

Balancing family life with a legal career

Jan 08, 2024

How do you achieve a healthy work-life balance?



It's a question we often ask ourselves at Novartis. We take health and wellbeing very seriously and are committed to helping our people be at their best, at work and in life.

We recently spoke to two working parents in our legal team to learn how they manage to build their careers and make an impact at Novartis while also spending quality time with their families.

Sara is currently Senior Litigation and Investigations Counsel at our office in East Hanover, New Jersey.

Chiara is a Legal Project Coordinator based in Basel.

What do you think the secret is to balancing work and family life?

Sara: Having two children under the age of five and working at a major company like Novartis can certainly be challenging. But the key for me has always been flexibility. I benefit from having a manager who views us as people, not as machines churning out legal cases. So if I have to drop the kids off in the morning, I can come in a little later. If I have to pick them up, I can leave a little earlier. I also have the flexibility to work from home a couple of days a week, which makes life much easier.

Chiara: I agree that flexibility is important. Since my son was born, I have been working part time, doing 60% weeks (two full days and two half days). Of course, there are some weeks when you end up doing a little more than 60%. But then you can compensate by doing less than 60% in other weeks. The flexibility of my manager, Peter, and whole team, especially my teammate Nathalie, is what makes that possible.

Sara: Don't get me wrong – being flexible isn't always easy. There are times when I'm working at six o'clock in the morning or, very occasionally, nine o'clock at night. But doing that frees me up to be with my family when it matters, making dinner, having meaningful conversations and spending quality time together.

Chiara: Communication is also key. When I got pregnant, I went to my manager and made it clear that I wanted to reduce my working hours. We then worked together – my manager, my coworkers and I – to work out how we could assign a proportion of my tasks to other members of the team. It depended on us talking openly and honestly with each other.

Do you feel that your coworkers respect your need for work-life balance?

Sara: 'Respect' is exactly the word I would use. I was due to have a day off recently but at the last minute, I needed to switch it to a different day. My manager sent me a call invite for the morning and, of course, I accepted, as I was no longer planning to be off. After an hour or so, he got in touch and said: 'I've just seen you're meant to be out today. Do you want to move the call?' It really helps having a manager who respects my time in that way.

Chiara: Yes, having the support of my team members was crucial for me. If they hadn't been onboard with me going part time, and if they hadn't been prepared to take on some of my responsibilities, then I don't think I could have gone ahead with it.

If you had one piece of advice for new working mothers, what would it be?

Sara: Learn how to set boundaries. It can sometimes seem daunting, but when you do, it can be extremely beneficial – and you'd be surprised how understanding other people can be. In my experience, when you set boundaries in a respectful way, and they are there for a good reason, your coworkers will respect them.

Chiara: If you're considering reducing your hours when you return to work, then you're probably worried about the impact it might have on your career. I know I was. My advice would be to be open and transparent about it from the start. As long as you have supportive teammates, and a trusting relationship with your manager, then I think there is no reason why you can't combine a good family life with a successful working life. Going part time certainly worked for me!

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List of links present in page

1. <https://prod1.novartis.com/stories/balancing-family-life-legal-career>
2. <https://prod1.novartis.com/tags/category/people-and-culture>