

Balancing work and life

Work-life balance is a dynamic concept that changes with the changing goals and priorities associated with different phases of life

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Maxine McKew, an award-winning journalist, says in Jack Welch's book, *Winning*: "Let me tell you what I gave up. I wanted my career. And so I never had children."

Janet Lowe has quoted Jack Welch in her book *Jack Welch Speaks*: "For 41 years my operating principle was, work hard, play hard and spend some time as a father. I felt my life was perfectly balanced... But looking back it is clear that the balance I chose had consequences for people around me."

Do you think the people quoted here managed their work-life balance well?

Work-life balance is best viewed against the yardstick of a person's goals and priorities. It is relative, and what may be perfect for one might be skewed for another! Ron Ashkenas, partner with Schaffer Consulting, did his doctoral research on the balance between professional achievement and successful family life, using academic physicians as his focus group. He highlighted that the more successful professors also tended to have greater instances of divorce and estrangement from children. How would you explain this?

People make choices—big and small. For instance, choosing to speak at a forum, work late or attend business meetings, over family outings and parent-teacher meets. These choices are generally made without serious deliberation. The sum of these individual, isolated trade-offs gradually tip the work-life balance one way or the other! So, the point is to evolve a balance as a result of intentional choices that are aligned with priorities. Welch echoes this in his quote: "There's no such thing as work-life balance. There are work-life choices, and you make them, and they have consequences."

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sional proficiency during the initial working years. This is supported by Malcolm Gladwell's premise in his book *Outliers*, that it takes at least 10 years for a person to attain excellence in any field. Saina Nehwal revealed in an interview that her demanding schedule is completely oriented towards achieving excellence in badminton, leaving her with no time to socialise. Choices get tougher as one moves through the subsequent phases of life, with marriage, family and career making competing demands on one's time. Balancing work and life is, thus, a process that evolves as a result of changing priorities, and wisdom attained through experience.

How do you achieve it?

Set goals: Work-life balance is meaningless in the absence of goals. As a starting point, identify your goals and create a plan to achieve them, for "One minute spent in proper planning saves ten minutes in execution," as stated by Blake Beattie in *Bullseye! The Ultimate Guide To Achieving Your Goals*.

Learn the art of influencing: Your stakeholders comprise your family, manager, colleagues and all those who are affected by what you do. Imagine how your work-life balance will be impacted if your manager responds positively to your request for additional resources and your family takes on the domestic chores willingly! What is the

strategy for achieving this? First, look at the issue from your stakeholder's perspective by understanding his problems, preferences and goals. Second, ask yourself why he should adhere to your request? Third, present your request in a way that addresses his needs and objections. Fourth, engage with flexibility and patience. Fifth, build strong relationships through a helpful attitude, a pleasant demeanour, and an appreciative manner. Robert Cialdini, the author of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, has shown that people are more likely to say 'yes' if they like you.

Manage your time: Optimise your time by scheduling tasks that need greater concentration during your prime time—the time of the day when you are at your productive best. Maintain a to-do list and guard against distractions like phone calls, visitors, background conversations, etc. Gloria Mark, professor at the University of California, has shown through her research that on an average people spend three minutes on any single task before being interrupted! The loss is far greater in terms of the time entailed in resuming with the same degree of focus. So, ward off interruptions by stealing some quiet time outside the din of the regular office work hours, seeking refuge in a meeting room, or possibly working from home occasionally,

Bring in efficiencies by getting organised and eliminating clutter.

Learn to say no: Often we adhere to people's requests in the interest of 'relationship building', and culturally too we are not adept at refusing a request. But as you pass the reins of your time to others, you hurt your work-life balance. The trick lies in offering alternatives. For instance, "I am stretched for time at the moment. Will it work if I give you this data by tomorrow morning?"

Do it now: Many of us are bitten by the procrastination bug. Rather than picking up tasks like paying bills and filing returns at leisure, we wait till these simple tasks assume the dimensions of urgency, and get them done, often at the cost of other tasks, adversely impacting our work-life balance.

Delegate: People often subscribe to the 'do it yourself' brigade under the illusion that nobody can match their standards, or because training someone else is cumbersome or out of sheer insecurity. Think win-win and delegate judiciously, as it would not only motivate your team but also release some of your precious time. Similarly, let go of the 'penny wise pound foolish' syndrome and outsource whatever can be reasonably outsourced. Reshape division of labour at home, encouraging family members to take on some chores.

Let go of perfectionism: Best is the enemy of good! Don't set excessively high standards, and then invest time on activities that don't bring commensurate returns.

Nigel Marsh, author and speaker on work-life balance, said in a Technology, Entertainment and Design speech that working towards a work-life balance need not entail dramatic upheavals in life. The quality of our relationships can be radically transformed through small investments in the right places. He rightly said, "If you don't design your life, someone else will... and you might not like their idea of balance."

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