

TEN QUESTIONS WITH Michelle L. McMullen, Ph.D.

Shareholder, Biotech & Life Science
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Q. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your family.

I am a biotech attorney and an active mom of three kiddos. Between my clients' ever-evolving needs with COVID-related tech and my kids' hockey schedule/e-education, I definitely feel in demand this year! My daughter, Hayden (12) enjoys science and debating politics (what will she do now that the election is over)? My son, Logan (9) loves hockey and socializing with his buddies when permitted. My youngest son, Clayton (4), is the loudest of all! He has recently learned to independently skate and is following in big brother's hockey footsteps. Fortunately for me, dad (Todd), loves to cook and collect wine. We enjoy outdoor activities, particularly in the mountains or at the beach.

Q. How did you decide to pursue a career in the law after receiving degrees in biochemistry, molecular biology and cellular biology?

I entered my Ph.D. intending to pursue a joint MBA. I always wanted to apply a commercial angle to science. I felt there was a disconnect in academia as faculty spend years improving treatments or studying disease, but traditionally did not actually apply their knowledge to patients' lives or care. Along the way, I was exposed to patent law and was hooked. I spend most of my days helping get medical discoveries protected and prepared for successful commercialization.

Q. As an area of law, how have you seen the biotech field change throughout the years and what is the most challenging aspect of your practice?

Over the last 20 years, I have seen much of the primary research move out of big pharma. Now big pharma in-licenses technology from academic and medical centers as one means of improving their technology pipeline. The most challenging aspect of my practice is similar to that of many other patent counsel, which is managing large volumes of many small details. The non-extendible bar dates provide for a lot of fun too!

Q. National STEM Day was November 8, and we have seen an increase in the number of women pursuing careers in STEM-related fields over the years. Did you have a role model, teacher or other woman you admired who encouraged you to pursue your love of science?

I am proud to see the number of women and minorities steadily increasing in STEM-related fields. We need a critical mass of diverse talent! I always loved biology and science and I knew by third grade that I would pursue a career in science. I first wanted to be vet, then a physician, and finally a researcher. It was during my graduate work that I met a female patent attorney and she directed me on my ultimate career path.

Q. What have you enjoyed most so far about being part of the Polsinelli team?

I appreciate that everyone is willing to listen, help problem solve and pitch in to help! I am moving a decade's worth of patent portfolios, which are a lot of matters and files. The Polsinelli team approach is exactly the type of service that my clients need!

Q. Are you involved in any civic organizations or community outreach programs?

Does my grade school's book club and school fundraisers count? Ha! Alas, my 2020 plate is bit too full even for school fundraisers this year.

Q. What advice would you give to our young attorneys just beginning their legal careers? What is the best advice that you have ever received?

You must have a business development strategy by year four or five. For attorneys that want to be active parents, look at your career as a long game. Don't get caught up on four-year or eight-year milestones for progression. It is likely going to take longer as you need to develop clients, do your day job and be a parent. Reframing the timing will help you manage all of these important, but competing areas.

Q. How do you define client service and how do you try to distinguish yourself in this area?

I am willing to listen and tailor my advice to each client's particular commercial and IP needs. It's not atypical for me to follow very different approaches for clients in the same day. I focus on customizing IP strategy to better position each portfolio. It can be challenging for new team members to predict the direction I may go. I am the polar opposite of cookie cutter.

Q. In your free time, what types of hobbies do you enjoy?

I am a foodie! My favorite activity is gardening. I am an avid traveler (pre-pandemic of course) and I routinely travel with the entire family in tow. Todd had a sabbatical the summer of 2017, so we took all three kids to Italy, including the two-year-old!

Q. What is one interesting fact about you that people probably don't know?

I know how to farm. I spent my childhood weekends at my grandparents' farm in central Illinois. I can milk a cow, harvest crops, change oil in a tractor, and advise on the treatment of pests!

