

Walking the two



**VICTORIAN
EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY
AND HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSIONER
KATE JENKINS
HAS SOME
ADVICE FOR
DRIVEN YOUNG
LAWYERS.**

With the ever increasing pressure on young lawyers to obtain and maintain successful jobs in the legal profession, achieving balance at work can be difficult. The YLJ spoke with the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner Kate Jenkins about her experiences as a young lawyer and how she managed work/life commitments.

What do you think is the greatest hurdle for law students and young lawyers in balancing their work and other commitments?

I believe the challenges are generated from two different spectrums.

The first is the structure of firms and the nature of work itself. Law firms are often structured in such a way that there are usually long hours, client demands and urgent deadlines. The tasks delegated to junior lawyers, often including drafting affidavits and perusing discovered materials, are usually of a time consuming and repetitive nature. This often creates difficulties for young lawyers wishing to establish balance at work.

The other is the characteristics of young lawyers themselves. They are usually driven, smart, and can often be perfectionists who have high expectations of themselves. This is partly due to personal traits but also to the competitive nature of law school, clerkships and entry into the profession itself. Unfortunately, these traits can create internal hurdles for young lawyers in trying to get the balance right between achieving success at work and a fulfilling life away from the office.

What did you learn from your time as a young lawyer about juggling work and other commitments?

I had a very sad experience during my early years which became a turning point for me. In my fourth year as a solicitor, a close friend with whom I'd undertaken articles, died unexpectedly. Before his death we had a similar conversation about the issue of young lawyers and work/life balance.

After his death I decided to stop just talking about the issue and took direct action in gaining balance over my life.

I made two resolutions:



Work/life tightrope

- Only work weekends when absolutely necessary. I tried as much as possible to complete all my work throughout the week, even if this sometimes meant I had to come in early and stay back very late. The difficulty with thinking, 'I'll just do a couple of hours on the weekend' is that if this turns into a habit of coming into work every weekend, when there is a real explosion of work there is no time to complete all the extra work.
- Keep your social commitments. If you've arranged to catch up with family or friends, try to keep that commitment. Often young lawyers get stuck at work, making that well-known last minute cancellation call to their loved ones. Again, I would choose to come in early to satisfy deadlines rather than miss out on that valuable time with those closest to me.

Interestingly enough, none of the senior lawyers I worked with noticed that I had made these changes to my work lifestyle. So in fact, it did not impact on the quality or output of my work but I really noticed a big difference in feeling more refreshed when coming to work and even my attitude to work.

What do you think young practitioners can do to ease their stress at work and maximise their leisure time?

It is really important for young lawyers to say no when you are at your limit. Often overworked young lawyers are reluctant to do this as they do not want to be seen as unreliable or not hard working. But even though it may feel counter intuitive, it is important to recognise when you are "snowed under" and ask for help.

If the stress is because of bad behaviour by colleagues, including sexual harassment and bullying, you should ask for help. You can do that firstly within your organisation and if that fails, look for support outside, such as coming to the Commission. Our research shows that one in four female lawyers experience sexual harassment in the workplace.

It is also important to plan holidays. Sometimes practitioners fall into the trap of saving up all their leave so they can plan extra long holidays. This can in fact be counter-productive and sometimes leads to additional stress. The occasional long weekend here and there may in fact be more effective in de-stressing from work. ■

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