

How to Disconnect From the Firm and Be Present with Your Family





It snuck up on us.

The expectations around work, the ones we're used to, have changed. The phrase 9 to 5 is viewed as old-fashioned and outdated. A lawyer's family is expected to wait. Our friends and loved ones are supposed to take what they can get.

This sounds wrong.

It *is* wrong. Does this mean family time is viewed as an added bonus or an unnecessary extra?

A lawyer's family comes second?

That's what it sounds like.

If you're a lawyer, your work typically means you're grinding out long hours. It means missed family vacations, poor life balance, stress, anxiety and burnout.

It *used* to be like this.

In fact, for the vast majority of lawyers, *it still is*. The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. There are several new *alternative* work models that can give you what you want.

More time with your family and friends.

What's the big deal though? Why should you disconnect from your work and be present with your friends and loved ones?

- **Employee loyalty.** There's a collective change taking place. More and more employees are rejecting the 60 and 70 hour work weeks. They're looking for firms that share their values and ideals. Stick with the "traditional" model and your workload will continue to grow.
- **Mental health.** [Secondary and vicarious trauma](#) is an unspoken problem for many attorneys. Working with clients who are victimized and abused has a profoundly negative effect on lawyers. Lawyers need time to recover which many don't have, unfortunately.
- **Employee morale.** Overwork has a crushing and debilitating effect on lawyers. They're [3.6 times more likely](#) to suffer from depression than non-lawyers.
- **Work performance.** The by-products of a large workload produces stress and anxiety. This decreases our cognitive abilities [immediately](#) and in the [long term](#). The alarming part about all of this is the fact that *this isn't new*. We've known about this for decades.

A constant connection to your firm *increases* your stress and anxiety.
Disconnection **decreases** your stress and anxiety.

Which means...

A disconnect isn't optional, it's essential

But you can't disconnect.

Your fears are well founded. If you abandon your firm or you fail to deliver, you'll lose your job.

It gets worse.

At any given time, there are lots of people competing for the same position. This is actually good for you. It makes you indispensable, the person your firm can't afford to lose – if you have the right strategy.

Wait, why?

Most firms are in a position of power. They're able to tell their associates what to do, when to do it and more. Firms typically dictate the terms of the employer/employee relationship. Becoming indispensable gives you a negotiating position.

That's important.

Let's say your firm has an *arrive early, stay late* culture. You'll need to give them a compelling reason to give you what you want, while also giving them what *they* want.

Okay...

What specifically do you need to improve your negotiating position then?

1. **Conventional results.** Being amazing at your job. Going above and beyond. Your work is pristine, you're a pleasure to work with. You're an A player associate or partner and you excel at what you do.
2. **Transformative results.** You achieve results that raise your firm's profile. You become a noteworthy influencer or expert on a particular matter. You're a rainmaker. You're connected to power brokers and key influencers. You have information they need but can't get on their own. In short, you do something valuable that the firm *needs*.
3. **Positional leverage.** You have options and resources available to you. You have a [f*&k off fund](#), standing offers from other firms, multiple streams of cash flow, etc. Something that allows you to walk away if necessary.

Wait a minute.

Why do you need these ingredients? *Conventional results* are the foundation. Employers are far less likely to negotiate with an employee they're looking to get rid of. *Transformative results* shows employers [you're platinum in the raw](#), the rare lawyer they can't replace. *Positional leverage* eliminates your fear of conflict and negotiation. You're able to negotiate from a position of strength and confidence.

This allows you to set boundaries.

You're able to disconnect at a mutually agreed upon time. You get the time you need **and** your firm respects the boundaries you've set.

How do you do it though?

How do you disconnect from work and be present?

You circumvent the traditional model with a new one.

For decades, lawyers have stated that they aren't fond of working at law firms. These new models of legal practice give you the chance to take control of your career, achieving the results you want without sacrificing your personal time or familial relationships in the process.

What are these new models?

1. Secondment firms

These firms place lawyers in-house at a client's site. The arrangement is typically offered on a part time or temporary basis.

- Senior lawyers acting as general counsel or regional heads of departments in large firms
- Junior lawyers handle overflow work from in-house teams and other firms
- Lawyers are paid for the hours or work that's done and don't receive a set salary

Some of these firms may offer a full time flex option where a 40 hour work week is structured around familial obligations and other interests.

2. Law and business advice companies

These organizations bundle legal advice as a package deal with their other offerings. These can be management consulting firms, investment banking companies, or companies offering general legal work.

These organizations aren't as common but they do provide a significant amount of value.

What's more, lawyers also commonly receive a fair amount of flexibility in both their personal and professional work lives. The workload may be less focused on volume and billable time and more focused on value pricing.

3. Law firm accordion companies

These companies create a network of curated attorneys who specialize in a specific area. These networks work with traditional law firms, enabling them to accordion up to meet short-term staffing needs. These arrangements are typically more attractive to women and are often offered in blocks of 10 – 20 hour work weeks.

As with other arrangements, attorneys are paid for the hours they work or on a flat fee/per project basis.

4. Virtual law firms and companies

These law firms drive down costs significantly by allowing attorneys to work from their homes. These attorneys forgo a guaranteed salary but they're free to work as much or as little as they choose.

These firms *aren't* created equal.

Some firms are very traditional, operating like their brick and mortar counterparts. Others focus exclusively on the cases or projects they're assigned, leaving higher level tasks like rainmaking to company owners or marketing teams.

5. Innovative law firms and companies

This fifth category introduces a lot of variance. Some firms bill on a subscription model – they provide legal services to clients in exchange for a monthly fee.

This creates structure and predictability.

Lawyers are able to do innovative work in a sophisticated practice, but they're able to follow a traditional 9 to 5 schedule. No working on weekends, three weeks' vacation where they're completely unplugged and disconnected from the firm.

Other firms focus on innovative practices

They tweak the traditional model in ingenious ways to improve attorney work/life balance. Others may use alternative fee arrangements to optimize cash flow while decreasing the reliance on hourly billables. Some opt for a flat structure. They eliminate the associate/partner distinctions and "rainmaking requirements" in their firm, focusing on establishing a meritocracy.

Maybe your firm doesn't offer these options

Maybe they're traditional.

Maybe they're focused on doing things the way they've always been done. It's something you should plan for. Which is why I mentioned the ingredients I mentioned earlier.

These ingredients protect you.

Why if your firm doesn't offer you the flexibility and disconnection you need? What if you have a sneaking suspicion that your firm won't be open to discussing a disconnect with you?

You can **(a.)** introduce these options in your negotiations with your firm or **(b.)** you can establish one of these five options for yourself **before** you begin your negotiation. Doing this gives you the ability to walk into the negotiation with a strong and favorable position.

You'll have to choose to disconnect

I get it.

It's impossible to stop thinking about work, especially when you're trying to find your way through a significant problem.

Disconnection is simple.

Choose to focus. Focus isn't about brainpower. It's about saying No. When it's time to be present with your family, you'll need to say No. You'll have to say No to your phone, to the tethers that keep you connected to work when you should be focused on family vacation.

It's for your family.

But it's also for you. If you want to continue winning, to continue to do your best work, you'll need to be present. A constant connection to your firm **increases** your stress and anxiety. Disconnection **decreases** your stress and anxiety.

Your family comes first

If you want to achieve the impossible, you'll need a why. Your personal relationships give you the decrease you need to relax, recover and recharge.

Expectations around work have changed.

The phrase *9 to 5* is viewed as old-fashioned and outdated. Lawyers in traditional firms are implicitly expected to sacrifice their personal lives to achieve firm goals. But our friends and loved ones matter most. They aren't supposed to take what they can get.

Give them what they deserve.

If you're a lawyer your work typically means you're grinding out long hours. It means missed family vacations, poor life balance, stress, anxiety and burnout.

Not anymore.

With the right ingredients and a bit of strategy, you'll have everything you need prioritize your work and be present with your family.

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