

# Life & Work

BY ED FINKEL



## A Balanced Life

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◀ **ED FINKEL** is an Evanston-based freelance writer.

✉ [edfinkel@edfinkel.com](mailto:edfinkel@edfinkel.com)

## IT'S THE SMALL THINGS THAT UPEND OUR CAREER AMBITIONS: A

**MICROSCOPIC** virus; a baby; a brain tumor; even, as you'll see below, a parasite. Over the course of one's career, in reaction to life changes or simply because of burnout, what matters can change.

"During the pandemic, a lot of us have had an opportunity to pause in a way we normally would not have," says Debbie Epstein Henry, a legal industry consultant, writer, and speaker who has presented CLE programs for the ISBA on work-life balance (or, as ISBA president Anna Krolikowska likes to call it, "life-work balance"). "Many of us are reflecting on how we want to live life differently as a result of that wisdom—and how we can do that thoughtfully so we don't lapse into our crazy lives without remembering the lessons we learned."

Krolikowska, a matrimonial attorney, has programming planned throughout her presidential year on achieving life-work balance. "The practice of law is stressful; it was stressful before COVID, and it became even more stressful during COVID as we were adapting to changes, providing services to our clients, being safe, and taking care of our families," she says as her infant daughter Lily alternately coos and cries in the background. "In some instances, it allowed us to realign our priorities. It's a balancing act. We can't do it all at the same time."

### Life happens

During her third year of law school as a 26-year-old newlywed, Henry had a seizure. She was initially diagnosed with a brain tumor, but a specialist made a surprising discovery.

"My parents and my husband recall the magic moment when the surgeon ran down the hall saying, 'It's a parasite!' That moment gave me permission to be much more thoughtful about the life I wanted to live, how I wanted to navigate my career, and when I wanted to have children," Henry says.

"This pandemic, for a lot of people, has been their 'brain-surgery' moment. It's enabled them to reflect more thoughtfully on what they want and how they want to achieve it," she says. "It's important that we don't lose the wisdom of this moment."

The pandemic has proven that the way we once worked isn't necessarily the only way to



Debbie Epstein Henry

*Photograph by Todd France*

work. "I believe some of those changes will remain with us," Krolikowska says. "The key is for us to figure out how we keep the positives while hopefully addressing the negatives."

Henry recommends that attorneys build on the positive lifestyle changes they've made during the pandemic. "We've gained more insight into who and what is more important," she says. "It's critical that we reinforce that, in terms of new habits and new rhythms. That can mean exercising, learning a new language, playing an instrument, or taking breaks with family."

Rejecting perfectionism is another way to help achieve life-work balance, which Henry says may be especially difficult for female lawyers, who have been experiencing high levels of career burnout during the pandemic. "Perfectionists feel like the trait is baked in," she says. "But happiness is tied to adjusted expectations. How much happier would we be if we stop mistaking perfectionism for excellence? Rewire your brain and aspire to happiness and productivity."

Saying "no" can be an anecdote to perfectionism. "Time is precious," Henry says. "Reduce your commitments—but then invest more in the ones that are meaningful to you. And don't wait. A lot of lawyers I work with are risk-averse, and that fear impedes growth. If they consider the risk of inaction, which is sometimes greater than the risk contemplated, that may help propel them forward. That's the essence—to distill what is really important to

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you. Double down on your commitments to those initiatives and free yourself of those that are not valuable to you.”

The life-work habits of firm owners, partners, and high-level attorneys also can rub off on others. “Establish boundaries and routines in how you work,” she says to these attorneys. “Unless something is client time-sensitive, restrain yourself from communicating on the weekend with colleagues. Your behavior is often mirrored by people who work for you.”

Junior colleagues do take notice. “Our senior lawyers made clear to us as young associates that one of our vacations should be at least two weeks off,” says Tim Bertschy, ISBA president from 1998 to 1999 and a retired managing partner at Heyl Royster Voekler & Allen in Peoria. “It takes a few days to wind down from practicing law. We needed that remaining time to meet our mental needs.”

“If you take care of yourself, others will follow. That’s an important lesson for leaders, especially with so many people working from home,” says Henry. “Work and home have become inextricably linked and boundaries have become blurred. If you don’t have leaders exercising boundaries, it becomes difficult for everyone.”

### What works for you

A balanced life comes in many forms. The pandemic has taught us this.

“The COVID experience has been

very different for parents of school-aged children who needed to adapt to and incorporate remote learning versus parents of older children, parents of babies, single individuals, and senior attorneys,” Krolikowska says. “There’s not a one-size-fits-all magic solution.”

The profession itself makes this very clear. “Problems arise at any time of day, weekends, holidays. Our duty to the client requires that we address these issues promptly. It can cause disruption in our work-life balance,” says Bertschy. “We need the flexibility not to expect that a lawyer’s life is going to be absolutely smooth. This involves an acceptance not only by the attorney, but by the attorney’s spouse or significant other.”

Yet, it takes wisdom to know when to stop. “Not all client problems require immediate attention,” says Bertschy, an Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program board member. “That’s critical to work-life balance. Our profession is a wonderful profession, but it is demanding in a personal sense. We see it in high rates of divorce, addiction, and depression.”

Bertschy recommends reviewing what’s most important in your life once a year. “Presumably, the important things are family, success in your job, personal growth, and your health,” he says. “A lawyer needs to determine a reasonable and regular work schedule that allows them to achieve these goals. Sometimes, we don’t think about what we need, as opposed to what our clients need.”

Working hard while living a balanced life became essential for Jennifer Friedland, partner at Momkus LLC in Lisle and a mother of three children, ages 5, 9, and 12.

After her first child was born with Down syndrome, Friedland worked up the courage to ask for Fridays off so she could take her son to various appointments.

“Twelve years ago, nobody was working remotely,” Friedland says. As a woman, she also was concerned that such a request would be seen as a lack of commitment.

Her boss, past ISBA President Hon. James F. McCluskey, agreed to an arrangement in which she didn’t have to be in the

office on Fridays but incentivized her to meet her billing goals, which often meant that she worked on Sundays. “I could get more done because nobody was at the office,” she says. “That was the first way I handled the challenge of balancing family and work. I worked that schedule for about three years.”

When Friedland decided she wanted to make partner, she returned to a five-weekday-per-week schedule. “Then I had two more kids,” she says. (Her husband, also an attorney, became a stay-at-home father for three years.) “I believe very strongly—and I say this to people at my firm—that when you have employees who are mothers, the best way to garner loyalty is to be flexible.”

That’s been her firm’s policy, says Friedland, who was managing partner for five years. “When associates need to leave at the drop of a hat because their child is sick, I do not question it. In return, they are hard workers,” she says. “When I was hiring women attorneys, and they saw that the managing partner was not only a woman but a mother of three kids, that was encouraging to them that they would be at a workplace that was understanding of family issues.”

### Seasons of life and work

It’s impossible to achieve life-work balance perfectly during every moment. Friedland gives herself the grace to accept that. “If I have a trial, I’m not going to see my kids for maybe a week,” she says. “But after the trial, I’m taking time off to be with them. If I have a medical obligation, I will drop all my work obligations because my kids are more important in that moment. The balance exists over a longer period of time.”

Friedland says her toughest challenge is finding time for herself. “You have to block it out,” she says. For her, it’s Tuesday nights—typically yoga. “I also wake up very, very early in the morning to work, so that I can be home for dinner. We make a point of having a family dinner every night, as long as the kids don’t have some extracurricular thing.”

Ebony Huddleston, an Alton-based sole practitioner, formed her own firm in 2018 after about a dozen years of practicing law. “That was a huge adjustment,” she says. “Initially, it was very difficult to find a life-work balance. I do everything. You go from having to report to work at a certain time to, no matter what time of day it is, if something has to get done, if there’s a bill to be paid, I have to do it.”

But as a solo practitioner, Huddleston has taken more control over what cases to take and can gauge the amount of work that will go into a matter before she accepts it. “I can plan my work schedule around my life schedule,” she says. “There’s no financial expectation put on me, other than what I put on myself.”

Having a daughter earlier this year also profoundly altered her views on work. “That drastically changed my thoughts about how I practice law and still have a meaningful lifestyle,” she says. “I put a lot of expectation on myself to get projects turned out in a certain time frame. They weren’t time frames placed by the court, or even the client. I had been doing that prior to COVID and prior to my daughter. Now, I look at things differently and say, ‘Let’s reprioritize.’”

Huddleston realized that her love for her profession and passion for helping her clients “didn’t mean that I had to throw my entire existence into it,” she says. “It was difficult for me to go easy on myself—to say, you don’t have to work until 7 or 8. Work until 5, accomplish what you can, and then come in the next day and do it again. The hardest thing is saying to myself, ‘It’s OK if I didn’t get everything on my list accomplished. Work has been taken care of today. Now I can focus on life, family, myself.’”

For Chicago probate attorney Marcos Resendiz, finding balance between his practice and home life (he has daughters ages 15 and younger than 1) has meant carving out work hours from roughly 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and then from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. He’s been tempted by the high pay of Big Law, but says it would cost too much family time.

“I like money. But that gratification is short-lived,” he says as he cooks brunch for his family. “Yes, I get great happiness from watching my daughter go to [a private prep] school in Chicago and do well. But I also get great pleasure from watching my baby daughter take her first steps.”

Resendiz also wants to make his practice more efficient. He has been working with a friend who is developing software for his practice, and he’s hired two part-time staff members who work on Saturdays to help with in-person meetings. “We officially started work on the software this month and plan a ‘go’ date of January,” he says. “Once the software is available, it should make their tasks easier. I’ll have the data needed to populate any form I need to file with the court. That’ll free me up to focus on the client.”

Resendiz’s life-work perspective did not come naturally. He had a “go, go, go” work mindset for many years, but began feeling burned out even before the pandemic.

“There was a breaking point,” he says. “I was fatigued mentally. I was stressed, frustrated. I felt I wasn’t giving my family the attention that was most important. The pandemic helped me realize that not only is time short, but we can go at any time, and it’s best to be genuinely with the people who you’re supposed to be with.”

Bertschy can relate, as his views of life-work balance also have changed over the years (with some wake-up calls of his own). As a young attorney, he was full of ambition and excitement about resolving clients’ problems and changing the world. “I’ve seen a lot of wonderful examples of great lawyering,” he says. “I’ve also seen too many promising lawyers burn themselves out, get disenchanted, and leave the profession. I’ve also seen attorneys I knew developing addicting habits and, on more than one occasion, take their own lives. That caused me to reexamine things.”

By midway through his career, Bertschy says he was becoming more committed to taking time off. He resolved

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—Tim Bertschy, retired former managing partner for Heyl Royster Voekler & Allen in Peoria and ISBA president from 1998 to 1999

“to spend time at my children’s practices and performances; to take regular vacations; and not to spend the vacations working—to enjoy my holidays, and to engage in activities that took my mind and focus off cases and client issues that would have stolen my attention,” he says. “I also exercise, read, travel, and enjoy a number of hobbies.”

It might be a bit of a cliché, Bertschy says, but spending time with family and friends, or by yourself, “refreshes your soul, and makes you a better lawyer. You have to do it as a practice, and recommit when you’re ever not doing it. It’s recognizing that being fair to yourself and your personal life is not being unfair to your job and your clients.”

“I don’t know that young lawyers can truly appreciate this. But what they need to do, even in law school, is to begin setting parameters for themselves and understand that it is absolutely fair. The points of this article also shouldn’t be lost on middle-aged attorneys. If you don’t enjoy your job, or your life, it’s never too late to change. If you’re not achieving your career and life goals, and happiness, whatever your age, now is the time.”

### **Worth the struggle**

“Balance means that on certain days, the work part takes priority; on others, the life and family part takes priority,” Krolikowska says.

“Make sure clients know that you’re

unavailable, that there are folks covering for you, and when you will be back and able to speak with them,” she says. “This is going to be very individualistic. What works for me might not work for somebody else. Is it always perfect? No. There are days when I have little control. But it’s being more aware and more intentional.”

The pandemic has upended and disrupted the highlights of office work, Henry says. Many of us miss lunch breaks and other easy ways to connect with colleagues at the office. “A particularly big challenge has been how do we incorporate natural breaks throughout our day, and connect with people naturally,” she says. “It’s that much more important to be deliberate about what is a priority and how your calendar reflects that priority and mirrors the actual commitment you want to give to a project, person, or work assignment.”

As a young attorney, Krolikowska expected that her life-work balance would follow a more traditional path. But with more experience, she realized that wasn’t what she wanted—or needed. “I was already realizing this when COVID happened, but we all did that pandemic reset in terms of, ‘What does my life look like? What are my priorities?’ This was a wake-up call for folks and an opportunity.”

### Putting the pieces in place

Friedland says she’s been blessed with the stability of working for the same firm

for the past 15 years, especially since she knows the firm is flexible. But she would advise anyone to change jobs if they’re unhappy. As partner, she no longer takes Fridays off. But because of those earlier days, when she expressed her personal needs without sacrificing her work ethic, she’s been able to build a lifestyle that suits her.

“I’m pretty happy with my choices. It was key to take off those Fridays. I wish I could still do that, frankly. But I can’t. In a leadership position, you have to be around. But that was key to my sanity, and my ability to process my son’s diagnosis. I still take Thursday mornings off to take him to therapy, and I sit in the waiting room and work.”

When Huddleston accepts a case, she’s very upfront with clients about expectations. “I have a trial set for the end of November, so I probably won’t get to your file until mid-December,” she’ll say. “I used to think that was a cardinal sin—to give a potential client a reason not to go with you.” She also has become more confident telling a client she’s uncomfortable taking a case for whatever reason.

Huddleston also does not regularly work on weekends. “Weekends are for family, for self-care,” she says. “It used to be, ‘I’m just sitting here. I could work on file X.’ What helps keep me going is knowing that I’m building a legacy for my family, for my daughter. I feel good that she’ll be proud of me—that I stepped out

on my own to become a sole practitioner and create my own avenue in life.”

Resendiz says he had to learn to be comfortable with the consequences of establishing boundaries with clients. This was particularly challenging for him; as an attorney of color, he often feels internal pressure to go the extra mile. “I lost a client by establishing boundaries because they wanted the one-on-one, in spite of me saying, ‘I have other things I need to take care of,’” he says. “That was a humbling point that I had to be really OK with.”

“There’s a harmony in being able to be effective but not having to spend a million hours a day working,” he says. “Create lists, and be organized about what is absolutely a priority from a time perspective versus what can be continued or put off until it is higher on the priority list. That said, always carve out time to speak with your client—even if it’s to say, ‘There hasn’t been any movement on your case.’”

Create a schedule that reflects the right balance and stick to it, Bertschy says. “If you can’t live that schedule regularly, you need to talk with your mentors and your bosses about what the problem is,” he says.

“Examine whether your expectation of what the profession demands is realistic. If it’s not, you need to change jobs within the profession or leave the profession. Your work-life balance is ultimately determined by you, not by your job, and not by your boss. Frankly, the money we make isn’t worth being unhappy for the entirety of your life.” 