

Skills Savvy | *Zooming in on Client Development*

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Balance? What Balance?

We have spent a tremendous amount of time discussing women lawyers' work-life balance during the past decade. Now, with COVID, that discussion has taken on new emphasis. The legal profession continues to grapple with the changes resulting from the ongoing lockdowns. Work-life balance discussions have shifted from how to juggle the demands of office life with the demands of home life. Those lines of demarcation have blurred to the point that there is almost no break between the two—they proceed simultaneously with the addition of new requirements: school, childcare, cooking, cleaning. For women, it as if the 1950s have merged with 2020 like some professional version of that old commercial about peanut butter in my chocolate.

Balance has always been about control. For women lawyers in particular, the ability to have that control depends on the ability to direct the work and control the schedule. Control depends on your ability to make decisions. Control, in other words, requires clients. Your own clients. In addition to the piles of work and obligations of home, you need to also devote time to business development during the enforced confinement of the pandemic.

Upside to the Pandemic Prison

You are probably thinking as you read this, "I'm locked in my house. The kids are whining. I have work to do. I don't have time to think about business development." However, the crisis presents an unusual window of time to develop relationships and expand opportunities in a way that a busier, more normal time does not. Your need for work will extend beyond the current crisis. As law firms evaluate their staffing needs, those lawyers with their own clients stand a better chance of long-term employment than those who do not. The need for clients in your own column on the balance sheet increases in times of uncertainty. That is certainly true now.

The pace of work and deadlines has slowed enough that you have the luxury of personal contact in a way that is hard to justify when the judicial system demands a 24 hour, 7-day-a-week focus. The time spent glued to your computer terminal provides a chance to reach out to your friends and colleagues by email or social media to ensure that they and their families are safe and well. Analyze your contact list and identify those old friends, clients, and colleagues you have not talked to in the past year.

Pick Your Favorites

Prioritize the clients you have most enjoyed working with. Make a list of them and create a schedule to contact them. Not only will the schedule help give you some structure to your business development efforts, but it will also give some definition to the endless weeks. That list should comprise the people who have provided you with assignments in the past and those who either have or may refer work to you. Remember: work comes from people who know you and know your work. Business relationships are personal relationships.

The pandemic may provide you with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to focus on the personal and professional relationships that lead to work of your own. You should update your firm biography and your LinkedIn listing. Those are necessary building blocks for your personal brand but take time that you may not ordinarily have. Build into your week an allocated amount of time to work on your post-pandemic professional life. For now, you can visit clients and contacts without the cost of an airplane ticket or the scheduling difficulties of an in-person meeting. You can develop business without the usual financial costs. You do not have to ask permission from your firm or from the marketing committee because it is possible to make connections without cost. Email and social media connections cost nothing. And, you do not have to request budget approval for a free, 40-minute Zoom call, for example. Invest some of your time into developing the business you need for controlling your life in the years to come.

Sharla Frost, a strategic counsel in Houston, recently published a book entitled Power at the Table: The Women Lawyers Guide to Developing Clients and Control. She can be reached at sharlafrost@gmail.com.