Becoming a Lawyer with a Work-Life Balance: From Part-Time to Partner

Miriam J. Guggenheim

As someone who recently made partner on a part-time schedule, I am living proof that an administrative law practice can offer the opportunity for a successful legal career with a reasonable work-life balance. An administrative law practice depends more upon developing substantive expertise than logging a vast number of hours. While it takes time to develop that expertise in what can be highly specialized practice areas, attorneys who gain such knowledge can deliver significant value to their clients and their firms within schedules that can be relatively reasonable and flexible. With a wide variety of subject matters from which to choose, it is easy to find an area of administrative law that is of personal interest, which also can contribute to a feeling of balance between one’s professional and personal life. These features help make
a career in administrative law highly rewarding yet not utterly all-consuming, allowing an attorney time for family, friends, hobbies, and other interests.

**MY STORY**

Upon returning to work after having my first child, I realized that I might need to rethink the best way to manage my legal career and my desire to spend more time with my daughter. I am fortunate to work for a very family-friendly firm that allowed me to take a year-long maternity leave and return on a part-time schedule. When I returned, I was welcomed back onto the large, complex litigation matter on which I’d been working, but when the matter soon settled, I found that I was not excited about the prospect of joining another large litigation case. Because I would be working a reduced schedule compared to my colleagues, I wanted to ensure that I would deliver value to the firm in terms of my expertise, as I knew I would not distinguish myself in terms of the sheer number of hours I billed. I was also concerned about the possibility of extensive travel and unpredictable hours that can be an inherent part of a litigation practice in any large law firm.

An administrative law practice seemed appealing both because I could become an expert in a field who’d be highly valued even on a reduced schedule, and because it seemed to me that the administrative lawyers in my firm worked more predictable schedules than those of the litigators or corporate attorneys. Both turned out to be true. I’ve now been a food and drug lawyer practicing part-time for eight years and was recently made an equity partner. Even on a reduced schedule, I have gained expertise that enables me to serve my clients at a high level of sophistication and to speak at industry seminars and client training sessions on issues in my field. Meanwhile, I have also enjoyed considerable time with my three children, never missing a school event or important milestone. I remain at the firm at which I started practicing, politely declining the scores of headhunter calls seeking attorneys with my expertise, but welcoming that affirmation of the value of my knowledge and experience.

**SO MANY CHOICES!**

A quick scan of the titles of the Code of Federal Regulations reveals the wide range of administrative law practices available to attorneys—from
Essays by Administrative Law Veterans on What You Need to Know

aeronautics to wildlife regulations, and everything in between, including banking regulation, election law, energy law, telecommunications, and virtually all areas the government reaches. The variety extends not only to subject matter areas but also to the range of professional options in which to practice in these arenas: law firms, government agencies, in-house at corporations or trade associations, on congressional staff, and in public interest or other nongovernmental organizations.

For me, the first step in making the transition was to choose from the broad array of administrative law practices available in my Washington, D.C., firm. I considered our trademark, patent, and health care practices, but ultimately joined our food and drug practice because my firm has one of the leading practices globally in this area and because it suited my long-standing interest in food, health, and nutrition.

**A PERSONAL CONNECTION**

Finding a legal practice in a subject in which I already had an interest has certainly contributed to my enthusiasm for my work and has made me a more effective lawyer as well. My subscriptions to five cooking magazines not only advance my culinary hobby but also help me spot and understand trends in food, diet, and health that my clients are also facing. And on numerous instances in conversations with clients and consultants, I’ve had occasion to discuss food-related books I’ve been reading that also resonate with these colleagues. I’ve bonded with a client’s public relations expert over Julia Child’s *My Life in France* and shared anecdotes from the biography of the White House pastry chef with the head of a food trade association. These exchanges are rewarding both professionally and personally, demonstrating to clients my genuine interest in, and commitment to, what it is that they do and enhancing my own enjoyment of my work. I know this is also true for my colleagues in other administrative practices, such as transportation lawyers who never outgrew their love of trains!

Administrative law practices can also seem more “real world” than other areas of legal work. I love seeing in print an advertisement on which I’ve provided regulatory advice, or a food label that bears a health claim for which I helped obtain approval from the FDA. Also, it’s easy to explain to my kids what it is I do all day: “See this cereal box? Mommy helps companies make sure they put the right information on the box, and helps them figure out the right way to tell people about how eating nutritious foods can help them stay healthy.” And for those
school events where your kids bring you in to talk about your profession, mine’s allowed for great fun. We looked at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Guide Pyramid on food packages and then built our own “pyramids” out of foods in the various food groups. I bet those transportation lawyers come up with some pretty fun ideas too!

A STEADIER, MORE FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE

For the most part, administrative law practices seem to offer more predictable schedules than do other areas of the law. Client emergencies certainly arise, but because these practices tend to be more advisory in nature, it can be easier to predict the coming week or to establish reasonable expectations about one’s schedule. Advisory matters tend to be shorter, taking a couple of hours, days, or weeks, depending upon the issue or inquiry, rather than months or years, as can be the case in litigation, for example. So even when a matter is hot or a crisis emerges, the extended hours needed to resolve the issues generally don’t last too long. While the particular matters can vary on any given day, in my experience a pattern has emerged about the mix of daily work, with some relatively quick answers to smaller questions, some extended work or deeper analyses on more significant matters or in order to guide longer-term strategy and planning, and some preparation for calls or meetings with clients or agency personnel. Our practice also often provides regulatory support to litigation or corporate teams, delivering substantive expertise and guidance on lawsuits or deals involving food and drug company clients. While such work can put us onto the deadlines faced by those other practices, the regulatory counseling role is still rather limited on these matters. The nature of an advisory administrative law practice, therefore, can provide a more balanced schedule than in some other practices that involve very large matters over extended periods of time.

The advisory nature of an administrative law practice also can mean that much of the work can be done anytime, anywhere. No need to travel for depositions, hearings, closings, and so on, although of course there are meetings at agencies and at clients’ offices. You can research, write, and call from virtually anywhere. For example, I generally work from my home office one or two days a week, and my ability to serve clients is not impaired at all. When I want to leave the office early or come in late for a family event, I can make up whatever I need to do at home in the evenings. Technology has clearly made this possible in a
number of areas of practice, but advisory administrative practices seem particularly amenable to flexibility of place and time. I’ve found that even administrative agency personnel have availed themselves of such flexibility. For instance, I once called an agency official at her office number, which apparently rolled over to her home line, because I heard children’s music and she said, “That’s Caillou (the children’s television program) in the background. My child is sick and I’m working from home today.”

JOB SECURITY

We have seen over the last year that practicing administrative law can help insulate a lawyer from the ebbs and flows in the economy. In the latest downturn, when many firms were laying off attorneys in corporate, real estate, and litigation practices, the firms with sizeable administrative law practices seemed either unaffected or considerably less troubled by the economy. Companies must comply with government regulations regardless of the economic environment. And as is the case right now, an economic downturn can lead to more, not less, government regulation. The need for regulatory counseling, therefore, remains strong.

One caveat is that the regulatory priorities can change with changes in government administrations, and at times in the past some administrative lawyers have needed to change gears when a new administration decides not to pursue enforcement in a particular arena. But the pendulum can swing back, as we’re seeing now in environmental law, for example. And certainly, comparable swings occur in private sector priorities as well, perhaps with less predictability than the shifts that can occur in administrative law with a change in administration every four or eight years.

For all of these reasons, an administrative law practice can be highly rewarding on both personal and professional levels. An attorney can find an area of law she truly enjoys and work with clients and colleagues who share her interests. It is possible to develop considerable expertise and experience to serve clients on a very high level without significantly compromising family or personal time. And a lawyer with relevant regulatory expertise is not easily replaced, and is likely to find opportunities in both the public and private sectors. Attorneys seeking a practice that is challenging and engaging while offering a reasonable work-life balance are encouraged to consider the variety of administrative law practices.