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BALANCING ACT

Do you work to live or live to work?

Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com
October 22, 2007



New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts director Tracey Batt

It's been a busy week and a long day. You've been in the office since 8 a.m.; you came in early so you

could leave at a "reasonable" hour. You ate lunch at your desk. Actually, you didn't even take time to go to the cafeteria; you had powdered soup and coffee from the pantry across the hall from your office. But that's okay, you think, because you have dinner reservations at your favorite restaurant. It's your anniversary. The only problem is, the reservation, which you made six weeks ago when all was quiet, is in half an hour, and you have at least three more hours' worth of work ahead of you. What do you do?

All right. I admit that that scenario may be a bit extreme. There is a finite number of anniversary dinners you can miss before you don't get to have any more anniversaries.

However, there are many less clear-cut decisions awaiting you in your big-city, big-firm legal career. Three of the lesser-known corollaries to Murphy's Law state that you will be ready to leave the office at 4:30 in the afternoon if you have absolutely nothing to do after work; you will have so much work that you can't see your desk under all the piles of paper if you have plans; and you will have enough work to keep you in the office until 4:30 in the morning if you have tickets to the Led Zeppelin reunion and a first-class ticket to London.

Let's put aside the more extreme scenarios and just say that you have concert or theater tickets, and you would really like to use them, but you still have three hours' worth of work left that is due on a partner's desk at 9 a.m.. What do you do?

I generally find that there are two possible approaches to this problem. The first (we'll call it "my way") is to go to the show, have a great time, and then go back to the office and work as late as necessary to finish the project, riding on a post-concert adrenaline buzz. The second (we'll call it "my friend's way") is to give away your tickets or let them go unused and finish your work.

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Although I admit that doing things my friend's way might be the wiser career move, I could never do things that way. We attorneys work hard, and we earn our little pleasures. I always saw my big-firm job as a perfect combination of the opportunity to practice law for interesting clients in a subject area that I find exceptionally exciting, access to the wealth of cultural events that New York City has to offer, and, let's face it, the financial wherewithal to pay for the tickets. In other words, I see myself as the kind of person who works to live, not who lives to work. I strive to do work that I find emotionally and intellectually rewarding, but I also like to give myself the occasional, more tangible, reward for my efforts.

I should probably confess that "occasional" might not be the best word to describe my historical concert attendance record. I have been to 22 shows of various sizes and ticket price ranges so far this year, and I am currently holding tickets for four more. I may not be the best person from whom to take advice regarding whether or not to go to a particular show. Case in point: this summer, my nearly septuagenarian father, who is also, incidentally, an attorney, and I managed to obtain tickets to the Eric Clapton Crossroads Guitar Festival in Chicago. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event for guitar enthusiasts, featuring everybody from Eric Clapton, B.B. King, Robert Cray, Hubert Sumlin, Johnny Winter, and Buddy Guy to Vince Gill, Sheryl Crow, Alison Krauss and Union Station, Albert Lee, and Willie Nelson to John Mayer, the Derek Trucks Band, and Susan Tedeschi. I certainly did not want to pass up the opportunity to see Robbie Robertson join Eric Clapton for "Further on up the Road" or Steve Winwood join Eric Clapton for Blind Faith songs for the first time since 1969.

But the Fates are cruel and conspired to keep us away. After we had been in the airport departure lounge for 10 hours, our flight was cancelled less than 12 hours before the show. At 2:30 in the morning, we rented a car and drove 750 miles, straight to the concert. We are hardcore concert fans; we are, as one of my clients dubbed us, "gangsta." Take that, Fates!

Therefore, there is a slight possibility that my perspective is skewed. But I firmly believe that everybody should seize as many opportunities as possible to do whatever makes him or her happy. I am not suggesting that you should neglect your duties. I am saying that there are ways that you can arrange your schedule to complete your work and still do the things you really want to do, particularly with the availability of telecommuting, even if it means sacrificing a few hours of sleep.

My former firm had a wonderful program, through which they gave free tickets to concerts, theatrical productions, and sporting events to their associates. I doubt if they would have wanted us to let the tickets go unused if there was any way we could avoid it, as they were clearly recognizing and rewarding us for our efforts on their behalf as well as trying to keep us happy. Everybody, including my old firm, knows that happy employees produce better work product than unhappy ones.

Figure out which activities outside the office make you really happy, and make the time to participate in them. You will find that you have more energy for your work, as well as less potential for resentment of it if you don't allow your work to take over your life completely.

Tracey I. Batt is the Executive Director of New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. Before joining NJVLA, she was the Associate Director and Legal Services Manager of Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and an associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges in New York, where she practiced copyright and music licensing law for seven years.

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