hours," she said.

Develop a Career Plan.

Sometimes the biggest roadblock to achieving balance is lack of organization. Without clear goals and a well-developed plan to reach those goals, you may feel pulled in too many directions, may be unclear on which work to prioritize, or may feel overburdened with trying to figure out next steps.

Through its industry-leading CareerLink program, Kirkland offers attorneys one-on-one, confidential career coaching so that attorneys and alumni have assistance mapping out their goals and career paths. Not only can a career coach help you assess your career objectives, but they can also help you plot out the kinds of assignments to pursue and potential mentoring relationships. Coaches can also provide you with targeted tools and resources to help you tackle your work more effectively so you can maximize your personal time.

"I decided to turn to one of our CareerLink Coaches to help me make a plan and strategize my career goals, as well as realize the resources I have within my network," said New York Transactional Partner Keri Schick Norton.

"Coaching, combined with the tools and tips they shared, helped me develop achievable objectives so I can strengthen existing and develop new, meaningful relationships both at Kirkland and externally. The CareerLink program has been an excellent resource to help define my career path and work more efficiently," said Norton.

Foster Relationships.

Networking is crucial for career success, and networking within your firm is just as important as making outside contacts. Developing relationships with your team can be a huge asset in achieving work-life balance.

“The partner in my practice group has become a real mentor to me,” said Christina Katsampes, debt finance associate in Boston. “Our check-ins give me a chance to voice any issues I am having, and the partner provides helpful recommendations based on his experience. Having the opportunity to discuss and get input from someone more senior who has dealt with the same issues has really helped me find work-life balance.”

Having strong relationships with partners and fellow associates can build trust for those times when you need extra flexibility. And when you feel comfortable sharing your obligations outside of work—such as child care, elder care, or personal commitments—you will be more at ease setting a certain schedule or leaving the office for appointments. Finding a firm where relationships are valued and personal obligations are respected is key to finding healthy work-life balance.

“During these regular check-ins we talk about my workload, staffing, and what I need to feel supported, so that I can manage my workflow and have enough time for my personal life,” said Katsampes.

And you don’t need to be in the office to foster these connections—the pandemic has revealed just how effective remote networking can be. Participating in a firm lunch via video, a remote affinity group meeting, or a virtual summer program event can help you feel more connected to your colleagues and allow you to keep fostering your network.

Prioritize Your Mental Health.

A critical aspect of maintaining optimal work-life balance is being attuned to your mental health. According to a 2016 ABA and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation national study of about 13,000 licensed lawyers, 28 percent said they faced depression, 23 percent dealt with chronic stress, 21 percent faced issues with alcohol, and 19 percent handled anxiety.

Finding a firm that will support your mental health is just as important as finding a firm with your ideal practice area or long-term prospects.

“We understand the pressure that lawyers face in their jobs, and as a result, we have created a program that engages, equips, and empowers our attorneys to lead healthier lives,” said Kirkland’s Director of Wellbeing, Robin Belleau. “The pandemic has caused attorneys’ personal and professional lives to be more challenging, which has made it even more apparent how important is it to focus your well-being. By providing our attorneys with personalized and confidential support, knowledge, practical tools, and specialized resources, we can help enhance their overall mental and physical health.”

Kirkland’s Wellbeing Program is the only BigLaw program of its kind and was created to not only provide resources on resilience, connection, and fitness/nutrition, but also to offer support when it comes to anxiety, stress, and depression. Finding support networks—whether through your firm, your family, your friends, or some other resource—will be necessary for most lawyers throughout their careers, so don’t hesitate to embrace yours.

Focusing on your wellbeing will bolster your long-term legal career—whether that means prioritizing time for yourself, using your firm’s support network and resources, or focusing on relationships and your future goals.