

LEGAL LIVES: RETAINING TALENT THROUGH A BALANCED CULTURE

Executive summary

Addleshaw Goddard commissioned Working Families to investigate the possibility that specific barriers, unique to the legal profession, exist which militate against work-life balance. This report is the result of qualitative research carried out by Working Families within legal firms in the period April to June 2008. While specifically focused on identifying barriers to work-life balance for fee earners in the law, it builds on earlier research around work-life balance cultures in the City of London (*Quality of Life in the City*, Parents at Work, 2001; *Moving Mountains: The Culture Change Challenge*, Working Families, 2006). Further details of our research methodology can be found in section 5. Our key purpose was to identify how law firms can attain a better work-life balance; and research participants were asked to define how this would look.

Why balanced working matters

The legal sector is a major contributor to the economy, and Britain is the second largest exporter of legal services in the world. In the last decade the economic and social environment in which the sector operates has undergone significant change. Differing generational expectations around work-life balance, a greater readiness to embrace mobile working and demographic shifts are redefining workplace culture. Enabling work-life balance is seen as a key challenge for 21st century organisations, and is a vital part of talent attraction and recruitment strategies. Without action the private practice part of the legal profession risks falling behind in the global “war for talent”, as employers continue to compete for scarce skills. Section 2 explores this context in more detail.

Our calls to action for private practices

Law firms are aware of the challenges, and in particular the gender imbalance at senior levels that flexible working might impact on and improve. Our research suggested the will to improve and build on flexible work initiatives certainly exists in participant firms. Policies are in place and in many cases it is now the softer issues that need to be addressed. This forms the basis of our calls to action for those who manage private practices, which comes with explicit responsibility for the development of talent.

1. Review work processes to encourage smart working.
2. Focus on changing the culture to support balanced working.
3. Foster better out of office working.

Our three calls to action come from people working within the profession, and are explored in more detail in section 3. It is our desire that this research will enable the people who manage law firms to take flexible working to the next level and embed it into the culture and mainstream of their businesses. Accordingly, we have supplied a “route map” of the necessary steps at section 2.

Key findings: the current challenges

Our key purpose was to identify how a better work-life balance could be attained in law firms. Research participants were asked to provide us with the elements of the definition and to identify the key challenges for private practice. We have grouped these into three categories:

1. Working practices:

Focus group participants identified a number of working practices traditional to law firms, in the way work is assigned, managed and evaluated which can create obstacles to more flexible working for individuals and across teams.

2. Culture:

Focus groups identified six cultural factors perceived to be barriers to more balanced working. It is our contention that while many fee earners are achieving balance, the prevailing culture inhibits open communication resulting in a lack of role models or case studies which can form the basis for the development of further good practice in individual firms.

3. Out of office working:

Given the considerable expenditure by firms on IT infrastructure we believe that fostering home and remote working is both the easiest and quickest step firms can take to improve work-life balance. Furthermore, action is likely to result in savings on office overheads and contribute to the cultural shift discussed above.

It is important to note from the outset that for the majority of fee earners the desire for work-life balance is not a plea for reduced working hours, or a signal of lowered commitment to their careers. Indeed, most legal professionals welcome challenging work and recognise the inevitability of long hours which will often accompany this. What they are looking for is better ways of balancing excellent client service with control over other aspects of their lives. Our findings and key challenges are discussed in detail in section 3.

A desire to provide excellent client service is sometimes viewed as a potential obstacle to balanced working. Our research suggested the perception is not reflected in reality. All lawyers work for clients who are themselves likely to be employees of organisations that are attempting to address the challenges of work-life balance. The clients who responded to our survey confirmed their support for balanced working and recognised the benefits it brings. A further discussion about client opinion can be found at section 4.

It is the intention of all parties involved in this research that the resulting report should provide a practical “route map” to guide the legal profession in making the necessary changes. Our recommendations are designed to support the process law firms are undergoing to embrace 21st century ways of working. We have concentrated on providing practical steps and best practice examples; and we invite everyone in law firms responsible for the performance of people to engage in the journey with us.