

Beyond Juggling

Are you keeping too many balls in the air? Here are some ways to rebalance your busy life.

By Kathy Buckner and Kurt Sandholtz

“It was the year after my divorce, and I was working full-time and getting my MBA in the evenings,” begins Stephanie, a researcher at a global electronics firm. “My three kids were involved in Cub Scouts or Girl Scouts, all on different nights, and hockey or ice skating, also on different nights, not to mention the games every weekend. I think I went through that whole year without sleeping.”

Stephanie recounts her story during a

work-life balance seminar. The exercise is a 21st-century version of “Can You Top This?” with the prize going to the person whose life is the most out of control. The tales are startling, outrageous, and, at the same time, familiar. As Stephanie finishes, the 60 other people in the room nod knowingly, a silent expression of “been there, done that.”

Such out-of-kilter lives have become the rule, not the exception. It’s not surprising that work-life balance has em-

erged as the Holy Grail of the workplace. In survey after survey on work values, people rank balance at the top of the list.

Now the good news. Work-life balance isn't an impossible dream. In our research, we talked to many people who found workable solutions. In nearly all cases, they realized that they wouldn't achieve balance by running faster, working harder, and cramming more into their lives. They let go of the idea of juggling. That doesn't mean they dropped out of society and are surviving on organic vegetables and goat's milk. Most of the successful balancers we studied aren't interested in an extreme version of the simple life. They accept that the three elements of balance—meaningful work, satisfying relationships, and personal rejuvenation or self-care—rarely come together in a tidy, stress-free package. So, they use a variety of methods to rebalance their lives into a more satisfying, sustainable pattern.

Why juggling doesn't work

Forty-five minutes, two seconds. That's the longest amount of time Anthony Gatto, a professional juggler and the world-record holder since 1989, has kept five clubs in the air. If you add one or two more clubs, he can't juggle more than a minute.

Anthony is a juggler extraordinaire. Most of us are not, but we're trying to juggle six, seven, eight, or more simultaneous commitments. Patti Manuel, the president and chief operating officer of Sprint Long Distance, identifies the multiple roles in her life: "I'm a boss, an employee, a friend, a mother, a daughter, and a member of my church and community." (That's seven.) "Balance is about understanding what those roles are and not letting any one of them dominate. Most of the time, I'm good at it. Other times, I'm trying to manage my way back from chaos."

Juggling is a knee-jerk coping mecha-

nism—the default setting when time gets tight and it seems that nothing can be put on the back burner. As long as our reflexes are sharp, juggling works; we can have it all. For that 45 minutes and two seconds, we have a meaningful worklife, a satisfying relationship with our partner, quality time with our kids and friends, and sufficient time for personal rejuvenation. Then something happens, and it all comes crashing down.

Comedian Steven Wright has observed, with his inimitable deadpan delivery, "You can't have everything. Where would you put it?" In our hearts, we know he's right. But that doesn't keep us from trying to pack everything in. And when it doesn't quite fit, we juggle as best as we can.

Beyond juggling

If you're an exhausted juggler looking for a better way, consider the following alternatives gleaned from interviews with busy professionals.

Alternating. Alternaters want it all, but not all at once. Their work-life balance comes in separate, concentrated doses. They throw themselves into their careers with abandon, then cut way back or quit work altogether and focus intensely on their families or outside interests.

Murray Low is an organization effectiveness manager for Eli Lilly. Over the past 15 years, he has been a CPA, has worked for a strategy consulting firm, and has run the HR department for a steel plant, with three- to six-month stints of unemployment in between. He has made the most of his time off, skiing and mountain biking with his wife and kids.

Others alternate on a daily or weekly basis. These micro-alternaters turn off their cell phones the minute they get home. They refuse to check email at night or on weekends. And they take all of their allotted vacation days every year. They consider their off-work time to be

crucial for deepening their relationships and for rejuvenating.

Outsourcing. "We have a family of four and a staff of eight," says Jon Younger, a New Jersey-based executive. He and his wife have little free time to allocate to a seemingly endless list of demands. Their solution: Prioritize the activities in which they want to be personally involved, then hire out the rest. On the personal list are spending one-on-one time with their two sons, coaching children's sports, attending church services and events, sharing quality time with extended family, and walking the dog. Just about everything else—yard care, food prep, academic tutoring, vacation planning, and car maintenance—gets outsourced.

Outsourcers achieve work-life balance by off-loading responsibilities—usually in their personal lives—to free up time and energy for the tasks they care about most. Their motto might be, "I want to *have* it all, not *do* it all." Outsourcers with limited income rely on a robust, reciprocal network of family, friends, neighbors, and other supporters who band together to help each other gain balance in their lives.

Bundling. Bundlers involve themselves in fewer activities, but they get more mileage out of them. They examine their busy lives and look for areas in which they can double dip. For example, a group of women meets three mornings a week to work out. They get physical exercise while deepening their friendships.

Everyone bundles to some degree, but we also found a lot of faux bundling—a version of juggling in which people fool themselves into thinking they're multitasking. The most egregious example is people who talk on their cell phones in a public restroom. They're doing two things at once, but is it really helping them feel more balanced? The essence of bundling isn't so much multitasking as multipurposing. Its genius is in giving separate tasks greater meaning by putting them together.

DEVELOPMENT

Techflexing. Techflexers leverage technology to conduct their work from almost anywhere, anytime. Flexibility is key as techflexers figure out how to maximize control over their schedules.

In contrast to jugglers, techflexers don't use technology to increase the work hours in a day. Rather, they use it to liberate those work hours from the rigid 9-to-5 structure. For example, telecommuters can get up early, work several hours in the morning and then take time off for exercise, spending time with the kids, or other interests. Techflexers who work in an office use technology to enrich their personal

such as "I took a voluntary pay cut to work four days a week."

Rebalancing your life

Those strategies—alone or in combination—have helped many people as they strive to juggle less and enjoy life more. None is a panacea, and each requires tradeoffs. Balance, like happiness, is a journey rather than a destination.

But if you focus on rebalancing your life—making conscious choices and course corrections as you go—small changes can have a big impact. Work-life balance isn't an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Spending an hour or two per week on the things that

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lives. For instance, they may use a cell phone, Webcam, or instant messaging to stay connected to family while at work.

Simplifying. Simplifiers have decided they don't want it all. They've made a lasting commitment to reduce the time and energy devoted to nonessential activities, whether at work or at home. The payoff is greater freedom from stress, minutia, and the rat race.

Some people simplify from the beginning of their careers. Others come to it after they've tried juggling for a while. In either case, a common characteristic is the willingness to make some sacrifices—small ones, such as "I've decided to buy only one color of socks," or large ones,

matter most to you can be the difference between feeling out of control and feeling tired yet satisfied. And in a world brimming over with meaningful opportunities and fascinating distractions, tired yet satisfied isn't a bad way to go.

Kathy Buckner and Kurt Sandholtz have more than two decades of experience in consulting, training, and speaking. Their Realistic Work-Life Balance seminar is based on the ideas from their recent book, Beyond Juggling: Rebalancing Your Busy Life (Berrett-Koehler, 2002); www.beyondjuggling.com.

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