

How to Find a Job that Allows for Work/Life Balance

by the Project for Attorney Retention (PAR) Law School Project
& the Stanford Law School Office of Career Services

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Finding a job that allows for work/life balance is not as straightforward as it might seem. The part-time programs described on many law firm websites exist on paper rather than as truly usable options for the ambitious attorney. Here is a strategy for finding a challenging job with long-term career potential that also offers work/life balance.

First: Questions to Ask Yourself

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What would your schedule be like if you worked at this firm? A general rule is that an attorney bills 7 to 8 hours for each 10 hours worked. (For sample schedules, see “Billable Hours – What Do They Mean to You?,” at <http://www.law.stanford.edu/experience/careers/ocs/students/resources/pdf/Billable%20Hours%20Handout.pdf>.)
- Do you need/want a schedule with predictable hours?
- Do you need flexibility in when and where you bill your hours? In other words, do you need/want to work from home part of the week? Or to leave the office at a certain time, but resume your work later in the evening? Or to work long hours during the week, but to keep weekends free? Or are you willing to work long hours, so long as you can depend on taking vacations?
- Do you anticipate working full-time for your entire career? Part-time for your entire career? Or do you anticipate working part-time during part of your career? In other words, is it important to you to find a firm that truly embraces reduced-hours work and does not penalize reduced-hours attorneys in terms of assignment and partnership decisions?

Then: Do Your Homework

The more research you do before walking into the interview, the fewer questions you have to ask. Sources of information on the opportunities for work/life balance in a given firm include:

- The firm’s website.

- The website of the Project for Attorney Retention, www.pardc.org. PAR is building “The Scoop,” which lists objective parameters that can help you assess whether or not a firm’s flexible work schedules offer high-quality work with career advancement. The site is currently under construction; all the firms listed will be filled in by May 2007. If a firm that you would like to know about is not listed, write PAR at info@pardc.org and we will try to help.
- To interview at your law school, employers have to fill out a form from the National Association for Law Placement (NALP). One crucial piece of information on that form is the percentage of attorneys who work part-time, a statistic that also appears in NALP’s Directory of Legal Employers. If only 3 to 4% of attorneys work part-time, this may signal that lawyers are reluctant to use the existing part-time program (or it may signal a firm that is trying hard, but has few lawyers who want part-time work—your call). Firms with the highest percentage of lawyers on flexible schedules have 12 to 20% of lawyers working part-time. The NALP Directory is available at www.nalpdirectory.com.
- An even more useful form is the NALP workplace questionnaire, a longer form that is required by some schools but not others. If your placement office doesn’t require it, they should consider doing so. (If your law school does require this, you can ask the firm’s Human Resources Manager—see below for other possible questions to ask people at a firm.) If they offer it, study it. Information you should be able to get from these NALP documents includes:
 - What are the average billable hours, broken down by practice group?
 - What are the average billables of associates who have made partner in the past five years, broken down by practice group?
 - What percentage of men takes parental leave? What is the average time they take?
 - Have any part-time attorneys made partner in the past five years? How many attorneys in all made partner during that period? If there is a lower- and a higher-hours option, what is the comparative partnership rate of attorneys on the lower- and the higher-hours option?
 - Broken down by practice group, do attorneys typically take all their vacation days? If not, what percentage of vacation days is actually used?
- A helpful book is *Presumed Equal: What America's Top Women Lawyers Really Think About Their Firms*, by Lindsay Blohm and Ashley Riveira.

Finally: Questions to Ask People at a Firm

What questions to ask people at a firm and when to ask them depends on two things: how important work/life balance is to you and your overall taste for risk. *Obviously, the central task in the interviewing process is to determine how exciting you find the work and how compatible you find the people.* That said, at the callback stage you talk with quite a few people, which gives you a chance to work a question or two about work/life balance into each interview, if you feel the need to do so. Here are some suggested questions to ask. *Note that you have to be strategic about whom at the firm you ask*

which questions and when. Our notes about certain questions appear in italics. (If you have good or bad experiences with these questions, please let PAR know, at info@pardc.org. If you have other questions to suggest, please let us know that, too.)

To ask associates:

- **Before you get an offer**
 - Describe a typical day. When you arrive; your projects (research, drafting, client interaction); whom you work with; when you leave.
 - When do people typically leave for the day? Do you have a policy where if you have to work past a certain hour, the firm pays for dinner and/or a cab home? *(These programs are great, but may signal an expectation of 24/7 availability.)*
 - I know some people are morning people and some are not. Does everyone arrive and leave at about the same time?
 - *If the firm's website mentions a mentoring program:* I see the firm has a mentoring program. How are mentors assigned? What do they do? What has been your experience?
 - What type of bar association activities do you do? Are they typical of others in your firm? If not, what activities are more typical?
 - Is there a formal process for getting work assigned to you? How does it work? *(Firms without a formal assignment process often use a "hey you" assignment system, which puts a premium on being in the office as much as possible so you are there when a partner walks down the hall looking for staffing.)*

- **After you get an offer**
 - How do the practice groups differ in terms of billables, vacations, pressure? *(Or, if you are only interested in one practice group, you would ask these questions about that practice group.)*
 - Are there any part-time attorneys in your practice group?
 - If I am thinking of building my career here long-term, what are the options, down the road, for flexible work? What is their effect on advancement?
 - What non-billable projects have you been assigned to in the past year? How were they counted in terms of your contribution to the firm?
 - Do you feel comfortable finishing up your work at home, or is it important to be seen here in the evenings? Weekends?
 - How many weekend days have you worked in the last three months? Do you take all your vacation days?
 - *If the firm offers a shorter-hours track, with a lower salary, that also leads to partnership:* Did you choose the lower- or higher-hours option? Why? Do you know people on the lower-hours option?
 - *You may want to ask to speak with attorneys who work part-time.*
 - *You may want to look up people who have recently left the firm, which can be a very effective way to discover the ins and outs of firm life. (You can do this by comparing successive editions of Martindale-Hubbell, a well-known directory of law firms. Ask your career services office or visit www.martindale.com.) Often they will feel freer to speak than attorneys still at the firm. Why did they leave? What were their impressions?*

To ask partners:

• **Before you get an offer**

- What kinds of client development activities does the firm hold? *(Note that if these entail golf on Saturdays, you are expected to be on call on weekends. Note whether the activities involve one-on-one contact, which is very time-consuming, or group activities, such as a spa day or a party in the country for clients, attorneys, and their families.)*
- I assume that lawyers are out of the office a lot. How do you keep in touch? *(This may tell you how important “face time”—being visible in the office—is. It may also provide some insight into whether the firm provides adequate IT support for work outside the office.)*

• **After you get an offer**

- What are the criteria for partnership? What are some of the reasons people fail to make partner? When people are deferred, what slows them down?
- *If there is a part-time program:* What do you consider the biggest challenges of the firm’s part-time program? Has there been any pushback from clients? *(If so, it would be nice to know how it was handled.)*
- *If the firm’s website mentions a women’s initiative:* I see you have a Women’s Initiative. What types of activities are included?

Also, while at the firm, keep your eyes and ears open...

Do the partners include mothers and men who share child care responsibilities—or is the partnership composed chiefly or exclusively of lawyers whose spouses either don’t work or work part-time?

Do all the women partners seem similar? If so, it may mean nothing. But it may signal unspoken expectations that women will conform closely to a limited number of models of behavior, whereas men are less constrained.

The PAR Law School Project is sponsored by U.C. Hastings College of the Law and Stanford Law School. These questions were drafted jointly by PAR and the Office of Career Services at Stanford Law School, with thanks to Susan Robinson.