

# DIGITAL BEAT

## The Intrinsic Equation

By Darin E. Hartley

**Work-life balance  
aided by technology?  
It's possible.**

It is funny that work-life balance seems to be the topic of the day—seeing as how I sit here writing at least parts of this column on the bus in Seattle, en route from the Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal to the Poulsbo Park and Ride. We have all heard the phrase *work-life balance*, but what does it mean? Is it really possible? And, specifically, what's out there on the technology front that can help the typically over-laden training professional (and others) find his or her center?

At some level, every person has an intrinsic equation for the appropriate level of work and nonwork, life activities that create his or her balance. But many variables make that seemingly simple idea very complex. Here are a few:

- Work-life balance is different for each individual; that's part of what makes this concept a nightmare for training and HR professionals.
- People who enjoy their work will generally accept more work and less life.

The converse is also true.

- People who have good or great nonwork situations generally don't want to have excessive work requirements. The converse is also true.

One of my favorite books, *Blur*, by Stan Davis and Chris Meyer, captures some of the issues associated with work-life balance in our connected economy. The authors write:

"Speed is the foreshortening of product lifecycles from years to months or even weeks. And, speed is the worldwide electronic network over which financial institutions transfer money at the rate of US\$41 billion a minute. For the individual, Speed is scores of messages a day, creating near continuous communication. Miss a day and your world moves on without you. Accelerated product lifecycles and time-based competition have become part of the business lingo. These experiences have changed people's perceptions. We now expect real-time responsiveness, 24 hours of every day of the year."

With that kind of time pressure and the incessant demand for connectivity, one sees how difficult it can be to achieve true work-life balance.

### Can one ever be centered?

The answer to that question can be answered in true consultant fashion: It depends. Each person's inner work-life compass points to north a little bit differently. And with so many external, social, and environmental factors, true north is always different. It's probably not a bad idea to assess your individual balance on a semi-regular basis so that you can make the necessary adjustments. Believe it or not, there's technology out there that can help you achieve balance.

## Ten Tips for Work-Life Balance

1. Have goals (short- and long-term), and work towards achieving them. In *Flow*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, says that real happiness comes from work and effort towards meaningful goals. Think about it: Some of the toughest work you've done was probably the most rewarding.
2. Use these goals to prioritize activities and to know when to call it quits for the day. If you take care of the most pressing tasks first, you'll be better able to manage your time.
3. Find and use a mentor or work buddy, especially if you're new in your role. Spending time with a more experienced person can help you do things more efficiently.
4. Know your limits. Every one of us could work every day for 20 hours if we wanted to, but that would take its toll on our health, work quality, and personal relationships. So, work smarter, not longer.
5. If possible, volunteer in your community.
6. Ask for help when you need it. There are limits to everyone's capabilities.
7. Minimize the time you spend around negative people; they are huge energy drainers.
8. Use effective communication at work and home. That helps minimize issues and facilitate planning.
9. Work on projects that bring about closure when possible, at work and at home.
10. Make sure the human processes are in place before trying to use technology to solve problems, because the technology won't work otherwise.

The first group consists of time-management tools: MS Outlook, Franklin Planner add-on software for MS Outlook (Plan Plus), and the plethora of PDA (personal digital assistant) integrated calendars, planners, contact systems, and so forth. The reason I've mentioned these applications first is because a major part of attaining true balance has to do with how your time, tasks, and daily events are planned, prioritized, and scheduled. If you haven't had any formal training on time management or haven't read any books or worked with a role model who uses these tools effectively, it's probably a good idea to do so. When people are able to use these tools effectively, there is a strong chance that the human processes underneath these tools are in order.

Ensuring that the human processes are in order will enable more successful use of any of the tools we discuss here.

For example, you can have the hottest, most-connected memory-laden PDA on the market, but if you don't keep your calendar up-to-date, don't know how to prioritize, and can't use some of the time-saving features, then these tools become less effective and, in fact, can be detrimental. I'll bet that all of you who have networked electronic calendars in your work groups have at least a couple of people who never update their personal calendars, so you have to call them on the phone or track them down to see if they'll grant you the pleasure of attending the meeting you've scheduled.

### Foils

One of the foils of work-life balance for many professionals is the nearly continuous stream of email and other electronic media (spam, pop-ups, offers, electronic reminders) that bombard us. As consultants, it's important when we're working with clients that we

# Email is a work-life balance foil.

Learn to sort by subject, read most current message, delete junk, set up email rules, write concise messages, and, sometimes, refrain from emailing and talk with your co-workers.

are able to track our billable time closely. When dealing with email, if you respond as it appears on your screen, starting with the first unread at the bottom (assuming that's the way your inbox is sorted), you potentially end up reading and responding to duplicate email.

Here are some email tips:

1. Sort all unread mail by subject.
2. Delete any obvious junk mail or spam. Consider setting up rules to handle junk mail so that you minimize the chance of getting the same junk mail repeatedly.
3. With messages sorted by subject, go to the most current message in a common subject thread and read it first. Start from the bottom of the message. That will let you read just one message in the same subject. It also minimizes the chance that you won't put your foot in your mouth by responding prematurely to an issue that may have been addressed by a previous sender.
4. You can delete all same-subject emails except the most recent when all of the replies are contained in that email.

5. When possible, set up rules to handle any incoming messages.

6. Use email as it's meant to be used—for short concise messaging, not long diatribes.

7. Consider talking with a co-worker instead of sending email for short notes, questions, and the like.

For grins, I Googled “work life balance” and received 378,000 Website matches. Here are a few:

- [worklifebalance.com](http://worklifebalance.com)
- [lifelearninginstitute.com](http://lifelearninginstitute.com)
- [wlb.monster.com](http://wlb.monster.com)

Many of the sites offer tools, methodologies, assessments, activities, and surveys.

### The beat goes on

Work-life balance can seem like an elusive dream, but it is attainable when you leverage tools to make it happen.

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### Your Input

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