

From powerlifting to DJing: the City partners finding that elusive work/life balance

30 August 2024 16:01pm | Elisha Juttla and Anna Huntley

‘The challenge with law, especially in big firms, is that it can be all-consuming, taking everything you have. As an individual, you must maintain some level of control and ensure there’s enough left for yourself.’



As Herbert Smith Freehills global energy co-head Lewis McDonald sums up, being a successful lawyer is a demanding business. But now, perhaps more than ever before, there is a growing recognition of the need to avoid over-work and burnout.

Despite the obvious challenges of achieving that goal, more and more lawyers are shunning the workaholic clichés of old and openly acknowledging the importance of carving out personal time to maintain some semblance of balance in the world of Big Law.

HSF’s McDonald, a guitarist and singer since his teens who shares his music on LinkedIn, has kept his musical hobby alive throughout his career, often writing songs which aligned with significant phases in his life.

‘In my first job as a lawyer, I experienced the hard graft that all junior lawyers probably feel. During that time, there’s a fair amount of angst, and you have to decide whether to accept it or do something else. I captured a lot of that thought process in my music, writing songs during that phase, including ‘Treadmill of Life,’ ‘Trapped,’ and ‘Night and Day’.

On why music became his hobby, McDonald explains: 'For me, combining music as a hobby and an outlet helps me deal with the emotional aspects of what we do. It allows me to channel potentially negative feelings into something positive.'

During lockdown, McDonald began posting videos of himself performing on LinkedIn, prompting much online interaction – something he says led to related professional benefits.

'I've generated a lot of contacts, connections, and dialogue from this,' he explains. 'Strangely, it has also led to some additional work. In a way, my legal world and musical world have had this criss-cross pattern throughout my life, and that's where it stands now'.

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Addleshaw Goddard head of planning and infrastructure Marnix Elsenaar (*pictured below*) spends much of his free time DJing, and has performed on an international stage. 'I've done a club in Amsterdam, a bar in Ibiza, parties for friends and a few client parties. The most recent set was at a client event we did at Nobu in Shoreditch, which was a really cool venue.'



Credit: MikeFeather

‘Am I a fully-fledged professional DJ? Am I about to compete with Tiesto or Armin van Buuren? Definitely not, but I’ve had some good feedback on the gigs I’ve played and it’s great fun,’ he continued.

Outside of the music scene, Taylor Wessing real estate partner Leona Ahmed (*pictured below*) spends her free time as a reformer pilates instructor. After starting pilates 10 years ago, she decided to move into teaching as her skills grew.

‘I had been going to the gym for years, doing HIIT classes, weightlifting, and running on the treadmill. However, reformer pilates was different. The complexity of the movements required such focus that I couldn’t listen to music or watch TV. I had to be fully present in the moment, which emptied my mind of everything else,’ says Ahmed.



She continues: ‘It’s been revolutionary for my life in many ways. It translates to my job – I love meeting new people. I also love teaching, whether it’s in the context of law, supervising, or helping a trainee or a junior lawyer develop new skills.’

‘This translates well into reformer pilates, as you’re essentially helping the person you’re working with learn to use their body in the best possible way for them.’

McDermott Will & Emery partner Mark Fennessy (*pictured below*) also draws work/balance from physical activity, competing both domestically and internationally as

a powerlifter – all while serving as co-head of the US firm's London transactions group, and London finance, restructuring and special situation group.

A few years ago, Fennessy entered his first powerlifting competition as a novice, on the prompting of a friend. He won the regional competition, qualified for the All-England Championships in May 2022 and took home second place. He also competed in the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships in New Zealand the same year, where he won two bronze medals.



‘I was doing all this at the same time as running deals in the really busy transactions team at McDermott in London. I remember literally coming off the podium and a few hours later being on client calls in my hotel room,’ says Fennessy.

He adds: ‘Any competitive sport requires discipline and consistency, and that reflects in my approach to work and client service. It’s also incredibly good for the mind and body. Although injuries can happen, I’m currently recovering from an operation needed to reattach my right bicep which happened on the last lift qualifying for this year’s All England!’.

In a different sphere, Howard Morris – the former head of restructuring in London at Morrison Foerster and now a senior advisor at Birch Risk Advisors – runs a website and Instagram account called GreyScape with his wife, dedicated to brutalist, modernist, and constructivist architecture.

With an Instagram following of more than 73,000 followers, Morris explains: ‘Modernist design and architecture, is something that I believe naturally appeals to a lawyer. Modernism sought simple design solutions, avoiding unnecessary adornment – form following function. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said “God is in the details” – a sentiment that appeals to the rigorous mindset of lawyers.’

‘It’s important for lawyers to not have a single-minded focus on their job. One is a better lawyer, a better person, for having interests outside the law,’ says Morris.

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