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# When family meets business: The challenge of work/life balance

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Michele Neitz, professor at Golden Gate University School of Law

The attorneys at law firm **Weil Gotshal & Manges** couldn't believe their eyes. The firm's leadership sent an email titled "Important New Email Policy" and explained that firm emails would no longer be transmitted between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. on weeknights, and between 11:00 p.m. Friday and 6:00 a.m. Monday.

In addition, the notice stated that employees would not be responsible for checking email while on vacation. The last line of the email stated, "We are proud to be taking a leadership role in caring about our colleagues' quality of life."

Employees were thrilled, especially junior associates who regularly bill 16 hours a day or more at the firm. For a moment it seemed that Weil Gotschal was on the cutting edge of a new approach to law practice and work/life balance.

But the date of the email? April 1, 2015.

Indeed, the email sent to Weil Gotschal's employees was an April Fool's joke. As one might expect, associates who believed that their lives were about to improve were furious to learn that work/life balance is literally a joke to the leaders of their firm. One associate described the joke as "making a mockery of our hard work."

Facing a wave of negative publicity, the firm's executive partner soon apologized for the prank.

This unfortunate April Fool's joke represents a clear failure in leadership. Large law firms are certainly notorious for their expectations of long work hours, and associates are highly compensated for their dedication. But the evident disconnect between this firm's partners and its hardworking associates presents an opportunity for other business leaders to pause and ask, "What messages are we sending to our employees?"

Some businesses in San Francisco are listening closely to the needs of their employees while maximizing efficiency. Technology companies, for example, were pioneers in designing workspaces to fit the physical and emotional needs of their workers. This includes cafeterias with free food and coffee, gym and exercise rooms, meditation rooms, and on-call massage therapists.

Of course, tech companies' use of on-site facilities can be viewed as an attempt to stack the work/life balance deck, allowing people to spend more of their "life" at the workplace. In turn, employees in these companies need not ever leave the building — a clear productivity win for these companies.

But what of the small businesses, including family businesses, who cannot afford to provide high compensation or gourmet food to their employees? Family business entrepreneurs are especially at risk of stress and fatigue, since there is often no line drawn between "work hours" and "life hours." For these companies, a creative approach to work/life balance could mean the difference between burnout and success.

A fine example of the blend between innovative work/life balance and productivity is the Bend Law Group in San Francisco.

Doug Bend, the firm's founding partner, envisioned the creation of a law firm performing high-level legal work without the high costs (and high stress) of traditional law firms. The Bend Law Group's associates receive unlimited sick and vacation time, and the firm pays 100 percent of health insurance costs for employees. Associate bonuses are based not just on billable hours, as is usually the case, but also depend on employee expenses. This method, combined with the fact that the firm's books are open for review by employees, inspires associates to think like partners when making spending decisions.

Most significantly, Bend Law Group's associates are encouraged to work remotely, in the physical spaces that enable them to work most efficiently. For example, one associate works mostly in Sonoma, where his family is based, while others are able to travel freely around the country while staying connected to clients. Ironically, the firm's lack of physical boundaries enables employees to maintain work/life boundaries.

While this may sound like an April Fool's joke, especially to those familiar with large law firms, the Bend Law Group's unusual approach to work efficiency has led to a strong business model. The firm's lawyers are the top ranked business attorneys in San Francisco on Yelp, and there has been very little employee turnover. This firm demonstrates that high employee morale often translates into high revenue.

As the demands on San Francisco companies become more complex, business leaders should think imaginatively about ways to create balance for their employees. While every business is different, connecting with the needs of employees will almost always result in elevated levels of productivity — and elevated profits.