



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 8 - Work/Life Integration [Because True "Balance" Can Be Elusive]

By [Megan Monson](#), [Nicole Fulfree](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#), Lauren Hanson
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Amanda Cipriano: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an Associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Megan Monson: Welcome to the latest episode of the Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk. I'm one of your hosts today, Megan Monson, Partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Group and one of the core members of Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network. I'll turn it over to my two colleagues, Nicole and Rachel, to introduce themselves as well.

Nicole Fulfree: Hi, everyone. I'm Nicole Fulfree, I'm Counsel in Lowenstein Sandler's Bankruptcy and Restructuring Department.

Rachel Dikovics: Hi, my name is Rachel Dikovics. I'm an Associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Criminal Defense Practice Group.

For this episode of the Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk, we're focusing on work-life integration. We're purposely not using the phrase work-life balance because we know from experience that balance is not always achievable. That's partially because stress in any aspect of your life tends to affect the other parts of it. And the balance between work and personal priorities is virtually never 50/50.

Nicole Fulfree: So today, we're going to be talking about some of the issues that women attorneys deal with in this respect, and then try to offer up some tips for achieving professional successes while still prioritizing a fulfilling personal life and also avoiding the burnout, stress, and anxiety that all of us are unfortunately very familiar with.

We're also joined today by a very special guest, Lauren Hanson, who is senior employment counsel at Thomson Reuters, and who also happens to be a best friend of mine. And I will turn it over to Lauren to introduce yourself.

Lauren Hanson: Hi, everyone. Thanks for having me. Like Nicole said, I'm Lauren Hanson. I am a senior employment lawyer at Thomson Reuters. I've been with

Thomson Reuters in-house for four years now. And prior to that, I was formerly a summer associate and a litigation associate at Lowenstein's New York office.

Rachel Dikovics: Awesome. Thanks for being with us, Lauren. We're so glad to have you. So I'm going to moderate our discussion a little bit today and I'll jump in from time to time. But I do want to dive right in. So I want to start by talking about current satisfaction levels with work-life integration. Would you all say that you're currently satisfied with your work-life integration?

Megan Monson: So I'll take this one. I'd say on the whole, generally yes, although, like anything, it can change on a day-to-day basis. For me, the reasons that I'm generally happy with my work-life integration, and I like the use of that phrase, Rachel, because you're right, it's not always 50/50 and it's going to change and peak in one direction or another, I tend to be generally satisfied with my work-life integration in part because I've made it a purposeful and thoughtful effort to make sure that I'm still taking time for myself while achieving all of my work goals. By that, I mean, for me, I like to spend time going to dinner with my husband, getting together with friends, working out every morning. And so I purposely make an effort to have that be part of my daily or weekly routine. And by forcing that to be kind of what I'm focused on and making it a part of my routine, it makes me much more satisfied from a personal standpoint and makes kind of keeping the work and life balance in check.

I'd also say another reason that I'm generally satisfied with my work-life integration is being able to try to have my weekend time to myself to the extent I can and/or, at least pre-COVID, take vacations and time off. And so making sure to take that time for yourself is really key and critical. And I've found when I was earlier in my career, I didn't necessarily spend as much time focused on that and would let work be a driving factor, but realized it's just as important to take time for yourself to care for your mental and physical well-being because you're ultimately then going to be a better and happier worker.

Nicole Fulfree: Okay. So for me, I think that I'm in a little bit of a different position. I'm in a sort of a transition point in my work-life integration journey. I just returned from maternity leave a couple of months ago. And so now I'm working on how to find a new balance given my new life responsibilities. And so I'm definitely struggling a little bit with how to find the right place and time for work and personal issues. I'm working on it. I think that one of the things that I struggle with, though, is that I find that personal time is the first thing that gets sacrificed. And so when I think of work-life integration, I think of how do I balance my work and my family life. And I honestly don't even think of personal time as part of that. And so I think that's the main problem that I'm struggling with.

Lauren Hanson: I'm experiencing a very similar struggle that Nicole just described, except I've just recently returned to work after my second maternity leave. So I now have two daughters, a two-and-a-half-year-old and an almost one-year-old, and find that I've done a pretty good job successfully integrating, I like to say better integrating work and my familial responsibilities but have certainly

done so at the expense of myself. So it did take some reprioritization just to learn to juggle two children as opposed to one child and work. But I'm kind of at a transition point now where I'm working on trying to focus on myself as well.

Megan Monson: And just to add in something based upon what you both said. I think it's also important that your work-life integration or balance is going to be shifting, right? Your priorities change as your life changes, your work level experience changes. So it's always going to be kind of an evolving process. And I think one of the things that tends to help in trying to kind of achieve say satisfaction, or at least happiness with it, it's also learning and leveraging others experiences, right? Because for both of you just talking about your return from maternity leave, I'm going out on maternity leave shortly, and I know I would look to both of you for advice on how to work through some of those issues coming back. And so I think it's also really important to just kind of leverage your network and figure out kind of what people have found to be successful and not successful in trying to achieve their goals. And it's always good tips to get from others.

Rachel Dikovics: These are all great points. And the fact that you all brought up maternity leave I think leads into my next question really well, which is whether you think it's harder for women to truly integrate their work and personal lives than it might be for men.

Nicole Fulfree: So I think that integrating work and personal life is something that's really personal to each individual. That being said, in my opinion, or at least I can speak for my house, I think one of the issues that comes up is traditional gender roles that often still fall on women and some of the pressures associated with those roles. And so in my house, I think it's true that a lot of the household and child care responsibilities do fall on me, even though both my husband and I have hectic work schedules. I think that at times, or I think it's fair to say most of the time the default responsibilities with respect to house and child care do fall on me. And so that's one of the struggles that I'm working on right now. So that's one thing that I definitely think is harder for women.

I do think, generalizing again, but women are great at multitasking and always find a way to make everything work. But it's definitely a struggle when you have additional loading on of all of those responsibilities and being the default person to take on those responsibilities when there's two people working in the house. And so that's one thing that I'm struggling with right now.

The other issue related to integrating your work and personal life that I've struggled with lately is feeling uncomfortable with mentioning my responsibilities at home to colleagues. And so I feel like, I guess I feel a pressure not to mention those responsibilities if I have to take my daughter to the doctor or if I have to do the bedtime routine, which I do make a point to do and kind of impose a schedule on myself to help me find my way in that respect. But I think I get uncomfortable sometimes with telling people that I can't join a call because I have to do the bedtime routine. And what I've been trying to do is just not feel like I have to give a reason.

But I think the concern is, and I don't know whether this is self-imposed or if people really do think this, but I think what I feel is that if I say those types of things, that people will make assumptions about my career goals and that I'm maybe not as driven because I just want to be a mom or I'm concerned with my household responsibilities. So that's one of the things that I think about quite often.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. That's something that we've talked about in women's initiative programming before is the potentially opposite assumption about the same activities by women and men. So for example, I think a lot of times if a man says he's leaving the office early or he has to skip a call, or whatever, he's going to his kid's soccer game, for example, I think the default reaction by people is wow, he's such a great dad. It's so great that he makes time to do that. But for women, I think the default reaction is often what Nicole's describing, which is she's not reliable, she's not prioritizing her career. And so I think that can be a real roadblock for women achieving equity in work-life integration with their male counterparts.

Megan Monson: And I think it's also helpful to think about, Nicole you mentioned, not giving a reason why you can't be available. And that might be a good tip for everybody because nobody really needs to be involved and know every aspect of your personal life. And there's a lot of other women professionals who may not have children but just have other obligations or want to even go to happy hour, albeit, and that certainly could be frowned upon if that's a reason that they're not joining a call. But I think the way you tactfully handle it in terms of I'm not available between this window and this window, but I'm available all of these other times, I think takes some of the pressure off them thinking that you're not committed and focused to your career.

Rachel Dikovics: So Lauren, of the three of us, you're the only recovering law firm attorney. So when you went in-house, do you feel like the way that you integrate work and your personal life changed?

Lauren Hanson: To my disappointment, it did not magically change. I found myself working similarly long and consistent long hours just trying to learn my new client, the business, and trying to figure out how to navigate corporate America, which is completely different from law firm life. And also just trying to create a reputation for myself as being responsive and really thoughtful and a practical, trusted legal advisor to these various new HR professionals throughout the US who I was only beginning to learn and establish a working relationship with.

So it didn't really change until I made the time to change the manner in which I worked. Just as some context, when I initially joined Thomson Reuters, I was one of six employment lawyers based in the US. And so I felt as though I needed to be all those things I just described to really justify my spot on the roster because it was an unusually large group. And so about a year after joining, we actually, the company sold a significant part of its business, the entire financial and risk business. And our team went from being a team of six employment lawyers to a team of three employment lawyers. The other three were part of the divestiture of that business. And so I found myself

again feeling like I really needed to justify my spot on the team and did so at the expense of my personal life.

It wasn't until after I had my oldest daughter that I really, I realized I had no choice to change the manner in which I worked in order to just keep my career and my family afloat, really.

Rachel Dikovics: I think you make a really good point, Lauren, that a lot of times these things are not going to change until you decide that you're changing them. It's a good reminder that nobody will ever be a better advocate for you than you. And a lot of times, if you want to implement a certain balance, if I dare to say it, in your life, you'll have to be the person to make that change because if you don't put certain parameters on what you're willing to do and your time, other people certainly will not create those parameters for you.

And so that leads into my next question, which is as you've all become more experienced attorneys... And I want to give a special shout out to Megan Monson, who is now the most experienced attorney among us and just found out last night that she's a partner in her group as of January 1st. So, congratulations, Megan. As you've become more experienced attorneys, has the "balance" in your lives changed for better or worse?

Megan Monson: So for me, my balance has changed for the better. And I think part of that is by becoming a more experienced attorney, I just became more confident in my abilities and also more comfortable pushing back on people, right? So as a more junior attorney, I didn't feel comfortable saying no or pushing back when I got work assignments and I was already overwhelmed. But the more experience you have, you know that it's not only okay to reach out for help but to really ask does somebody need this today, especially if you're getting something over the weekend or late at night or if you're on vacation.

So being comfortable to set those type of boundaries I think has been key for me in terms of getting, we'll say, a happier work-life integration. And that just for me came with time and experience and building my own reputation at work as well. And I think that's part of it is that people know the work's going to get done. It's going to get done well. It doesn't really need to be always right now.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. And so I definitely agree with you, Megan. To a certain extent, I think that as I've become more senior in my career, I have a little bit of a better understanding on how things work. If a matter is not sufficiently staffed, I feel like I can speak up on that point, or if I feel like I'm working on a project, I have people that I can delegate it to at this point. So those things make it easier and along with the things that you mentioned, Megan.

But I guess on the flip side, finding the balance has become a little bit more difficult in certain ways. I think that as I've become more senior in my career, you're taking on more responsibilities, more client-facing responsibilities. You're the one signing off on the final draft of things. And so, obviously, I always cared about my final work product and how it came out. But as you become more senior, I think taking on those additional responsibilities also

adds some stress and a little bit more ownership over certain tasks, which makes the balance a little bit more difficult in some ways as well.

Megan Monson: Yeah. And I want to touch on actually something that Lauren said before is that her work-life integration really changed when she made an effort for it to change. And I think the same was true with me, is that early on I didn't focus on taking time for myself. And it really became a detriment, frankly, to my ability as an attorney because you're facing burnout, you're facing long hours, and you're not going to be the best attorney you can be. And so by at least figuring out a way to integrate kind of what your priorities are at a personal level into your life, you're just going to be a happier, more well-balanced person and your work products is going to be evidenced by that.

Lauren Hanson: I agree. I feel like one of the things that changed as I became a little bit more experienced and felt a little bit more established in my current role is that I felt more confident in my ability to prioritize tasks and I became a little bit more protective of my time. And so in my role, people often come to me for just day-to-day advice about various employment issues that pop up. And certain things are particularly urgent. For example, if they need to terminate someone's employment immediately because they just engaged in some kind of egregious behavior but they're concerned about doing it.

But there are other things that come up that aren't necessarily urgent. And so when people reach out to me and ask do you have a minute, instead of just making myself immediately available and dropping whatever it is that I was focused on, my first question is of course, can it wait? I'm freeing up in 30 minutes or in an hour, and I can speak then. This way I could at least complete whatever it is that I was consumed by at the moment instead of constantly disrupting my workflow just, again, to be the most responsive person.

Rachel Dikovics: Those are all really great tips. Thinking a little bit prospectively, how would you describe the work-life integration that you aspire to have, or put another way, what are your must-haves for a rewarding and fulfilling life? And I just want to say that being independently wealthy and not having to work doesn't count as work-life integration. So note that.

Nicole Fulfree: Well, there goes my answer, Rachel. No, but seriously, I think two main things that are kind of more abstract goals that I think of them as. I think the first one is is minimizing the guilt that I feel when I'm focusing on one particular part of either my work or my personal life. And so I find myself at times when I'm focusing on a work task, I feel guilty that I'm not with my family, or if I'm spending time with my family, that I should be working. And I feel like there's always that constant little voice I hear in my head saying you're not being the best worker that you can be or you're not being the best wife and mom that you can be, depending on what task that I'm doing. And I think that's something that a lot of women do to themselves. And I think it's really unfair. And I think becoming more aware of those thoughts and kind of trying to push them out to minimize the guilt that I feel is something that I'm working on.

I think the other main goal that I strive for is just to not miss out on major opportunities at work. And on the other hand, not miss out on major milestones that are important to my family and my personal life. And so I think that if you're doing it right, there's a way. Sometimes we have to make sacrifices, right? But if you're doing it right, I think that you shouldn't have to sacrifice any major work opportunity or any major family milestones in order to satisfy other obligations.

Lauren Hanson: That really resonates with me. And when I think about what I'd like to have to have what I consider to be a rewarding and filling life, it would be having that successful career, having a successful career that I truly enjoy and find challenging but gratifying, and also being able to have some quality time with my family, especially my husband and my two daughters and our extended families.

What I alluded to earlier in the podcast is the third aspiration of mine, which is to have a little slice of time each day for myself with no set agenda, whether it's for exercise, whether it's for reading, whether it's going for a walk or a drive, just something for me. And here's the real idealistic part, not at the end of the day when I'm mentally and physically drained after putting my two children to bed and finishing a long work day, but to make that time for me at some point during the day when I have the energy to enjoy it and the wherewithal to enjoy it.

Rachel Dikovics: So we talked a bit about the kind of integration that we aspire to. What do you perceive to be the biggest barriers to actually achieving those aspirations?

Nicole Fulfree: I think one of the main barriers for me is trying to give my all in the different aspects of my life and the desire to want to be really good in both of those roles. I wouldn't change anything about that. I think the barrier's there because I care so deeply about the work that I do and about my family and personal life. And so I don't think there's any way to get around that barrier. But it's definitely something that makes it a struggle for me to take time away from one to focus onto the other. And so it's at times hard for me to focus on and enjoy the particular task that I'm working on, whether it's work or home when I feel like I should be somewhere else.

Lauren Hanson: One of the barriers that I see, and I can't take credit for this concept, it's something that I read about from an author, a woman named Glennon Doyle. She talks about how women in particular have a tendency to abandon themselves. And instead of abandoning themselves, what they really need to do is instead abandon society's expectations of them. And at that point, they can finally take a look at their lives and do what it is that means the most to them. And so I think that that barrier really is just, it's society's expectations of women in particular and women's natural tendency to abandon themselves at the cost of meeting everyone else's expectations.

Rachel Dikovics: Building on the Glennon Doyle train, when we were prepping before recording this, I mentioned the concept of the mental load, which is the idea that women generally in their households carry the to-do list essentially in their mind at all times. And I think it was Nicole said, "Oh, Glennon Doyle

calls that the ticker," meaning basically like a stock ticker that's running constantly with the values of different stocks. And the analogy is that for many women, there is a constant list of things that need to be done or scheduled or purchased for your household or your kids or whatever it is constantly taking up mental space and taking up mental energy.

And a lot of times that I think prevents women from being able to fully take time for themselves and relax and stop thinking about everything else that they have to do in the other aspects of their lives, whether that's their work life or other parts of their personal lives. And it seems like that's super common across women of in any industry. It's definitely not just women attorneys. It's not just corporate women. It's women everywhere. But if you take that tendency and add it to a very stressful work life, it can be a difficult barrier to achieving the kind of integration that we're talking about.

So on that note, how do we fix it? Looking to you guys for very exact answers. So do you have any tips or suggestions for trying to find the right work-life integration?

Megan Monson:

So one of the things that I do is I actually put time for my personal time in my calendar and that almost forces me to treat it like any other sort of work obligation. So I have my half hour, 45 minutes in the morning to work out. If I'm planning to go out to dinner on a particular evening, I pencil in an hour and a half, have it on my calendar. So I would almost feel like it's an obligation, something I need to do, and it then doesn't become, oh, I'm just going to write off the personal time because I have other stuff to do.

I'd also say don't let a single day or week define you in terms of your balance. Because as Rachel mentioned earlier, it's kind of it's always going to be fluid and changing. And some days you may feel that you're hitting everything spot on and other days you may feel like a failure. And just don't beat yourself up over it because it's something that we're all working on and struggle through.

And the last point I would suggest, at least for me, is we all have really limited free time when we're not at work and we're not dealing with personal obligations, so be conscious about what you're spending that time on and make sure you're doing things that are actually meaningful and important to you.

Lauren Hanson:

I think those are all great suggestions, Megan. The calendar suggestion was one of the tools I used to try to become better at integrating my work and personal life. And just taking it one step further, I found it useful to allocate time to particular tasks. So not only calendaring it, but saying, you know what, I'm not going to spend more than an hour on this particular task. While I could probably work on it for four hours to perfection, it's not really something that I should be devoting that amount of time to. And there are other competing priorities and tasks I need to complete in order to be able to log off for the day, let's say, and make the time to enjoy dinner and bath time with my kids, putting them to bed because that's something that I value doing every day as much as possible.

One of the other tips that I found to be helpful, and you really do have to be diligent in doing it in order for it to work, is just creating to-do lists and taking a look at it periodically throughout the day to really assess what it is that absolutely needs to be done today, what it is that absolutely needs to be done before the close of business, what can wait until a little later on in the evening if you have to log off to take care of something personal in the meantime, and just kind of re-shifting your schedule accordingly so you can kind of juggle all of your other responsibilities. So sometimes it's, personally I find it tempting to just cross off the easiest tasks off my list to feel like I'm accomplishing things, but that could end up backfiring and impede my ability to do things that are important, like sign off to be able to enjoy dinner time with the kids.

Nicole Fulfree:

So Rachel, this prompt makes me think back to my answer on what the main barriers we have from achieving the integrations that we desire. And so the feeling that only I can do this right or that I should be all things to all people, or my ideas, or maybe it's society's views on what it means to be a great mom or a great wife or a great attorney. And I think one of the only ways to avoid burning out while trying to achieve all of those things at the same time is to find the areas in which you can relinquish a little bit of control. And so this is something that I've been working on lately. And honestly, it's very difficult for me.

And I'll give a little personal anecdote. But this morning I took a big step and let my husband take our daughter to her pediatrician's appointment. She has a lot of doctor's appointments. And so I traditionally take her to all of her appointments and it's very important for me to be there and I enjoy taking her. But it's just too difficult at times when my work schedule gets really hectic. And so I made the decision at the beginning of this week that I was going to relinquish a little bit of that control and task my husband with taking her to the pediatrician by himself. And it was really hard. But I stuck to my guns and I was able to keep my work schedule this morning and keep my calls on my calendar. And I didn't give in to my desires of just wanting to take back that control and make sure I was there for it. And nothing bad happened.

And so that's what I try to keep reminding myself, just find little areas in which, certain tasks or areas of your life that you can give up a little bit of the control because I find that when I've tried to do this the world didn't burn down. And so each time I do it, I feel like a little bit more assured that other people can help out too and I don't have to take on the bulk of every responsibility.

I think this is something that's applicable to work too. Somebody mentioned earlier that it's difficult to give up the control on work that you're working on and maybe sometimes you think it's harder to delegate certain tasks. And so I think this is something that's both related to personal life and work life.

Rachel Dikovics:

I totally agree. And I think all these tips are really great and all kind of relate to a concept that I think of as sort of a pendulum between work and personal life. And the swing of the pendulum is not, it spends the most time in between the two points. But like Megan said, it can be difficult to not let the times

when you're at one point or the other completely really define what you think of your ability to integrate because you do spend the vast majority of your time somewhere in the middle. And that's where most of us want to be. And I think that all of these tips will help us maintain that integration and hopefully some level of balance that we're looking for.

So thank you all for joining us for another episode of the Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk. Hopefully, this discussion provided you with some ideas and actionable tips about how to achieve that elusive integration and maybe even balance that we're all looking for. We hope you'll join us again for future episodes as we continue the Real Talk.

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