

# My flexibility story

Having children early in your career may have its drawbacks, but it can work out for the best, as the story of a Cairns practitioner illustrates.

## Nine years after admission, Stephanie Williams, *right*, is a barrister practising in Cairns.

She is now settled after a series of roles in government and private practice that were complicated by her decision to have children early in her career.

The roles were with the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, a private criminal law firm and a civil firm, followed by more than three years as counsel assisting the Coroner.

At both of the private firms, Stephanie negotiated a four-day week after having her children.

“One of the law firms was less receptive about working flexibly than the other,” she said. “I felt that I had to work longer on the four days that I was in the office to give the impression that I was working five days.

“At the first firm I made myself available on my day off by phone and email. This meant that I was spending a lot of time fielding calls from my administrative staff. I did not do that at the second firm, which worked much better for my family life.”

In 2013, while working at the Office of the State Coroner, the older of Stephanie's two children began school.

“My son's school day finished at 2.45pm and I was reluctant to send him to after-school care five days a week in his first year of school,” she said. “As such, I approached my manager and the Coroner with a proposal to work a full day but start earlier, and they were both supportive of the arrangement.



“In my view the fact that I was still able to complete a full workday, albeit earlier in the day, greatly assisted the negotiations for flexible arrangements.”

Stephanie switched to a 6.45am start, finishing at 2.30pm. As the office was empty and few others commenced work between 6.45am and 8am, she found this time particularly productive. However, there were some drawbacks.

“I regularly had to appear in court, which impacted on my ability to finish at 2.30pm,” she said. “It took some time for staff to adjust to the early finish time, but ultimately both staff and stakeholders became aware of my working hours and would contact me without hesitation during those times.”

As a consequence of having children early in her career, Stephanie said that one of the issues she had to adjust to was seeing her contemporaries advancing their careers while she was on maternity leave or working flexible hours.

On reflection, Stephanie became content with the realisation that this part of her career was only temporary. In her mind it was a question of: “At this time in my life do I want to focus on my career, or do I want happy children who I can spend time with?”

It was Stephanie's recommendation, based on her own experience, that lawyers seeking flexible work arrangements had to bring a good reputation as well as strategic thinking to the table when negotiating flexible arrangements.

“In my experience trust and confidence has to pre-exist between employer and employee, whether it has been built up over time with an existing employer or through bringing a reputation of good work and reliability with you,” she said.

“Be creative in your thinking about working flexibly and stick to your guns – don't make yourself too available on your day off unless you feel it is the right thing for your family – set boundaries and limits for yourself and your employer.

“Don't overcompensate for wanting to work flexibly. In my own experience flexible work arrangements should not result in you going above and beyond what you would do in full-time employment.”

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](mailto:flexibility@qls.com.au) and share your experiences with flexibility in the legal profession.