

Work-Life “Balance” Isn’t the Point

by Christine M. Riordan

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Climbing the organizational ladder often requires employees to work long hours and deal with difficult and complex issues. Some days on the job are likely fun and positive and other days are tension-filled and stressful. A common dilemma for many people is how they manage all of the competing demands in work and life and avoid letting any negative effects of work spill over into their personal lives.

Research has in fact shown that employees who believe they do not have time for the personal life feel drained and distracted while they are at work. In addition, the spillover of negative aspect of work into an employee’s personal life can lead to job exhaustion, disruption of relationships with family and friends, loss of enjoyment, and increased stress.

However, some people appear to manage career success and a positive private life with ease. Here are a few pointers:

1. Strive for work-life effectiveness—not balance. The term work-life balance implies that one dedicates an equal portion of time to work and life. Catalyst, a research firm focused on women in business, uses the phrase work-life effectiveness, and suggests

striving for a situation where work fits with other aspects of your life. Researchers Jeffrey Greenhaus and Gary Powell expand on this concept and recommend that work and personal life should be allies and that participation in multiple roles, such as parent, partner, friend, employee, can actually enhance physical and psychological well-being – especially when all of the roles are high quality and managed together.

Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, came under scrutiny when she returned to work soon after the birth of her son. She managed being a mom and a CEO in a way that was personally right for her. Like Mayer, one should take a holistic perspective, thinking of one's career as an integral part of life, rather than a separate and obligatory activity. To help eliminate 'negative spillover' from work into home life or vice-versa, we should put everything in the same container and create a coherent narrative – doing so can reduce work-life separation. Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin Airlines, has noted that some of his best ideas have come from engaging his children in conversations about work. Even in the busiest of schedules, the most practical and effective way we can live is by aligning our personal priorities of work, family, health, and well-being. Such realignment can bring huge gains in emotional and physical energy, not to mention greater clarity and focus at work.

2. Define success in all categories of your life. Every person needs to define success on his or her own terms. Ultimately, for both men and women, the definition of success is deeply personal. At the end of each person's life, only he or she can look back and say, "I was successful." It is also important to realize that what constitutes success to one person may not constitute success to another. Ryan Smith, co-founder of Qualtrics, manages his success by doing the following: "Each week, I examine the categories of my life – father, husband, CEO, self – and identify the specific actions that help me feel successful and fulfilled in these capacities. This weekly ritual helps me feel like I'm doing everything in my power to address my needs and the needs of those around me. This is important because I can't lose sight of the business agenda,

and we've all seen or read about what it looks like when you lose sight of your family's needs." As Smith suggests, consider sharing your priorities and ideas of success with important stakeholders in your life. By doing so, you will gain valuable perspective and, perhaps, buy-in to your work and life goals.

3. Maintain control. Researchers suggest that people may experience high stress when they feel out of control. So, take control of your career – explore your own history, biases, motivation and preferences. As an example, many people enjoy spending a lot of time at work because they like what they do. Thus, long work hours are not necessarily burdensome to them. Each of us should take the time to find a job that 'fits' us. When possible, we should set our own boundaries. Many successful executives who work long hours suggest that they put parameters and limits on work. The CEO of Starwood Hotels, Frits van Paasschen, in a recent Wall Street Journal interview, noted, "It's important not to be so immersed in your work that there isn't anything else. Taking care of your body and your mindset, carving out time to be with your family, doing things that recharge you – these all make you more productive in the end." We should also proactively manage the direction and meaning of our work.

As Anna Quindlen observed, "If your success is not on your own terms, if it looks good to the world but does not feel good in your heart, it is not success at all."



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