

Walking the Tight Rope: Work- Life Balance in a World of Organisations

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“Work- Life Balance” is the popular expression for determining how we juggle the demand of home, family, friends and work. The key though is that balance comes first, that is balance of our whole life. This raises important questions like “what is this life that I have? How do I really want to live it”? These are challenging questions, possibly too big to be answered without some kind of structure and support.

We need to work out where we are out of control and recognise that building balance into our lives is the basis of long-term success in our work and careers. In a high-pressured business environment, where it is often almost impossible to keep control over our lives, we need to have a holding pattern that enables us to see all the pieces of our immediate life in sharp focus.

If any of you have had the experience of learning to ride a bike to ski or to sail a boat then you will have experienced the difference of feeling either in or out of balance. The sense of having that holding pattern, of everything working together smoothly. How far off are you with this sense of balance in your everyday life? How effectively are you using your personal resources to keep your day to day in balance?

Knowing that we are balanced, calm when we need to be, excited when we want to be, our lives containing the elements or components we want and need, has to lie at the centre of us.

An accepted belief we have to live with is that we have to bow down to the demands of our work and our careers. That we have to give up so much of our lives to earn the money we want or need. We tend to be in an all or nothing frame of mind: work comes first and extras afterwards in the spare time left.

The reality is the reverse, people who do not fall over, get stressed, or have to leave jobs because of personality conflicts are the ones who have taken time to work out a balance between work and play. The people at the top of organisations who take time out to relax and spend significant time with their family, are not always doing that because it is easier for them to do so, rather than their employees. It may be that they are at the top partly because they have learned how to balance their lives and remain relatively stress free.

Balance is something we have to work on wherever we live and in whatever circumstances. There is no short cut and once you have it in your life you have to keep fine-tuning it, it is an ongoing dance. You may need help and support initially to establish the kind of balance you want and then be ready to recognise any signs of tilting. The ideal is when someone asks you how you are in the morning when you get into the office, and mean it when you say you are fine!

From an organizational perspective, there is a lot that can be done to encourage employees to achieve better work-life balance. However, the most important thing is that the people leading organizations believe in the value of having employees with a quality of life that includes work as well as time for family, friends, personal development, etc. The following are some current trends in working conditions that contribute towards making work-life balance a reality. They all fall under the concept of “**flexible working**”:

- ❑ Working from home
- ❑ Job sharing
- ❑ Flexi time
- ❑ Staggered hours
- ❑ Longer days/shorter weeks
- ❑ Part time work
- ❑ School term time working
- ❑ Leave, career breaks and sabbaticals

These are some examples that can benefit both the organization and the employee, as long as they are implemented after serious consideration of staff and organizational needs. Research has shown flexible working to:

- ❑ Improve recruitment and staff retention.
- ❑ Reduce absenteeism.
- ❑ Improve morale and productivity.
- ❑ Attract younger workers.
- ❑ Offer a wider pool of skills and experience to choose from.
- ❑ Improve the quality of service provision.
- ❑ Support service provision outside regular working hours.
- ❑ Concentrate staff during peak workload hours.
- ❑ Helps all carers with dependents (not just parents)
- ❑ Gives greater access to work for people with disabilities.
- ❑ Encourages and allows people to combine work and study.
- ❑ Balances work with other interests.
- ❑ Allows more time for participation in community activities.

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Organisations therefore, need to do their part to facilitate work-life balance among their people. Research indicates that there are long-term benefits for organizations that take this direction. Many argue, however, that waiting for organizations to take the initiative, is not enough, especially in the immediate present. Ultimately, work-life balance is something we have to create and negotiate for ourselves. The following are some brief suggestions and guidelines for creating work-life balance.

- ❑ Accept that you have to do it yourself for yourself.
- ❑ You have to actively create it – it will not happen by accident.
- ❑ Decide how you want your life to be – create a personal vision that includes your most deeply held values.
- ❑ Describe your ideal day in specific detail.
- ❑ Prioritise your personal vision. As you go through your ideal day, which of the points are most important to you?

- ❑ Start, even in small steps, but start!
- ❑ Proceed according to plan.

In a recent book, “The Heart of Success”, best selling business author Rob Parsons (2002) identifies an emerging social class, the “new poor”. He describes the new poor as being “time poor”. Time poverty can be elusive because often other parts of the life in question seem to be going well. These persons enjoy a high standard of living and their families have every material need provided. Their children get expensive presents at birthdays and Christmas and attend the best schools. They have nice homes, expensive cars and clothes and can afford to go on holidays. Parsons goes on to explain, how these people often live with a sense of having “missed it”. “...they have built up a fair stock of material possessions, but they have a gnawing at their very soul that they have had little time to develop close relationships with those they love. Time poverty is tragic because while we strive for “success” it simultaneously attacks those we care about most”.

Parsons offers seven guidelines to help us with work-life balance.

- ❑ Don't settle for being money rich – time poor.
- ❑ Believe that the job you do makes a difference.
- ❑ Play to your strengths.
- ❑ Believe in the power of dreams.
- ❑ Put your family before your career.
- ❑ Keep the common touch (don't let success or power go to your head)
- ❑ Don't settle for success; strive for significance.

Probably the first step towards achieving a healthy work-life balance is making the time to take an honest look at our life and evaluating it according to the benchmark of our most deeply held values and personal vision. Two good questions to ask are, “How do I want to be seen by my loved ones now? How do I want to be remembered by my loved ones after I am gone?”