

Striving for Professional Mediocrity

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By Stephen E. Seckler

Accepting mediocrity in yourself is the only real way to achieve balance in your life. If you are a lawyer in private practice and you want to practice law while raising a family, then you need to be a mediocre lawyer.

In fact, if you want to have any outside interests while engaged in the practice of law, then mediocrity is your only choice.

My analysis is based purely on the laws of nature. There are only 24 hours in a day. If you spend 14 of them practicing law and commuting to work, other important things in your life will not get the attention that they need.

I have also reached this conclusion because the practice of law rewards complete devotion. You can always do more to research an issue, fine-tune a brief, or identify additional risks your client might face in entering into a deal.

I strive for mediocrity in my own work and family life. I'll never run a marathon, but I exercise regularly. I'll never be the country's top-grossing legal recruiter, but I make a comfortable living. I rarely work 12-hour days, but when a client needs something, I try to be responsive. I also participate actively in my children's schools, eat dinner with my family most nights of the week, and make time to read and play piano.

Of course, I do not even practice law. So why am I advising lawyers to be

mediocre? Mediocrity is hardly the way to impress people within your organization.

How is it possible to be mediocre and be a great lawyer at the same time? How can you keep your law job and still have a life? I would like to offer some practical suggestions on how you can have it all-or at least almost have it all.

How to Achieve Mediocrity and Still Keep Your Job

If you went to a top law school or did very well at a second-tier school, mediocrity will not come easy to you. After all, working hard is what got you where you are. You identify as a professional, and you derive some sense of self-worth from doing a great job.

Initially, however, you do not have to worry about doing a mediocre job. As a young lawyer, you will not have time for mediocrity because being mediocre is an earned privilege in the practice of law.

1. *First impressions are critical.* You need to earn the right to be mediocre. Giving anything but your best effort when you are a young lawyer is likely to have bad consequences for your career. In life, first impressions are very important. In a corporate legal setting, making a bad first impression may have irreversible consequences on your career-at least at that organization. Pay your dues when you are a young lawyer. The goodwill that you generate as a young lawyer will make it easier to set limits in the future.

2. *Learn to "just say no."* As you become more experienced in practice, people will learn that you can deliver a great work product in a timely fashion. They will

know this because they have worked with you. As you begin to implement your plan for achieving mediocrity, you need to begin saying no to certain work assignments. The key is that you must continue to do a great job on the work that you do agree to take. Rather than staying in the office until midnight every night or cutting corners on everything you do, do a great job on some things and say no to other things. Don't do shoddy work. Just take on fewer assignments.

3. *Learn to delegate.* Learn to delegate those tasks that you do not need to do yourself. Take the time to figure out which tasks you can delegate. Anything that is likely to result in greater productivity is a good candidate for delegation. Once you have invested the energy in training a paralegal or other assistant to take on these added responsibilities, you will reap the returns in future matters.

4. *Think critically about your assignments.* You can always spend more time researching an issue, drafting and revising a contract, or negotiating an agreement. Try to allocate your time according to the importance of the issue. Not every matter that you work on demands the A++ attention that you are accustomed to providing. If your client does not care a lot about a particular issue, then move on to something more critical. If the potential financial exposure for the corporation is low or if the actual risk of something occurring is truly de minimus, then do not over-lawyer the issue.

5. *Shut off work when you leave the office.* Turn off the cell phone when you can. If you make yourself unavailable, then you are less likely to be interrupted. You will not be providing superstar 24/7 service, but most organizations do not actually need this kind of service anyway.

Conclusion

You can't have it all. Law is a demanding profession. If you want to be a superstar in your organization, don't expect to be at home for dinner at 6:00 every night. Don't plan to take up a new hobby or be at every one of your child's soccer games.

But with some effort, you can reach a compromise that will enable you to be a pretty good lawyer and, more important, a well-rounded person. Other lawyers or even some co-workers you come in contact with will think that you have settled for mediocrity. But you will know that you have chosen to lead the life you want to lead.