

A day in the life of ...

## Jon Wright

DIRECTOR, WORKDYNAMIC AUSTRALIA

Jon Wright has a thick wooden door between his office and the stairs to his home above. With three children under the age of four and a busy practice in employment law and workplace investigations, Wright needs it to draw the line between work and home. Wright, 34, hasn't always worked in such a flexible environment. He graduated from the University of Wollongong and learned the ropes in a small practice in Engadine, in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, before diving into the big end of town at Sparke Helmore Lawyers for five years, followed by two years at Minter Ellison as a senior associate. However, in December 2014 he decided he was missing out on too much at home and joined Workdynamic Australia. It is an unusual firm set up by his sister, Jane Wright, and Lauren Barel, who were poster girls for flexible work practices when they were job-sharing senior associates at Herbert Smith Freehills. In early 2014, the women left Freehills to launch Workdynamic, a firm with no office, no support staff and flexible hours. Jon joined three months later and, as well as the demands of building a new firm, the trio was juggling seven young children between them. "Working from home with three children under four can have its challenges," Wright says. "I have had to set some strict boundaries about when I am at work and it's now second nature to the kids." Two years on, the firm has 12 lawyers in Sydney and Melbourne. Clients include several universities, corporate and government clients and the firm gets regular work from Sparke Helmore and Australian Business Lawyers. Wright tells **JANE SOUTHWARD** about his work and continuing pursuit of work/life balance.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON MCCORMACK

"About half my working days begin with a 30-second commute down the stairs to my home office in Sydney's south. I always aspired to work in a large firm and my plan was to continue on that upward trajectory and ultimately become partner. Children and living expenses had a key role to play in my decision to change firms but it was also about continuing my professional progression.

I was in that mindset of really wanting to get ahead. My hours were long, although I was expressly told that it was not required of me to do those long hours – I would often leave home at 7am and get back at 10pm – but I wanted to make sure everyone knew I was capable and hardworking, so I put pressure on myself.

I had a one-hour commute and it was starting to wear. There were nagging thoughts that there must be a better way to do this. This opportunity presented itself and it happened to be presented by my sister – and it was over the dining room table at my parent's home.

It was a really hard decision and it took me months to make the leap and join them. Between us, we had seven young children. There is obviously a risk in starting up your own business especially when you are in an established position that you actually enjoy. It was the prospect of being able to see my children more than just on the weekends and still maintain a good practice that was tempting.

I found I really had to back myself. It's different being a cog in an established piece of machinery than starting something new. If it wasn't my sister who was pitching it, I probably wouldn't have done it. I just knew that if she did it and it was a raging success, I would kick myself.

There are now different pressures but you are holding the reins yourself. It can be a mental challenge to switch off but when you see an opportunity for down time, you can take it.

Another challenge has been managing our own business. You come from a background

where your formal training is in law and suddenly you find yourself in the role of HR manager, IT manager, finance manager, in charge of business development and even planning the Christmas party.

When we started, we cut away anything that wasn't necessary for a law firm. We didn't have an office. We didn't have large server-based document and time-management systems. Everything we started up was cloud-based. It was getting back to basics. We had limited admin assistance and my wife's bookkeeping business managed our accounts.

Our lawyers are a lot more self-sufficient. We often do our own photocopying and scanning, and we have embraced technology and moved away from traditional paper-based systems. It's just as efficient to create an electronic record yourself than give a hard copy to someone to scan. Each of our lawyers is equipped with a completely mobile office so they can work in any location.

We initially used a serviced office for client meetings and workplace investigation interviews and for some admin support. It served its purpose but we outgrew it and we wanted a team environment.

We now have co-located with Ash St Partners in the Sydney CBD, a like-minded boutique firm that has also broken away from large firms to set up something different. Now that we have a base, even though it's optional, we see a lot more of each other. Yet we still have that freedom to not be there.

Yes, we work weekends. Yes, we work nights. But then there will be the preschool play, which we are free to attend because we are working nearby and are managing our own hours – and I get to play darts on Tuesday evenings.

Lawyers are used to working to deadlines and, whether you are at home or in an office, that hasn't changed.

We are all employment lawyers. That involves the whole gamut of employment law, everything from hiring to firing and industrial relations. Our streamlined practice means we

**"Working from home with three children under four can have its challenges. I have had to set some strict boundaries about when daddy is at work and it's now second nature to the kids. They almost don't understand it when I have to go to the city."**





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Jon Wright and the family he missed so much he changed jobs for more flexibility.

for help before an issue reaches boiling point. Our mobility means we often work from clients' premises.

A key part of our practice is workplace investigations. This involves going to a workplace to find the facts of what has happened – that might involve claims of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, fraud, misuse of information systems; basically any category of wrongdoing in a workplace.

As a traditional employment lawyer, your role is not to conduct the investigations but to oversee them or review them after the fact.

In our previous roles, we were confronted by varying quality in that space, and that was a real reason why we started this firm. We can be directly engaged by a law firm or by a company to do this work. Higher hourly rates often make it uneconomical to engage large firms to do this work. More often a human resources practitioner may conduct the investigations. We understand the legal framework in which these reports are used and the

laws regulating conduct at work and can ensure that investigations are conducted in a lawful and professionally fair way so that the end result will withstand legal scrutiny. This can save everyone time and money in the end.

Our firm enables staff to choose their own adventure within the law. For me, that has been about making time to spend with my family and to play more sport. Some work part time, and not everyone has joined us because they have young families. Two are tree-changers and live on the south coast. Another has a separate business and works part time so she can run that. Others were simply drawn to the idea of a different way to practise law.

Trust is extraordinarily important. It's about having people who can work autonomously and people who have the confidence to pick up the phone rather than suffering in silence. Within the team, it's a matter of letting everybody know where you are going to be on any given day. **LSJ**

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