

Ask A Mentor: How Do I Juggle Billables And Other Activities?

By **Melanie Webber** (March 26, 2024)

Experts answer questions on career and workplace conundrums in this Law360 Pulse guest column series. Have a question you're afraid to ask your law firm chair, practice area leader or mentor? Submit it anonymously here.

In this installment, Melanie Webber at Fisher Phillips offers advice on balancing billable hour requirements with nonbillable work while maintaining healthy work-life boundaries.

Q: I want to get involved in some of my firm's internal initiatives, but I'm worried that would negatively affect the time I have for billable work. What are some ways to balance billable hours with nonbillable professional activities, while ensuring I maintain healthy work-life boundaries?

—Associate at BigLaw firm

Involvement in internal firm initiatives can be hugely rewarding, both personally and professionally.

But it's not without risk: As an associate, especially a new associate, you have billable time requirements that don't leave a lot of room for other work. You must plan and execute properly to ensure that you're meeting all of your firm commitments while spending the time you need on personal activities to remain balanced.

As chair of my firm's national women's initiative and leadership council, an active member of several firm practice groups, a mentor to several female associates, a partner and a mother, keeping work and life balanced is a constant challenge.



Melanie Webber

When I joined BigLaw 14 years ago, I was already a partner but still felt that I needed to establish myself within the firm. I wanted my colleagues to know that I was a good lawyer, was responsive to clients and was a good firm citizen — i.e., willing to serve on committees, task forces, etc.

Admittedly, I also was eager to become involved in the firm for business reasons: to network and grow my practice.

I immediately volunteered to be a women's initiative and leadership council ambassador for our Cleveland office, offered to speak on as many firm webinars as possible — internal and external — wrote articles, joined practice groups and task forces, and tried to meet as many attorneys as possible at my firm retreats.

While I saw some immediate benefits from meeting so many colleagues and showing a willingness to contribute, I was overextended. I was not hitting my billable hours goals, not growing my book of business, not fulfilling my nonbillable commitments and definitely not sleeping enough.

I realized it was time to reevaluate my priorities and commitments. In doing so, I found the following strategies helpful.

Prioritize and Set Goals

You have limited time to spend on nonbillable matters. Don't waste it on efforts that don't matter.

Identify the internal initiatives that interest you and for which you have a passion and take a pass on the others.

It's also critical to set objectives: What do you hope to gain from your involvement?

Sometimes it's enough to do good deeds, but when it's also beneficial to your career, you're going to get more out of it.

And, don't forget to set aside time for family, friends and your own self-care — including our often-overlooked mental health needs.

Make Sure You're Networking Internally

Choose an initiative that provides access to the partners and colleagues who can help you advance your career and build your practice.

Put another way, if you're collaborating with the right people in the firm on internal initiatives, you'll create opportunities to work on the projects and for the clients that will help you build and grow your own business.

Seek Support and Guidance

Discuss your plan to get involved in nonbillable activities with your mentor and/or sponsor.

Make sure they understand your plan to balance your time on internal initiatives with billable work. They can help you set realistic expectations for your availability and identify the most beneficial internal initiatives.

Track Your Time

Accurately track and record time spent on the nonbillable internal initiatives, so your time is recognized.

Also, be sure to track the additional billable work, clients or contacts — internal or external — generated as a result of your participation, which allows you to evaluate the return on your time investment.

Manage Your Time Meticulously

Before you start, understand the time commitments and what you'll need to do to manage your time.

Organize your schedule to maximize productivity. This may require blocking out specific times for nonbillable work or adopting new time management techniques.

And remember: It is always OK to say "no" to nonbillable projects if you start to fall behind.

Leverage Your Effort

Leverage time spent on internal initiatives in your external business development plan — e.g., by writing articles, speaking and posting on social media about the initiative.

While it may go without saying, whenever possible, you should choose initiatives that allow you to develop skills that are relevant to your practice area or professional growth. This makes your investment in nonbillable activities more beneficial and justifiable — to the firm and also to yourself.

Seek Opportunities With Flexible Commitment Levels

Some internal initiatives require less time commitment than others.

You're a busy professional trying to build your career, so start with activities that have flexible or minimal time requirements, so you can assess how much you can handle without affecting your billable work.

Delegate and Collaborate

Don't hesitate to delegate tasks when possible and collaborate with colleagues on nonbillable initiatives.

This not only shares the workload, but also fosters teamwork and networking within the firm.

Set Boundaries for Work-Life Balance

It's essential to set clear boundaries for your work hours and respect your time off. This holds true even if you're not involved in internal initiatives.

Establishing — and respecting — those limits will help you recharge and maintain productivity in both billable and nonbillable work. Equally important, they will allow you to provide the best service you can at all times.

Be Open to Feedback

Regularly solicit feedback from partners and your other internal clients about your performance, both in billable and nonbillable areas.

This can help you adjust your efforts to align with the firm's expectations and your personal career goals.

Regularly Assess Your Commitments

Reevaluate your participation in internal initiatives regularly.

Is your billable work being affected? What about your personal life? Adjust your commitments as necessary to maintain the balance you need.

Conclusion

Always remember that balancing billable and nonbillable work while maintaining healthy work-life boundaries is a dynamic process that requires flexibility, continuous adjustment, and open communication with your colleagues and partners.

However, engaging in nonbillable activities will not only contribute to the firm's culture and success but may also significantly advance your own professional development.

By learning to manage your time more effectively, you're not just meeting the demands of your role — you're also cultivating skills that are essential for leadership positions and client management in the future.

I have consistently found during my career that involvement in nonbillable work, both in the firm and in the community, has brought tremendous benefits to me: enhanced skills, personal fulfillment, professional growth and the development of a supportive network, all of which have been invaluable to my career and to me personally. Good luck.

Melanie Webber is a partner at Fisher Phillips and chair of the firm's women's initiative and leadership council.

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