



COMMENTARY

How to Find Success in Law Without Sacrificing Your Life

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By Isaac M. Marcushamer | January 10, 2023 at 09:15 AM

More than four years ago, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos said that the term “work-life balance” was a “debilitating phrase.” To paraphrase his advice, he recommends that professionals should not view work and life as a strict trade-off, but rather take the perspective that personal and professional pursuits are a “circle” rather than a balancing act. The world has changed drastically since Bezos’ uttered those words; however, the thought process is perhaps more relevant today than ever.



Some people spent the second quarter of 2020 writing or reading books and learning new hobbies like knitting. Not long after it became clear that we were not living through the zombie apocalypse, but before vaccines and the end of mask mandates, I decided to co-found a new law firm. While there are plenty of guides, books, and resources about starting a business— even a few about how to set up and start your law firm—there were exactly zero on how to start a law firm 14 months after the most disruptive public health event in at least a century.

In hindsight, my partner and I likely broke every “rule” on starting a law firm, but we were committed to the belief that if you are not having fun, you are doing it wrong. We love what we do, even if it can be draining. I’m here to tell you that you can practice law in a way that fulfills you without sacrificing your personal life for your profession. Indeed, it is possible for attorneys to grow, thrive, and make an impact in law, without necessarily being at a national/international firm and without sacrifice of personal/community ties. In sum, you can have it all, and even some left over to give to others.

So here are the lessons we at DGIM have learned ...



Money Is Not the Only Motivating Factor

Most law firms talk about “we” but only compensate “me.” While salaries have gone up exponentially in the race for talent—average associate compensation at the end of 2021 increased 12% year-over-year—a recent study [Thomson Reuters Institute and the Center on Ethics and the Legal Profession at Georgetown Law] found that “firm culture, the people they work with, and work-life balance” were more important to associates than money. Indeed, Simon Sinek probably captured it best, “Money is like fuel. Cars need fuel, but the purpose of the car is not to buy more fuel. Business is the same. The purpose of business is not to make money, it’s to advance a greater purpose or cause.”

So, it is important to know what your firm’s purpose is. It is likely even more important to know what your own personal purpose is. Mine is to have success, personal growth and above all, fun. Our firm’s motto is “impact through innovation and collective insight.” Purpose is much more rewarding than money (even though money still matters!).

Speaking of Culture, It Is Queen (and King)

A lot of companies talk about culture, it’s the new “we are different.” As my law partner regularly reminds us, “anyone with a laptop and an internet connection can practice law.” This is even more true in today’s world of WFH, hybrid workplaces and Zoom fatigue. The physical distance—ironically called “social distancing” but there is nothing social about it—has created an environment in which mentorship, training, and connections between colleagues are difficult to establish or continue.



That said, having a work culture—the attitudes and behaviors of employees within an organization—is essential. For us, the creation of our firm’s ethos—“Insight. Innovation. Impact.” —was defined under the counsel of a business coach. Our key is respect and treating ourselves and our teammates as adults empowered to use our judgment for the firm’s success. We hold ourselves accountable but not over where someone is, rather, it is over the quality and substance of their contributions to our business.

If you’re struggling to empower, engage, and earn your team’s trust, I recommend seeking an outside perspective to shed light within the four walls of your firm. Indeed, our business coach/culture consultant regularly shines a mirror and a spotlight back into the blind spots of our firm that allows us to individually and collectively reflect on what is going well and what can be better.

Throw the Box Away

If you Google “thinking outside of the box,” you will be inundated with articles from business, entrepreneurial, and marketing outlets, most publishing pre-pandemic. My suggestion: throw the box away!

Let’s start over by focusing on alignment. An aligned team aspires to achieve the same vision, understands, and strives to reach agreed-upon goals, utilizing the strengths of each member to contribute to success. This means aligning firm objectives with individual ones and recognizing that individual successes will ultimately lead to firm successes.

Alignment is a constant conscious practice that requires daily attention from the entire team.



Be Open to Advice. And, If It Comes From an Expert, Take It.

If it is not part of your core mission, subcontract it to the experts. This is not new advice, but we didn't take it (at first). Eventually, after many late nights lost working on tasks outside our core competencies, we adapted and started to partner with outside experts who would support us in discrete tasks. This was scary at first but quickly became super-liberating for several reasons.

- Our business partners had significant concentrated expertise. Our outside partner list quickly expanded from outside IT services to include accounting, business coaching and public relations support.
- Replacing a Vendor Was A Lot Easier Than Replacing a Teammate
- Our outside partners do their jobs well, and we appreciate their help running our business as much as they appreciate our business.
- We don't have a single point of failure as we would with a single teammate at the firm running a particular aspect on the business side.

Lastly, adding just a few extra words to the abovementioned tried-and-true saying makes it invaluable: when you hire an expert, listen to the expert.

Pivot, Pivot, Pivot.

Ross Geller said it first on "Friends"

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIaCmXw0fBQ>), but it holds true.

It is inevitable that mistakes will be made, more than you'd like to think. But when you do, reflect, discuss, and then pivot as fast as you can to course correct. If the last two-plus years have taught us nothing else, giving up the tight grip we tend to have on control is a key takeaway.



Be Brief but Impactful

I live by the philosophy that “how you do anything is how you do everything.” That said, for me, the big picture is viewing yourself and your teammates as more than just lawyers.

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