

My flexibility story

It's not a case of 'one size fits all' when it comes to flexible working arrangements. Sole practice may suit your needs, as it has for this Gold Coast practitioner.

Denise O'Reilly, pictured, is an employment law sole practitioner who established her own practice (D.O.R. Legal) in September 2011.

She spent the first seven years of her legal career at Freehills, working for the firm in multiple offices, and then moved to the Gold Coast where she spent 18 months with a local firm. Prior to starting a family, Denise chose to open her own practice.

"My thinking when the opportunity arose to establish my own practice was that I wanted to have an arrangement, once children came along, where I could work from home as much as possible while they were babies, and that's something I was able to do," she says.

"I had certainly seen flexible working arrangements in action. At Freehills, there were people who worked part-time in my team and had job share arrangements and these arrangements worked really well. There were also some flexible arrangements in place at the Gold Coast firm I worked for.

"For me, thinking about having children, I was unsure if what I wanted in terms of flexibility might be greater than what a traditional law practice might be able to offer me, or than I could ask of an employer.

"Within a traditional practice, particularly a large practice or in other areas of law, it is not always feasible to manage the workloads the way I can as an employment law sole practitioner.

I have been able to manage my clients' deadlines and expectations so I could meet client needs and be engaged in practice, but still do what I needed with my babies.



"A lot of my clients are small and medium-sized businesses, and the work they need in my area of law tends to be in smaller parcels and more manageable on a turnaround time frame than for very large clients or in more transactional areas of law. The tasks tend to be manageable around my responsibilities, even when short turnarounds are required.

"When both my children were babies, up until each was about seven months old, I was at home with them most of the time, so I could work around when they slept, were playing or in the evenings when they were in bed. That's something I don't think I could have done in an environment where the work requires extended and unbroken blocks of time."

Denise says that as with any working arrangement, sole practice has its positives and negatives.

"Certainly starting up a practice renewed my interest in the law and practising. I had been working in the one area of law for a long time and it was interesting to have the new challenge of how to run a practice, to become, effectively, a small business owner. And working the way that I have has meant that I have been able to remain engaged in my work, and connected with my clients, through my children's early years.

"As a sole practitioner you need to be highly organised, have a supportive spouse or partner, have a good technology arrangement and be willing to be as flexible for your clients as you want to be with your own working life. When you get busy, you have to find the time to look after your clients irrespective of what is going on at home. That is the trade-off."

Denise says a commonly asked question from clients is what are the obligations to provide flexible working arrangements.

"Employment law requires workplaces to provide some flexibility, in certain circumstances, and for some businesses and employee roles that can pose a greater challenge than it does for others," she says.

"No one person's needs or desires for flexible arrangements are the same necessarily as the next person's.

"For me, it's working on designated office days and on other days working around the kids on an as needs basis. I think I am very fortunate to be able to work this way."

This story appears on behalf of the flexibility working group, an initiative of the Queensland Law Society and Women Lawyers Association of Queensland. The group needs your story – good or bad. Please contact flexibility@qls.com.au and share your experiences with flexibility in the legal profession.