



Kate Holderness

Kate was called to the Bar in 2008 and has been at 3VB since the start of her pupillage. She has built up a broad commercial practice, although in recent years has been doing more insurance and arbitration work.

What has been your experience to date of managing family life together with a career at the Bar?

I am relatively new to the role of working mother. I returned from my first maternity leave in early 2019, and will shortly be taking another period of maternity leave for my second child. In short, the last year has been challenging but not in the ways I had expected.

Before I had my first baby, I had built up a practice typical of most juniors at the commercial Bar. I had some of my own cases, but most of my time was spent on big, led cases. When things blew up, I worked weekends and evenings (and late nights and early mornings). I was not sure how that would work with a baby at home.

When I returned from maternity leave, I was constantly badgering my practice managers for work. Although I had said I wanted to build things up slowly, in true barrister style I immediately panicked that I did not have an inbox full of new instructions. The practice managers told me to be patient and, of course, they were right. Within 3 months, I was rushed off my feet. I had been saying yes to every possible opportunity and it came back to bite me.

What has helped you in maintaining a practice after maternity leave?

Thankfully, I have had a huge amount of support from my practice managers (who are brilliant at managing my diary and clients' expectations), my husband and, most importantly, my leaders.

First, I have found that my leaders are both mindful and respectful of the fact that I often work from home now (indeed, more and more members of Chambers are doing the same). I still come into Chambers regularly, but unless I am in court or have conferences, there is no need for me to do so on a daily basis. My computer at home connects to the Chambers network, I have a Chambers phone in my study, and I use the DX service for moving hard copy documents between Chambers and home. Unless someone looks in my room in Chambers, they would have no way of knowing if I am working there or from home.

Second, I have been fortunate to work on a few substantial cases where I am not the only junior, and I have found it much easier to balance work and childcare commitments when I am working as part of a team. This idea of teams of juniors is something that certain silks in Chambers have really supported and encouraged. I dislike the term "job-sharing" as that implies that I am only working part-time on these cases. That is not the case. I put in as many hours as I would have done pre-baby, but I now find that I am working some of those hours at odd times of day and often at home. I am also far more efficient and focused these days. I try to work four days a week, so that I have one weekday where my daughter and I can join in with play dates, but what that really means is that I work four longer days, and on the fifth day (and sometimes on weekends) I cram as much

work as I can into nap times and after my daughter has gone to bed.

Third, my leaders have been very accommodating of childcare commitments. If I am needed at a conference early in the morning or late in the evening, I am fortunate in that I can usually look to my husband or my parents for help with childcare, but I rarely have to ask for this because my leaders almost always ask me to indicate a convenient time for a conference before they agree to anything. I have never been made to feel that this is a nuisance. Of course, sometimes unsociable working hours are unavoidable but that is just a fact of life at the Bar!

What advice would you give to others?

I truly believe that I am fortunate to have a career at the Bar. I get to do a challenging and interesting job, but I am not tied to a desk in an office 10 hours a day, 5 or 6 days a week. However, in order to make it work alongside having a child (or children), I think you need to make it clear to those around you (at home and at work) that you are committed to your career. By that, I do not mean that you should act as if you don't have a life outside of Chambers, but do communicate the fact that your career remains a priority for you and that you want to make it work alongside your family life. In my experience, people in Chambers are only too willing to help you make that happen.