

Practicing Well: Setting Boundaries

Patty Beck | *Minnesota Lawyers Mutual Insurance Company*

The challenge of setting boundaries between personal and work time is nothing new for lawyers. For years, lawyers have shared that it is difficult to stop working after they have left the office for the day. Many lawyers say that the last thing they do before going to bed (oftentimes while laying in bed) is checking email on their phone, which is also the first thing they do when they wake up. There are several reasons for this, and a primary one seems to be that lawyers feel pressure from clients and colleagues to always be available and to always be working.

But a new challenge has surfaced in the wake of COVID-19: how do lawyers set boundaries between personal and work time when they literally live in the space where they work? Many lawyers have said they feel an even greater amount of pressure to be available at all hours since clients and colleagues know that most of us are at home and spending less time on social activities due to COVID restrictions.

The good news is that just because we are working from home does not mean that work must take over our home and personal time more than it did pre-COVID. While there are already plenty of articles addressing how to work *less* in order to have more balance with personal time, this article is about creating boundaries for *where* you work so that you have more control over *when* you work.

For example, many of us have been working from a guest bedroom (if we are lucky), our dining room table, or our kitchen counter. The trick is to make a thoughtful decision about where in your home work is “allowed” to be. Stated

another way, decide what parts of your home you want to designate as “work space” and then commit to only working from those locations. In my home, work is not allowed in either my bedroom or my breakfast nook. So, if I feel the urge to check email while I am laying in bed or enjoying my morning coffee, I force myself to walk to my designated work station, boot up my computer, and do my work from there instead of on my phone from my bedroom or kitchen. Thus, by controlling *where* I do my work, I am also controlling *when* I am working.

Lawyers often feel bombarded with work when they open their phones for personal reasons and are immediately faced with the red notification bubble denoting unread emails (quick tip: disable that notification bubble, or move the email app to the second screen on your phone so that it is not the first thing you see). The challenge is that if you check email from anywhere in your home, it allows work to follow you everywhere and prevents you from having a defined personal space, which is incredibly important to our mental health given the increased time we are spending at home.

This mentality can also be effective when living in a smaller space like an apartment or condo where you may not have a separate room for an office. The way to accomplish this is to make the decision to only check email from your computer. For example, if your computer is on your kitchen countertop and you get the urge to check email while sitting on your couch watching Sunday football (or in my case, Hallmark movies), get up and walk over to your computer to check email from there rather than checking it on your phone. This will allow you to

utilize your couch for personal space and your countertop for work space, which will also provide an added sense of control over your personal time versus work time.

The stress of COVID has affected people in different ways. Some people are suddenly grappling with feelings of isolation that they have never dealt with. Others are struggling with too much work while some do not have enough. Whatever experience you are going through, remember that you do not have to go through it alone. If you are struggling with work, talk to your supervisor. If you are dealing with unfamiliar (or familiar) mental health challenges, contact your state’s confidential lawyer assistance program or contact another mental health professional. One of the main challenges is that we do not know how long COVID will impact our lives, so rather than trying to be tough and “wait it out,” be proactive in making small changes that have the potential to greatly impact your personal and professional lives. ■



About the AUTHOR

Patty Beck is a Claim Attorney with *Minnesota Lawyers Mutual Insurance Company*, where she manages

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