

In law, can we still live the flexible dream?

by Ruth Hatten



Though our legal industry may sometimes appear inflexible, occasionally we are blessed with a breath of fresh air, and I am lucky to be someone who has experienced that freshness.

I was admitted to practise law in 2003 and since then I have held positions with a variety of organisations including private firms, government and not for profits. While government and not-for-profit organisations do offer flexibility, private firms can be somewhat less inclined.

Flexibility can be important for so many reasons, including such things as family commitments, sporting commitments and health and wellbeing requirements. For me, flexibility is important because I have a passion that resides outside the law.

Since I was a little girl, I have held a deep regard and compassion for animals. This approach to animals has grown as I have grown. With that growth, I sought out opportunities where I could use my skillset to improve the lives of animals.

Once I became a lawyer, I dreamed of a way that I could help utilise my legal skills to help animals. I stumbled across animal law and thought I had found my dream profession. In 2010, I was very lucky to be offered an opportunity to work as an animal lawyer. I left my senior lawyer position in one of the country's top firms to work for a not-for-profit organisation, Voiceless, the animal protection institute.

I loved working for Voiceless. It was my dream job. But life took a turn and I returned to private practice.

The yearning to use my skillset to benefit animals persisted and it was while working back in private practice that I decided to pursue animal naturopathy (the use of natural remedies like nutrition, herbs and physical therapy to support the body to function optimally, achieve balance and heal itself).

In 2014, I commenced animal naturopathy studies. In 2015, once I had obtained my certificate in small animal nutrition, I commenced practice as a cat and dog nutritionist, seeing clients on weekends and evenings. I absolutely love helping our furry companions achieve better health through nutrition.

But as any small business owner will tell you, running a small business can be extremely challenging, especially when you're juggling your business with a full-time job. I wanted to run my business and complete my animal naturopathy studies, but I also wanted to continue my practice as a lawyer.

Late last year I started searching for a part-time lawyer role that would provide me with the flexibility to operate my business and complete my studies. Many firms I approached weren't interested in hiring a lawyer on a part-time basis. After three months of seeking a part-time role, I was very lucky to be presented with an opportunity that allowed me to pursue my passion for helping animals and practise as a lawyer.

Four days a week I am a senior associate for Aitchison Reid Building and Construction Lawyers, a small family firm in Cleveland. Two days a week, I am a businesswoman and student. Life is extremely busy (whose isn't!) but every day I am reminded of the special opportunity I have been given to follow my dream.

The owners of Aitchison Reid, Fionna and Riley, have proven time and time again to be supportive of my desire to improve the lives of animals. When I interviewed with the firm I felt comfortable being honest and upfront with them about my business. There was no need to hide away this important part of my life for fear that I may not get a job. As small business owners themselves, they truly understand my position, and that understanding translates to supporting me in not only my practice as a lawyer but also as a business woman.

That support was evident again when I was recently presented with an opportunity to work one day a week as an animal lawyer for another firm. When I approached them about the opportunity, they didn't bat an eyelid. They showed their support by allowing me to accept this meaningful opportunity.

So why am I writing this article for a legal industry publication?

Because I want to let others know that you can pursue your personal interests while continuing your profession as a lawyer. Amidst the plethora of inflexible law firms, there are law firms which will happily provide you with the flexibility and support to pursue your passions outside the law. I know, because I have been lucky to find one such law firm.

So go on, dream big and have faith, because you never know what opportunity is waiting for you around the corner.

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