

PRESERVE YOUR WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS IF YOUR CAREER DEPENDS ON IT. IT DOES.

By Henry Hamilton III

The legal profession is a microcosm of the nation. And, as a nation, we have been through quite a bit the last few years—COVID-19, multiple mass shootings, the murder of George Floyd, the January 6 events, and financial disruption.

Admit it or not, each of these issues added additional stress to our lives. On top of all this, we must maintain our practices, meet billable hour requirements, zealously advocate for clients, comfort clients, meet payrolls, balance trust accounts, and take care of our children and our parents while at the same time upholding our many community and corporate responsibilities.

Our practices are dynamic and require us to work at a high level of awareness. It would do us good to recognize we do not have superhuman strength. Life's stressors and work pressures can take a toll. Our law degrees do not give us immunity from cancer or diabetes, so let us not pretend our law degrees give us immunity from depression and anxiety.

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I mention all this to make three points: (1) we must be intentional in our efforts to preserve our mental health and wellness; (2) we may have to modify our office environments to retain and recruit new attorneys who are more cognizant of the need to prioritize mental health and wellness; and (3) as employers, albeit solo small firm employers, we need to be aware of our obligations under national and state disability laws to offer accommodations to individuals suffering mental disabilities.

The longevity and success of your practice are largely dependent on your physical and mental health. Plan for the long game. Preserve work-life balance like your career depends on it—because it does.

The next generation of lawyers

and support staff are more in tune with their mental health needs and the benefits of a sustainable work-life balance. New lawyers and support staff will steer away from employers they believe are likely to disrupt their work-life balance and mental health.

Accommodations are more common. Law schools have already begun accommodating law students suffering from conditions such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and bipolar disorder. Examples of accommodations include extra time on exams, reduced caseloads, adaptive aids, and modification of examination procedures.

Law firms and employers are subject to state and national disability laws. It's reasonably predictable that firms will have to offer accommodations to retain and recruit new attorneys and to comply with state and national disability laws. These accommodations may include remote work flexibilities, liberal use of leave, quiet work spaces, and additional time for assignments.

Of course, there will be resistance to these changes, but these changes will occur nonetheless. Over time, though, we are likely to see reductions in the hazards of our profession (e.g., substance abuse, stress-related illnesses, and burnout) and improvements in career satisfaction. ■