

My flexibility story

While flexible work arrangements have benefited this practitioner, she questions whether law can ever really be a 'family-friendly' profession.

For the past 10 years I have worked flexible hours at both boutique and national top-tier firms.

At various times my flexible arrangements have been three days a week, or four days a week with the fourth day worked across evenings, or five days a week with some of those as short days.

When my children were born, I was able to take advantage of the flexible work policies in place at the firm I was with, and when I left I was able to negotiate flexible arrangements with subsequent employers.

The advances in technology and data management over the past decade have made it significantly easier to make flexibility work. Ten years ago, a bike courier used to bring files from the office to me at home, I would work on them, the courier would take them back at the end of the day, and then we would do the same the next day. Now, you can log into your office computer remotely, take a USB stick home and work on your home computer, or log into a data room. I also used to lug a suitcase of hardcopy files around with me all the time. I rarely need to do that now; it's just a USB stick.

In some ways I am the poster child for working flexibly, as I really have had no negative experiences. Having said that, I have had to be flexible as well. I have bent over backwards to make part-time arrangements work and I was happy to work numerous hours outside of my designated hours to make it work.

That's because in litigation, which is my area of law, you can't switch off your phone and not be contactable. You can't clock off on a Thursday at 5.30pm and not clock on Friday and Monday, and expect someone else to carry the load. Unless, perhaps, you are in a role where you are not dealing with disputes, where you are not running to tight

time frames, one where you don't have to be contactable or you are doing something that is task-oriented. It also depends on how your work group runs as well as the type of work you are doing and the area of law. At the moment, I am working on a short-term contract and I am very task-oriented. As long as I am working on those tasks there are no real issues.

I am also looking for a permanent position to take up after the contract ends, which is difficult at senior level.

I know that some employers have had bad experiences with people who work part-time, so while my recruiter knows that I am looking for flexible arrangements, it is not something I advertise when I meet with people, as I don't want it to be an impediment. I think I need a foot in the door initially.

Flexibility wasn't an issue for me in securing previous jobs, because there was someone in those firms who was a contact, someone who knew me, knew my work ethic, how I had made flexible arrangements work. I was a known quantity and they were comfortable with the arrangements I wanted and needed.

At one of the firms, what they originally offered was a full-time job. I thought that I could do it but when I got the offer in writing I looked at my life, my responsibilities, and thought 'I can't do it' and I told them that. They said, 'So what do you want? What will work for you?' I told them and they agreed, and I think that is because I had a friend in the firm who knew me well, had worked under me at a previous firm, and was able to let them know how I make flexibility work.

I don't have a lot of support at home and that's something I have to accept. I have had to accept that there are some things I can't put my hand up for, work-wise, because at the end of the day you work for a business and you have to deliver. There are certain circumstances in which I can't deliver, no matter how hard I try, just because that is the reality of the way things are.

In some of the roles I have had I have been challenged by working flexibly; in others I haven't. Even within a role, the work flow goes up and down.

It would be easy to say that I have been overlooked for career progression in the past in favour of someone who works full-time, and there are times when I have thought that. But I couldn't say categorically that it was the case. What I say to people is that I am no less committed to my work and my career just because I work part-time.

Even though flexibility arrangements have been positive for me, it has been a lot of hard work and there have definitely been times when I have thought I should take a break from law and find another career. Law is hard work in general. There's a drive by firms to please clients and deliver on unrealistic deadlines, and because everyone is competing for work, you dare not say 'no'.

When you have family and financial responsibilities you can't really step away from what you are skilled at, particularly when you have reached a career level where you are earning a good income. I am not going to be able to earn what I currently earn by retraining and doing something else that may perhaps provide a better work-life balance for me. That's not an option until my children finish high school.

'Big law' is not, in general, family-friendly. In all the environments in which I have worked, the partners have all worked incredibly long hours. That is not something I aspire to do on a long-term basis, even though I have worked incredibly long hours over periods of time in the past. The rewards are not worth it.

My mother actually asked me, 'If you had your time again would you do law?' I said, 'Probably not'. If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn't have chosen it as a career because it's not family-friendly, and that is the case I think whether you are male or female.

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.