

# Balancing Work with Play to Save Your Legal Career

By Ndidi N. Moses

**S**it with me and play," said an unassuming voice as I walked into the house. At the time, I was preoccupied with composing a mental list of very critical tasks I had to do, and I almost did not hear the voice repeat the request, this time with an emphasis on the word *play*. I glanced down, and encountered the wide eyes of my son. His brilliant chestnut eyes were dancing in anxious anticipation of my answer. I stood there frozen, feeling as if the request to *play* had caused the weight of the world to rest on my shoulders. I simply did not have time to *play*. I had to get dinner ready and then begin at least an hour of work before I could retire for the evening. I paused. I thought about saying "no." Then I remembered a conversation I had with a managing partner at an international law firm. I met her when we were both young lawyers, and over the years I have watched her effortlessly skyrocket to the top of her firm, unapologetically defying the odds to become not only an effective managing partner, but also a great daughter, wife, mother—a *superwoman*.

I contacted this *superwoman* to convince her to chair a committee for the Connecticut Bar Association. The conversation ended with her convincing me to listen to a TED Talk by Shonda Rhimes. In the TED Talk, Shonda Rhimes humbly admits: "Playing with my children likely saved my career."<sup>1</sup> This creator of *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away With Murder* claims that she "stopped loving work...[and] couldn't restart the engine."<sup>2</sup> Then she realized that "[w]ork doesn't work without play."<sup>3</sup> At first, I was not convinced. We all can relate to

**Ndidi N. Moses** is the 96th president of the CBA. Her focus for this bar year is balance for a better legal profession. As an active member of the association, she serves on the Board of Governors, House of Delegates, and Pro Bono Committee.



feeling burnt out or living in a professional rut. That said, the idea of playing more to save one's career seemed illogical. Everyone knows that work is the opposite of play...right? I am sure that is written somewhere in the hallways of every undergraduate university, burned into the wooden desks in law school, woven in the carpet in every law office.

Research, however, suggests the opposite. Human beings are "wired by evolution to play."<sup>4</sup> Since I am writing this article for an audience of legal practitioners, it might help if I defined the word play. Psychologists studying play have defined it as: "self-chosen and self-directed;...[an] activity in which means are more valued than ends;... has structure, or rules, which are not dictated by physical necessity but emanate from the minds of the players;... imaginative, non-literal, mentally removed in some way from 'real' or 'serious' life; and...involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind."<sup>5</sup>

Research has always pointed to the connection between play and a child's cognitive development.<sup>6</sup> Now, researchers are finding that play is important for adults to: reduce stress, restore men-

tal health, and kindle ingenuity.<sup>7</sup> Child psychoanalysts have recognized that while play is the "'royal road' to the child's conscious and unconscious inner world,"<sup>8</sup> it also helps adults develop "complex, skilled, responsive, socially adept, and flexible brains, which in turn build complex, skilled, responsive, socially adept, and flexible people and societies."<sup>9</sup> At least one study suggests that in a work environment, play can "speed up learning, enhance productivity, and increase job satisfaction."<sup>10</sup> In sum, play opens our minds, and lures us out of our comfort zones and ivory towers, into an environment where we can foster relationships and networks with a diverse array of people, and where we are more willing and able to absorb new concepts and ideas. Play gives us permission to reinvent ourselves repeatedly, discover our hidden talents, and push the boundaries of our potential.

If this seems inherent to you, the obvious question emerges: why aren't we all playing more? Could the answer be that we are all *too busy*, with very important demanding responsibilities? Or maybe,

that is just what we tell ourselves. I know I did. I was reading a blog in the *New York Times*, and I thought that the author had been secretly interviewing my friends and family when he wrote that this “busy trap” that we believe makes us important “is purely self-imposed.... we’re busy because of [our] own ambition or drive or anxiety, because [we]’re addicted to busyness and dread what [we] might have to face in its absence.”<sup>11</sup>

I have learned, however, that what we have to face in the absence of busyness is an opportunity to ignite our imaginations and improve our emotional and cognitive intelligence through play. My quest to play more assisted my brief transformation into a prehistoric dinosaur called Spinosaurus, so I could partic-

emerged refreshed, energized, and full of new ideas and endless possibilities.

If you are like me, even if you agree with everything in this article, you will struggle to find time to play, because it takes practice when you are trying to re-program your brain to recognize it as a necessity. Fortunately, this bar year, in accordance with our theme of balance, the CBA is blurring the lines between work and play, to help improve the legal profession in Connecticut. For instance, we have planned an 11-month statewide scavenger hunt to 11 different historical sites related to the suffrage movement for our members and their families,<sup>12</sup> international trips where you can visit interesting new countries with friends and family members and collect continuing

**“Their very imagination was dead. When you can say that of a man he has struck bottom... there is no lower deep for him.”**

—Mark Twain,

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*

ipate in an epic battle with my son, who had transformed into Tyrannosaurs Rex. Play lured me to take a beach stroll with my family, which turned into a nature hunt, and I ended up saving a caterpillar with my brother, and building a container where the caterpillar could transform into a butterfly. The energy caused by my desire to play, inspired me to surprise my husband with tickets to see his favorite country music artist in concert, even though, at the time, I was not a fan of country music. On my walk back to the office from lunch, a ball crossed my path, and my desire to play caused me to believe, for a moment, I was David Beckham, and I found myself engaged in an impromptu game of soccer. A dinner at home transformed into a dinner party with friends—on a Tuesday night—when I opened myself to play. Each time I retreated into the world of play I

legal education credits (CLE), a music event highlighting the musical acumen of attorneys in Connecticut, weekend CLEs at historical locations where you can bring your families and friends, lunchtime CLEs to give you some free time in the evening to play, and we might even include a spa trip, a cookbook, and some chocolate-making for more excitement. We hope that you escape with us to blur the lines between work and play, particularly if you are unfamiliar with the activity, and especially if you think you are too busy. By the end of this bar year, if we play enough, who knows, we might become better attorneys, friends, partners, parents, grandparents—and more importantly, better people. As Shonda Rhimes put it: “I said yes to less work and more play, and somehow I still run my world. My brain is still global, my campfires still burn.”<sup>13</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Hullinger, Jessica, “Shonda Rhimes: Playing With My Children Likely Saved My Career.” *Fast Company*, February 17, 2016, available at: [www.fastcompany.com/3056813/shonda-rhimes-playing-with-my-children-likely-saved-my-career](http://www.fastcompany.com/3056813/shonda-rhimes-playing-with-my-children-likely-saved-my-career).
2. Pangambam, S., “Shonda Rhimes: My Year of Saying Yes To Everything at TED Conference (Transcript).” *Singju Post*, available at: [singjupost.com/shonda-rhimes-my-year-of-saying-yes-to-everything-at-ted-conference-transcript/2](http://singjupost.com/shonda-rhimes-my-year-of-saying-yes-to-everything-at-ted-conference-transcript/2).
3. Hullinger, Jessica, “Shonda Rhimes: Playing With My Children Likely Saved My Career.” *Fast Company*, February 17, 2016, available at: [www.fastcompany.com/3056813/shonda-rhimes-playing-with-my-children-likely-saved-my-career](http://www.fastcompany.com/3056813/shonda-rhimes-playing-with-my-children-likely-saved-my-career).
4. Wallace, Jennifer, “Why It’s Good For Grown-Ups To Go Play,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, available at [www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-its-good-for-grown-ups-to-go-play/2017/05/19/99810292-fd1f-11e6-8ebe-6e0dbe4f2bca\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-its-good-for-grown-ups-to-go-play/2017/05/19/99810292-fd1f-11e6-8ebe-6e0dbe4f2bca_story.html).
5. Gray, Peter, “The Value of Play I: The Definition of Play Give Insights,” *Psychology Today*, November 19, 2008, available at [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/200811/the-value-play-i-the-definition-play-gives-insights](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/200811/the-value-play-i-the-definition-play-gives-insights).
6. *Id.*
7. Tartakovsky, Margarita, “The Importance of Play for Adults.” *Psych Central*, July 7, 2018, available at [psychcentral.com/blog/the-importance-of-play-for-adults](http://psychcentral.com/blog/the-importance-of-play-for-adults).
8. Bettelheim, Bruno, “The Importance of Play.” *The Atlantic*, March 1987, available at [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1987/03/the-importance-of-play/305129](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1987/03/the-importance-of-play/305129).
9. “The Psychology of Adult Playtime,” *Psychologies*, February 28, 2014, available at [www.psychologies.co.uk/self/the-psychology-of-adult-playtime.html](http://www.psychologies.co.uk/self/the-psychology-of-adult-playtime.html).
10. “Wallace, Jennifer, “Why It’s Good For Grown-Ups To Go Play,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, available at [www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-its-good-for-grown-ups-to-go-play/2017/05/19/99810292-fd1f-11e6-8ebe-6e0dbe4f2bca\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-its-good-for-grown-ups-to-go-play/2017/05/19/99810292-fd1f-11e6-8ebe-6e0dbe4f2bca_story.html).
11. Kreider, Tim, “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages*, June 30, 2012, available at [opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/the-busy-trap](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/the-busy-trap).
12. Check out the CBA’s website for more information on how to participate: [www.ctbar.org/events-education/19th-amendment-centennial-scavenger-hunt](http://www.ctbar.org/events-education/19th-amendment-centennial-scavenger-hunt)
13. Pangambam, S., “Shonda Rhimes: My Year of Saying Yes To Everything at TED Conference (Transcript).” *Singju Post*, available at: [singjupost.com/shonda-rhimes-my-year-of-saying-yes-to-everything-at-ted-conference-transcript/2](http://singjupost.com/shonda-rhimes-my-year-of-saying-yes-to-everything-at-ted-conference-transcript/2).