



We're Dancing as Fast as We Can

ONE OF MY favorite facts about the American workplace is this: Between the ages of 21 and 65, we spend roughly 11,000 days of our lives at work.

That's a hell of a lot of time to devote to any activity, even one you love. Unfortunately, in this day and age, too many people devote too many of their waking hours to work. I mean, let's strive for a little balance, OK?

Easier said than done perhaps.

Many people feel implicit (sometimes explicit) pressure to work long hours. It's emerging as part of the new, unstated employment contract—a kind of quiet *quid pro quo* between downsizing companies and anxious workers that says, "As long as you work like a dog, I won't put you out on the street."

That's a sad commentary on what has happened to any notion of job security in this anxious age.

So, how *do* you establish a balance between your work and family life?

Just recently, I was asked that question on a television talk show. I admit I had to think about it because I struggle with this issue myself.

Here are my thoughts.

Because our society doesn't tend to reward people for living balanced lives, take responsibility for establishing balance yourself!

Take time off. Recognize that no one will ever congratulate you for taking a vacation. Even so, make sure you plan regular getaways for your mental health, as well as for fun and relaxation. And when you get back from the mountains or the beach, give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done. Remember: At least one vacation a year should be just for you and your significant other. No kids allowed.

Plan. Understand that quality time with family is never *found*, it is *planned*. So, commit yourself to regular blocks of time each week with your family. For example, make Thursday nights a time when the fam-

ily always has dinner together. If you have kids, think about taking time on a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon to do some regular activity with them. For example, take your son out to toss a football or take your daughter to a bookstore and read to her in the children's section. (Personally, I think a cappuccino and a copy of *James and the Giant Peach* go very well together.)

Develop a hobby. Me? I have a garden in my backyard. And whenever my clients drive me crazy or I feel up to my ears in bills or paperwork, I hit the back 40 and plant daylilies or rototill my lousy Northern Virginia soil. Now I know why President Reagan liked to clear brush so much. It's purgative and palliative.

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Get regular exercise. It really does improve your mental outlook and your physical fitness. I've found it also gives me a mental edge, which really helps me in a business in which I need a constant supply of new ideas.

Be aware. Look for signs of job burnout. They include an inability to concentrate, a lack of interest in any activity, irritability, and anxiety.

Get perspective. Put office technology in its place. Fax machines, cell phones, voice mail, and so forth were designed to ease our work lives. But just as the machine gun was designed to end wars quickly (yet increased killing), office technology has had the unintended effect of ratcheting up workplace stress levels for most people instead of reducing them.

On weekends and on vacations, don't check your voice mail. (I know someone who checked his voice mail on an airplane en route to the Bahamas and it cost him a bundle.)

Instead, leave an announcement on your answering machine that says you're out having a sweat-lodge experience in the Adirondacks, on a religious retreat, making up for missing the sixties, or (and this is my favorite) lolling in the grass while considering the lilies of the field and how they toil not. You think I'm kidding!

Take note. Historically, men have been more prone to work-life imbalance than women. In the past, that frequently caused problems for men when they retired from active corporate duty and put themselves out to pasture with nothing to do.

I know more than a few men of my father's generation that experienced early death because they hadn't planned to do anything during their retirements, although they worked hard to earn them.

Nowadays, that's changing. But men still have a lot to learn about striking a balance. If in doubt, read the September 1996 issue of *Fortune* magazine in which Lee Iacocca talks about how he "flunked" retirement.

And women, you're not out of the woods here. You're increasingly susceptible to work-life imbalance, particularly if you're trying to juggle a career and child rearing, or are raising a family solo.

Wondering how to get better at creating work-life balance for yourself? Here's some recommended reading:

◆ *Solving the Work/Family Puzzle* by Bonnie Michaels and Elizabeth McCarty. Irvin Professional Publishing, 1992.

◆ *Women and the Work/Family Dilemma* by Deborah Swiss and Judith Walker. Swiss (John Wiley Trade), 1994.

◆ *Balancing Acts* by Susan Stautberg and Marcia Worthing. Master Media, 1996.

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