

Working outside the box

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THE INS AND OUTS of transitioning to an alternative work schedule (AWS) that works for you, your career, and your clients can be challenging. This needs to be planned properly, which is what we consider in this column. The next one will discuss common pitfalls.

Get clear on what you want

A critical first step to developing an effective strategy for creating and working an alternative schedule is deciding, and clearly defining, your goals. Do you want to leave earlier every day to spend after-school hours with your children or do you want to work one less day a week so you can pursue an advanced degree? Is your goal to lower your annual billable hour requirement or better define the hours in which you are expected to be in the office? Working an alternative schedule can mean different things to different people.

Once you determine what it is you want, look at your legal practice and see how you can make it work. Is your practice one that requires building in additional flexibility due to court deadlines? Do you work in a practice area that is exceptionally busy during certain times of the year? If you want a long-term solution, you must consider how to make your schedule attractive to your employer by thinking through how you will best be able to meet the demands of your clients.

You should also find out if there is a formal AWS policy at your firm and read it. Does it meet your needs? If not, identify what you would need to negotiate differently. Is there an informal policy? Will you be the first to propose an alternative schedule? Explore the firm climate. How does the policy work in practice?

Finding an advocate within your firm that believes in your ability to succeed working an alternative schedule is key. If those for whom you work are not on board with your decision, you will have additional challenges succeeding. Find someone who cares about your career and your tenure with the firm and discuss your proposal with them.

Work out the details in advance

Be mindful of your future goals when negotiating an alternative schedule. Do you want to become a partner? If so, make sure that going on an AWS will not stop you and make certain your proposal discusses your track to partnership and/or equity partnership and how that will be affected by your alternative schedule. Ask and negotiate for what you want upfront, not after the fact.

Thinking through the implications of going part-time involves not only analysis of your professional life, but also your personal life. Yes, you will have more time to take on more non-work-related responsibilities, but you must also have a back-up plan. For example, if you need to pick up your children by 3:30 every day, but have a deposition that runs long, you must be able to pick up the phone and enact 'Plan B' immediately (and have 'Plan C' on alert just in case). Often you will be able to schedule around your personal obligations, but sometimes you will not.

Get real

The truth is that a person who works an alternative schedule is sacrificing something to get something in return. You are trading face-time on projects and professional opportunities for face-time with family or other interests. It is important to be realistic about how this will affect you professionally. For example, if an AWS means that it will take you longer to make partner (some policies do require a longer partnership track), decide whether that is best for you. While an alternative schedule may lengthen the time you spend reaching your goals, they should still be attainable and the rewards both professionally and personally worthwhile. **WOMENLEGAL**

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