

Work/Life Balance – why is it out? How to get it back.

We hear and read a lot about the need for people to achieve a work-life balance. In this world of seemingly increasing pressure and workplace demands, is it really feasible to seek this balance? Does it matter? The short answer is yes, to both.

When you don't have this balance it leads to even more pressure building. You may be getting it from home and your life outside because you are not devoting time to that, or possibly from work as you struggle to cope with the demands there whilst keeping "life" going. As these pressures mount and the imbalance becomes worse, there is a probability of stress occurring. Organisations are more aware of the costs of stress related issues these days – local government included. Not achieving balance can begin to affect you as an individual, your team or colleagues, your family and friends, so it matters!

For most people, the lack of desired work-life balance is a result of things creeping up on them rather than a specific event causing it. The trouble is they do not take action on these small issues and changes as they happen, and before long these are the habit. This is often combined with events around them at work and the culture which has evolved around use of time and expectations from staff.

Having said this, the reality is that the problem of a lack of work-life balance is self-inflicted. You have allowed it to happen! The other challenging factor is that the solution lies within yourselves! You need to start by accepting more responsibility for how you use, or abuse, your own time. You need to acknowledge that the underlying problems arise because you are allowing others to take more control of your time!

To change your life and begin moving towards getting the right work-life balance for you, begin by thinking about what it would be. One of the problems many of people face, is they do not know what their ideal work-life balance would be like! (They often know they don't want what they have.) To get an idea of what you want spend some time doodling your thoughts. Write them down, mindmap them or even draw an image of what you want. As with many other activities, it can help you mobilise yourself into action if you have a really clear and compelling idea of what the end result will be. Be specific about what you want for you, personally, and for time with family and friends – and for work.

Now you know what you want, think about what needs to be different to achieve this. Identify what is happening with your time, and your life, currently. You can start with some generalised thinking, but this may lead to you overlooking some vital events or people! It can be useful to back-up your thinking by completing a time-log to make a note of exactly what you are doing, who and what interrupts you and how long these things are taking. Assess the activities against the key tasks of your job – and ask yourself which of these could or should be done by someone else?

The next step is to do a form of “gap analysis” . You can be specific about what needs to change in order to begin to achieve the desired balance which you created earlier. Before setting plans in place to address these areas, you can help yourself with a bit more self-assessment.

Over a number of years of working with groups and individuals in all aspects of time management and stress management, I have come to a conclusion that we make choices about what we do with our time. We do not think of it in those terms because those choices operate at such a deep-rooted level that we make them unconsciously. When we work late, even if asked by the boss, we are choosing to do that rather than go home to our family. These choices are based on our values and beliefs. Our values are the things which are important to us and we have evolved those over the years. Beliefs, in this context, are things we “hold to be true”. They take two forms, empowering and limiting. Put simply, the empowering ones are our “can do...” or “it’s OK to...” thoughts, whereas the limiting ones are the “must...”, “mustn’t...”, “can’t do...” or “it’s not OK to...” thoughts we have. This combination of values and beliefs dictate what we choose to do with our time. Taking the example above, you probably have values around security, career and ambition, which rate higher than values about family, relationships or self. You might have some limiting beliefs which say, “I must do what my manager (or other authority figures) asks.”

If you decide that achieving a better work-life balance is important you need to start by examining your values and beliefs. Firstly, identify what are your values. (Not something many people do or have done!) List them and then leave alone. Go back and look at them, decide what else you might want to add and then prioritise them. This can be a great exercise to do with a partner or significant other! When prioritised, evaluate how well you think these are being met with your current work-life balance. Where there is a gap, there will be a greater probability of pressure and stress being generated. If these really matter to you, you will take steps to start to make sure that your life is being lived to achieve them. This is why I said earlier, the solutions to getting your work-life balance lie with you!

The next stage is to do an action plan to tackle the areas in your gap analysis. Check back on your time logs and notice what is stealing your time from what would be your priorities in your balanced life. Be open to change – remember, *“if you continue to do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got.”* Some basic things to do:

- Decide what you need to reduce or cut back at work.
- Learn to say “no” more often, be OK about being unavailable to others in order to get on with your own work. This includes the telephone!
- Accept that you need to take breaks and have a life in order to be more productive.
- Organise your time with basic time management techniques, “to do lists”, time planners etc.
- Plan to do things for yourself and with your family and friends – and stick to those plans.

- Schedule to leave work at a certain time – and stick to it.
- Avoid taking work home and doing it in evenings or weekends, only allowing yourself very rare exceptions.

If your work-life balance is not what you want it to be, recognise that one of the reasons for this is you have allowed others to take control of your time (and life!). To achieve the balance you want, which leads to a happier life, less pressure and greater contentment, you need to put yourself back in control. To do this, be willing to change, taking responsibility for your own actions and reactions and use the appropriate behaviours to get the work-life balance you want.

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