

My flexibility story

Working in legal practice part-time while raising a young family can be a professionally and personally fulfilling choice for both men and women, as this Brisbane practitioner's experience shows.

James Fox, pictured, has been a solicitor at Fox Bradfield Lawyers since his admission in 2007. The boutique commercial firm was established in Brisbane in 2006 by his father George Fox and practice partner Annette Bradfield.

James' early career ambitions lay in science and medicine and he holds degrees in biomedical sciences and physiology as well as a Juris Doctor (JD) in law.

For the past 18 months, he and his wife Kristina, a solicitor at Barry.Nilsson Lawyers, have each worked part-time to share the care of their son.

"We both have flexible working arrangements with our respective firms and each work three days a week in our offices," he says. "It's a bit of give and take; sometimes things come up. When she has a particularly busy week I can take some days' leave and cover her and she can work longer hours. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen when things pop up, as they do in law.

"Our second child arrives in two months and we plan, after my wife's maternity leave, to continue with flexible work arrangements. I think both of our lives have improved by sharing the care of our son, both personally and professionally. We are both as productive, if not more productive, in the days we are in our offices than we were previously.

"I have found the arrangement very workable. I don't have the two days' off in a row. On my days at home, our son is still at the age where he has a nap during the day and he is old enough for solo play, so with technology being what it is, if there are any urgent work matters which need to be dealt with I can, perhaps, get two hours of work done while he naps.

"I can talk with a client on the mobile, they can email me information, I can look at it while my son is asleep, email it through to our admin staff with some notes on the drafting which needs to be done, and then the next day I will be in the office.



"Having the technology in the firm, and the workflow procedures in the firm to be able to do this, is key. Before entering into the flexibility arrangement I did think it might be more difficult to manage workflow, but you can find ways to deal with things when the support is there, which it is at our firm from the admin team and the other lawyers.

"Litigation requires a little more discipline and planning, but I make sure when I am dealing with a litigation matter that one of my clerks is involved from the beginning, working with me, so that if something needs doing on my day off my clerk knows where all the files are and I can talk them through what needs to be done."

James says among the benefits he's found of a flexible work arrangement is increased motivation.

"It's difficult for me to be objective, but I feel that when I am in the office I am more organised and motivated to get things done. You have to be structured, and set schedules, and you work hard because you want to go home and see your child before it's his bedtime, so that's the reward.

"Working only three days a week I think I work more productively. Our son is getting older and talking and playing games, so he is a lot of fun. Being with him all day is a long way from the law and a great leveller. It gives you perspective. Equally, after a day of playing trains with him, which is his world at the moment, and being the only adult in

the room, you think, 'Tomorrow it will be good to go into the office and work and have adult conversation and solve problems'. So it's the best of both worlds.

"I feel my son gets a lot out of having my wife and I with him on alternate days. He enjoys different styles of play and he has bonded with both of us."

James says he has received mostly positive reactions when people learn of his work choice.

"People of my age group who are starting families are very interested to hear about my wife's and my experiences. Friends with whom we have talked about it have entered similar flexible arrangements, and it is working for them – one of those couples, both are in the legal profession.

"I do get a feeling, though, that there is still a sense in the community of 'this is not a man's world' to be sharing the role of care giver to your child, especially for a lawyer. You are supposed to present as a young man, dedicated to the law, a hard litigator or business lawyer.

"I have encountered a few men in the older age group who feel they are supposed to say 'Isn't that great, well done', but that is not really how they view it. They would want you to be on call 24 hours a day.

"Obviously, this kind of arrangement doesn't work for everyone. A firm has to consider what are the imperatives for its clients, and how can it ensure that the clients don't suffer because employees are being given flexible arrangements.

"But I think it is worthwhile having the conversation. My wife is a skilled legal professional, with a lot of experience in her area, and it would be a waste to lose that if she were to have to take on the full family workload. You have to do what works for you and your family."

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.