

Proper Balance Doesn't Mean Equal

Work-life balance does not mean an equal balance of work and personal time.

By Stan H. Wisler



It is no secret that employees (who most likely include you) are struggling to balance their work and personal responsibility. In many cases, that struggle is a result of the following:

- Unpredictable work schedules.
- Two-career families.
- A reduced workforce because of the struggling economy.
- Constant accessibility, thanks to technology.

Work-life balance is an important issue. The 2012 Hay Group Insight opinion survey of 5 million employees worldwide indicates that 40% of employees believe their employers

do not provide sufficient work-life balance support and 50% are concerned about staffing adequacy (www.haygroup.com).

When I first set out to write this article, my intent was to talk about work-life balance from an individual's perspective, putting the sole responsibility for the proper balance on the individual employee. During the past month, I noticed that work-life balance is oftentimes discussed from the employer's standpoint—from the perspective that the employer has a responsibility to ensure and provide the proper balance. So I decided to

approach the topic from both vantage points.

Most psychologists would agree that the demands of an employee's career should not overwhelm the individual's ability to enjoy a satisfying personal life outside the business environment. In many respects, that means balancing achievement and enjoyment. What does the word "balance" mean? According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary's* third definition (and the most appropriate one for this article), "balance" is defined as "a state in which different things occur in equal or proper amounts or have an equal or proper amount of importance." For our purposes, the pertinent word is "proper" not necessarily "equal."

When I think of the word "balance," I envision a scale with work on one side and personal time on the other. Sometimes, the scale is tipped more to one side than the other, but the goal is to bring it back into proper balance.

Making a Case

Undoubtedly, there are health benefits to a decent life outside of work—benefits not just to your physical well-being but also to your emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. A fulfilling life outside work allows you to develop meaningful relationships with people (other than colleagues) that will lead to a fuller, more enriched life.

As Michael P. McKinley wrote in his book *Keeping Alive and Other Lessons Worth Learning*, "Most of

us divide our lives into three boxes—education, which occurs during the first 20 some years of our existence; then working; and finally, retirement. Activity-wise, we label these boxes ‘learning,’ ‘working,’ and ‘playing.’ Notice in particular that playing gets slotted to the ending point of our lives—to retirement—when we may or may not be here to enjoy it.”

Maintaining Balance

Here are some suggestions for maintaining balance in your life:

1. Schedule personal time and activities.

Be deliberate about doing so. Don’t just wait until you have time available, or it will never happen. Put personal time on the calendar. Set a reminder on your smartphone just like you do when you have a work meeting.

2. Take a break. Everyone needs a break from work. Have someone in your life who will hold you accountable for getting away from work. This tip is aimed especially at you workaholics—you know who you are. Everybody should try to take a lunch break every day. If you have a lunch partner, he or she can make sure you don’t skip out.

At one of my previous workplaces, it was convenient for me to work out at lunchtime with a friend. Working out with someone provided that accountability piece. Some days, I didn’t feel like going, but I didn’t skip because I knew someone was counting on me. Working out at lunchtime also provided a boost of energy to get through the rest of the day. I felt like I was once again ready to take on the world.

I know some of you are saying you don’t have time to take lunch—you are too busy. I contend that you can’t afford not to take lunch. You can be much more productive if you allow yourself to take a break. If you are in that habit of not taking lunch, break it. Get someone to help you break it. This simple example is transferable to bigger breaks, like weekends and vacations—or even leaving work at a reasonable time at the end of the day.

3. Practice good discipline. We tend to be disciplined in our work life; it’s our responsibility to be disciplined when other people’s money and lives are entrusted to us. Be just as disciplined in scheduling time for yourself to be kind to your body and mind with good nutrition, exercise, and rest.

4. Do something for others. Volunteer your time. It is a privilege to be able to serve others. It will help take the focus off of you, your work, and the related stresses.

5. Become involved in organizations with missions that are different from your place of employment. It will stretch your experience.



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Those strategies will stimulate your mind, stimulate your heart, and stimulate your body—all of which adds up to a happier you.

The Role of the Employer

Recently, a story on *NBC Nightly News* highlighted a company that exemplifies the proper work-life balance. In fact, Lester Holt, who introduced the segment, led off by saying, “This story may just redefine work-life balance as we know it.”

The company is Clockwork Active Media Systems in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Under the leadership of owner and CEO Nancy Lyons, the company has received many awards, including a Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award and more than 16 Best Workplace awards. Clockwork is a company that at its foundation treats its employees with respect and understands the benefits to them and the organization of a good balance between work and nonwork life. Among other perks, Clockwork allows its employees to:

- Come in when they want.
- Bring their kids to work if they want.
- Take the number of vacation days they need (the employer does not keep track of them).
- Have access to ice cold beer on tap.

The only caveat I heard was that those benefits are provided “as long as the work gets done.” It sounded too good to be true and very risky. However, according to founder and owner Nancy Lyons, the results are amazing. Productivity is incredible, and the employees are happy. In fact, the company’s website states in big bold letters: We Love Mondays.



That story ties perfectly to Daniel Pink's book *Drive*, which I highly recommend. The book sets forth what truly motivates people. It is interesting, thought-provoking, and backed by substantial research. Pink makes a case that in the workplace (and possibly beyond), autonomy, purpose, and mastery motivate people. His "hard-to-deny" concepts fly in the face of the traditional workplace environment and its regulations and rules.

Allow employees to determine the balance that is right for them.

Some of you probably supervise employees and perhaps, in some cases, are charged with establishing and recommending workplace rules. Consequently, you have a responsibility to help those in your organization maintain a proper work-life balance.

Provide a work environment that allows a certain amount of flexibility when possible. Allow employees to determine the balance that is right for them. The appropriate balance for an employee with three young children will be very different from the balance for an older adult with no children or a young college student who is working part-time.

You can encourage and enable a proper balance without sacrificing productivity. In fact, the research shows that a happy employee equals a productive employee.

Now What?

The appropriate work-life balance is different for everyone and will change from time to time depending on circumstances. Remember these three points:

- There is no perfect one-size-fits-all formula.
- Work-life balance does not mean an *equal* balance of work and personal time; it just means striving for a *proper* balance of the two.
- The balance will vary over time and from time to time.

Some say life is good. I say life is *great* if you can find the perfect mix of achievement and enjoyment through a proper work-life balance. It's time to make a change—we all can improve and work toward that proper balance one small step at a time.

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