

Balance Requires Evolving Skills

By Jim Bird

CREATING VALUE AND BALANCE in your everyday life is more challenging than it was a generation ago. On a daily basis you are exposed to more than 100 times the information and choices your parents were during their working years.

Because of this choice challenge, finding your own best work and life balance requires a different skill set and a different framework than those used in the past.

To find that balance, you must define what work-life balance is and what it is not.

What is work-life balance?

Let's first define what work-life balance is not. Work-life balance does not mean an equal balance. Trying to create a set hour equivalency between various work and personal areas of your life is usually unrewarding and unrealistic. Life is and should be more fluid than that.

Your best individual work-life balance will vary over time, often on a daily basis. The right balance for you today will probably be different for you tomorrow. The right balance for you when you are single will be different when you marry, or if you have children, or when you start a new career versus when you near retirement.

A flexible approach

There is no perfect, one-size-fits-all balance for which you should be striving. The best work-life balance is different for each of us because we all have different personalities and lives.

However, at the core of an effective work-life balance definition are two key everyday concepts that relate to each of us: daily achievement and enjoyment—ideas that are almost deceptive in their simplicity.

Aquiring a fuller meaning of these two concepts will help us define a positive work-life balance. Achievement and enjoyment answer the big question

“Why do you want a better income?” Is it to buy a new house, to send the kids to college, to do a good job today, or to not come to work at all?

Most of us already have a good grasp of the meaning of achievement. But let's explore the concept of enjoyment in greater depth. As part of a relevant work-life balance definition, enjoyment does not just mean happiness. It means pride, satisfaction, celebration, love, a sense of well being, and all the joys of living.

Achievement and enjoyment are like the front and back of a coin. You can't attain value from one without the other, no more than you can have a coin with only one side. Many successful people are not happy or not nearly as happy as they should be because they live a one-dimensional life.

Focusing on achievement and enjoyment daily helps you avoid the “as soon as” trap, which is the life-dulling habit of planning to get to the joys of life and accomplishment “as soon as....”

If a stranger walked up to me at this moment and asked me my purpose in life, my answer would be “You know, I just want to achieve something today, and I want to enjoy something today. And if I do both of those things today, I'm going to have a pretty good day. And if I do both of those things every day for the rest of my life, I'm going to have a pretty good life.”

I think that's true for all of us. Life will deliver the value and balance we desire when we are achieving and enjoying something every single day in all the important areas that make up our lives. As a result, a helpful working definition of work-life balance is: meaningful daily achievement and enjoyment in work, family, friends, and self.

At work, you can create your own work-life balance by making sure you not only achieve, but also reflect the joy of the job and the joy of life every day. If nobody pats you on the back today, pat yourself on the back. And help others to do the same.

When you are a person who not only gets things done, but enjoys the work, you will attract people. They will seek you out to participate in a team activity.

But what about the other areas of your life? Ask yourself now, “When was the last time I achieved and enjoyed something with my family and friends? How recently have I achieved and enjoyed something just for me?”

Self time—self balance

Too often we leave ourselves out of the equation. We fill our lives with only duties and obligations to others. This can lead to an increasingly gray existence.

If you start to do something just for you, guilt jumps up and says, “How dare you indulge yourself in this purely personal waste of time when you have all these commitments and responsibilities?”

It is not only acceptable, but it is essential to take some time just for you. If you are going to be there for all the important people in your life, you have to manage negative stress and stay mentally, physically, and spiritually balanced.

Taking some time for you, especially leisure time, reduces the production of excess stress hormones that studies show can cause heart attack, impaired immune system, emotional instability, spine pain, and reduced brain functioning. In addition to reducing negative stress, leisure creates greater value and balance in your life.

But what is leisure? Most of us are so caught up in the important tasks of our everyday lives that we are a bit foggy on the definition of leisure. So let's clarify its meaning by understanding the difference between a meeting and a date.

A meeting is action time with major decision topics for one or all of the participants. A date, however, is recreational or leisure time, with no major decision topics for any of the participants.

If you make a date with yourself or another person and spend even part of

your time thinking or talking about work challenges, refinancing the house, the poor grade your child made at school, then you are not having a date, you are having a meeting. And you are not physically, mentally, or emotionally reaping the benefits of recreation or leisure, which you must have to create balance in your life.

As we acquire responsibilities and obligations in life, too often we replace all of our dates with meetings. When you do that, you have totally changed the chemistry of that romantic evening, or the lunch outing with a friend, or time with a child, or relaxation time with yourself. You undermine and potentially ruin the positive value and balance you intended to bring to that relationship, by simply turning your date into a meeting.

So you should regularly ask yourself, "Am I still dating or am I just having meetings?"

To add balance to your life right away, schedule a date with someone before the end of the week. And stick to the "no major decision" rule.

In addition, make up your mind right now to set aside some personal time today. This is time where you are the beneficiary. It is not time with or for friends, work associates, or family. Remember your body, your mind, and your spirit need this time for a healthy, happy whole life. Why not devote 20 minutes on the way home tonight just for you?

Maintain a better balance by enjoying some leisure time for yourself everyday.

To stay out of the "as-soon-as" trap:

- Keep the definition of work-life balance in the front of your mind. Achieve something today and enjoy something today at work and with your family, friends, and self.
- Plan more dates and less meetings with the important people in your life.
- Create everyday self-time. Commit in your calendar, even in small increments, time just for you.

These are simple yet powerful concepts, but they are only useful if you act on them. Don't procrastinate. Act now. Make it happen, for yourself, your family and all the important individuals you

care about. Every day for the rest of your life...achieve and enjoy.

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