

Keeping Them Separated

RECENTLY MY HUSBAND AND law partner asked me if I needed to bring my car keys with me to lunch. When I replied “no,” he asked how I would get the mail without the key. He assumed that like him, I kept my office keys on the same key ring as my car keys and my house key. He assumed incorrectly.

With the technology that is now available, we can seemingly connect every aspect of our lives: arming our home security alarm with our phone, programming our television via our iPad, and even surfing the internet on our televisions. With cell phones, we can be reachable at all times of the day, no matter where we might be. But how much accessibility is too much? At what point do technology and the ability to be reached whenever and wherever blur the line between home life and work life? How do we reestablish that line? Do people even want to?

A partner in a firm I once worked for used to have a mantra that he never told a client “no.” I believe what he meant by that was that his clients always came first and that no matter what was needed, or when or where he was, he would tell the client “yes” and it would get done because clients do not like to be told “no.” More than once, that mantra and attitude led to my getting a call or email on the weekend or in the evening or even on vacation, asking if I could complete a task before the next business morning.

In contrast to that partner’s mantra, I made a conscious decision early in my career to try and maintain a separation between my work and my home life.

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As my career develops, and certainly with the opening of my own firm, that separation has become more difficult to maintain (I have a basket of preschool toys in my office and the receptionist computer can often be found playing Disney videos) but I still endeavor to keep it. How? There are a few seemingly simple things that I do which I believe keep that line in place.

First, I keep my keys separate. At the end of the work day, my office keys go into a specific pocket of my purse that I do not open until the following morning. Those keys, when visible, can serve as a reminder of what is waiting for me at the office the next day. By keeping the office keys away from my car keys or house keys, I can close things out for the evening and go home without that tiny, jingling reminder of what tomorrow will bring. That way, I can relax and enjoy the evening with my family.

Second, I do not give clients my cell phone or home telephone numbers. Some of you might disagree and I do know several attorneys who give clients or other counsel their cell phone numbers. Perhaps out of an abundance of caution, I feel the need to maintain that last bastion of privacy. People have asked me for those numbers and I have politely refused to give them. I do not practice criminal or family law, which might necessitate a client needing to locate me at odd hours. Much of my practice revolves either around the courts’ hours (for litigation matters) or normal business hours (for corporate and other business clients) and I am hard-pressed to find another reason that someone other



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than a close friend or family member would need that kind of access to me.


Another reason that I do not give those numbers to clients is because I want those clients to recognize that I have a life outside of my office, just as they do. Too often in today's world of instant gratification, people forget that good things come to those who wait. The same can still hold true in our type of service industry. Would you rather have legal advice that comes in a rush when you have pulled me away from dinner with my family or my child's performance, or even worse from my vacation, without the benefit of my having access to documents or research available in my office? Or would you prefer advice that comes as a result of a calm, measured review or approach while I am at my office?

Just as my clients likely have families and pursuits outside of their businesses or the matters on which I represent them, I need my clients to remember that I, too, have a life outside of my office. Also, in giving a client or opposing counsel that kind of access to us, we run the risk that they will abuse the privilege and call at inappropriate times or for unnecessary things.

Third, I try not to work at home in the evenings. For some, this might be difficult or even impossible, but I really do try to leave everything work related at the office. For those times that it just is not possible and I must do work at home, I try to keep it as separated as possible from my home life by waiting

until my daughters go to sleep and working in my home office, rather than on the couch or at the kitchen table. Keeping the work confined to a specific location at home also keeps me from thinking about it later when I've changed tasks or moved on to something else.

One more thing I do is try not to answer work-related emails in the evening or on the weekends. While I cannot escape emails coming via my smartphone, I can choose not to read them, or after reading them, choose not to respond until the next day (or Monday). In doing so, I avoid any potential back and forth that might result with the client or counsel and which could take up large chunks of time. That being said, there are times when I choose to read a message and respond so that the anxiety does not follow me through the evening or weekend.

Of course there are those who believe that clients should have constant access to them and who often do work from home or maintain a constant connection to their office. Each person is different and must find what works for them and is comfortable in their world. For me, the separation is necessary and I find it helps to reduce the stress that bringing home work can sometimes bring. And as with anything, there are exceptions to my rule of separation, but when those situations do arise, I try to handle them with minimal disruption to my home life. And I still won't give out my cell phone number. 

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