

## WOMEN AND THE LAW

# Girlfriends And Other Success Strategies

By Debra Snider

A wonderful woman joined the firm I was with two years after I started practicing law. She was also a corporate lawyer, fresh out of law school. I thought she was terrific from the instant we met. She had the sharpest, wittiest, most ironic sense of humor, a quick intelligence, and more than the usual allotment of plain good sense. She was tall and lanky (to this day, I have never met a woman who looked better in a pair of jeans), and she had twinkly blue eyes and a shock of smooth blond hair cut perfectly to compliment her delicate, high-cheekbone face.

For some reason I forgot long ago, my friend and I took to walking home together after work. We'd leave our offices at Dearborn and Madison in Chicago's Loop and walk up Michigan Avenue to Water Tower Place, where she would head east to her Streeterville apartment and I would jump on the 135 bus up to Belmont Harbor.

On those walks, we talked about anything and everything, and the conversations were so engaging that I never noticed the actual walking. (Anyone who knows me knows that I rarely walk even a block without complaining, and that was only slightly less true 28 years ago. Trudging, especially for over a mile through heat, humidity and Chicago's pedestrian traffic, has never been a favorite activity of mine. Add to that the

more formal work clothes and shoes we wore in the 80s and you'll get an idea of how truly great our conversations were.) We cut the more pompous of our colleagues down to size, we solved legal problems, we griped about the illogicalities of our work environment, and we plotted strategies for our careers and our lives.

I'm convinced that those conversations were a big part of what set us on the road to career success. Having similarly situated girlfriends is necessary to flourishing in settings where we are not the norm, where the rules were not written by or for us, and where we have to question our instincts because, however solid they may be in other arenas, they are not usually hardwired for naturally understanding how to succeed in male-dominated work environments.

During the early years of my career, I felt like an impostor most of the time and, occasionally, like an unwelcome interloper. In addition to being incredibly supportive and reassuring, my daily conversations with my friend as we walked up Michigan Avenue kept me sane, grounded and focused. They helped me be happy at work. They also began the thought process that allowed me to articulate, many years later, the essential elements of building a successful and satisfying



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career. I think of these elements as high level lessons learned; operating in accordance with them, even before I knew them consciously, is what differentiated me at work and made my career soar.

## Success isn't success if it doesn't make you happy.

A career is not a fixed road to a fixed destination. It's not about any particular destination (as in job), but rather about the journey – how you feel and build skills and contribute along the way. Career satisfaction is an ongoing thing, a process, a pursuit; it's not a means to an end, it is the end and it is what you should prioritize. Like satisfaction, success has to be measured in personal terms. Cleaving to some external definition, rather than to your own, is a sucker bet. You have to suit yourself.

**Once you're clear on what you want, focus on what the organization rewards.** Like people, organizations have personalities, core values and structure. Recognize this and figure out how the rules can work for you. Get yourself in positions where you believe that what you've set out to do can be done, that you can do it, and that it will add value. Be who you are – there isn't time for two personalities – and look to become indispensable. Commit yourself to leaving

every place you work better than you found it.

**Get organized and stay organized.** Being busy is not an excuse for being unresponsive and inconsiderate. Clear priorities and A+ organizational skills aren't chores; they're necessities that will make your life easier and better, give you a competitive advantage, and let you be the kind of person you want to be relative to responsiveness, courtesy and generosity.

**Demonstrate leadership every chance you get.** You don't have to be a boss to be a leader. Everyone has frequent opportunities to make things better and more fun, commit to the success of others, fix processes, and otherwise contribute to strong teamwork, strong culture, and strong organization. People who act like leaders feel more empowered, more positive, more effective and more satisfied.

*Note: Debra Snider is an author, speaker, no-longer-practicing lawyer and former financial services senior executive. Her books include A Merger Of Equals, a novel about a woman determined to climb the corporate ladder, and The Productive Culture Blueprint, a business book for and about lawyers. Visit Debra's website at [www.debrasnider.com](http://www.debrasnider.com) for leadership, productivity and other free career resources.*

# Keeping It All in the Air

By Jeena R. Beli

While recently participating on a panel at the Suffolk County Bar Association's program, "Birth of a Law Practice" I noticed that one of the attendees brought his "tween" to the program. I wasn't surprised at all, and when I related that my own daughter is the reason I put great effort into maintaining a work/life balance, he nodded with complete understanding. Carefully scheduling work-time around parent-time comes with the territory when you're a personal injury litigator in solo practice. Is it difficult? Yes. Can it be done? Yes, with a lot of planning and a little creativity. Here are some things for you to consider if you are thinking about how to juggle a career in litigation and parenting.

## Incorporate work/family balance into your business plan

The preparation of a yearly business plan is crucial for everyone who has a solo practice. As you create yours, it is important that you design it with an idea of how you will balance family and work life. Add a section in your plan which focuses on researching child-care resources with the goal of finding the best one that will fit your litigation schedule, including court appearances, client meetings and examinations before trial. If you have school-aged kids, you may need to consider a before or after-school program. Have you considered how you will work in drafting motions around after-school and weekend activities? How will you handle holiday and

Summer school breaks? These issues should be well thought out before you begin handling a case load. Keep in mind, however, that children get sick, babysitters get flat tires and school snow days do not necessarily mean that court is closed. You will need to include back-up childcare arrangements into your business plan.

## Explore part-time office shares to get the most out of working from home

When I started my practice in 2007, I knew that at the beginning, working from home was going to save me a lot of overhead costs. I also knew that working within earshot of the family room would provide me with an opportunity to spend some unhurried, quality time with my then four-year-old. I set up my home workspace with an easel and art supplies so that my daughter and I could share time together while I did legal research or checked emails.

As my practice started to grow, I needed to find some professional space in which to meet clients and conduct Examinations Before Trial. At first I looked for an office sublease, but I soon realized that in paying substantial monthly rent, I would feel the need to tie myself down to the office, negating the time I was enjoying with my daughter. Instead, I turned to a nationwide provider of virtual office space (think timeshare). For less than \$ 200.00 a month, I have 40 hours worth of office space, complete with desk, chairs, tele-



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phone and internet connection as well as receptionist and coffee station. What more could I ask for? I can get to court or schedule meetings after the morning school bus pick up and know that I will be home in time to pick up my child from aftercare. When I don't have meetings, I work from home and enjoy every minute of it.

## Capitalize on delegation to make your business work (and vice versa)

One way to manage your time more effectively is to delegate work to other family members or to contract workers you hire for specific projects. When I managed a law firm, I would hear such comments as, "It's easier if I just do this task on my own" and "If I delegate the work there is no guarantee that the work will be done properly." However, taking control of all tasks big and small can lead to early burnout and dissatisfaction. As litigator and parent, letting others take care of certain daily details must be included in your overall plan. Make a list of family, friends, and even neighbors who you think would be willing to step in on occasion to give you a hand and don't be afraid to ask for assistance.

On the flip side, find a colleague or two who practice in the local courts who can cover appearances for you on a per diem basis if you have a sick child at home or cannot otherwise attend yourself. Consider meeting clients on weekends so you can stay involved in your children's afterschool activities. Since many of my clients work Monday

through Friday, they appreciate the Saturday consult.

## If all else fails, incorporate the kids into the schedule

In the courthouse, you can always tell when it's the week between when camp lets out and the beginning of the school year. During that time, you will notice quite a few children accompanying their litigator parents in the Suffolk County Supreme Court DCM part or on simple calendar calls. As a last resort, if you do not have a trial or deposition scheduled, you can take your child into the courtroom once in a while if they will not cause a disruption. I have found it necessary to bring my little girl with me to simple court appearances. She usually brings her portable video game and puts it on silent mode. She sometimes takes a line from a famous dancing show and asks me when she will be able to go see "The Judges" again.

You may run into a situation where your client is not able to meet with you because he or she does not have anyone to watch their children. Rather than cancel the appointment, see if you can rearrange the meeting so that it can be done at their home. Offer to bring your child and you can turn the meeting into a professional play date. As outlandish as this may sound, I have been able to successfully turn what could have been a lost opportunity into a benefit by letting my daughter entertain my clients' children while we get down to business, and my clients appreciate the personal approach.

As you give your business plan one  
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