



A balancing act

BY FRITZ ESKER

People often gripe about their jobs. They talk of winning the lottery, quitting work, and devoting their lives to following their dreams and hobbies. Despite all this talk, many people actually have a hard time distancing themselves from their work, even in evenings and on weekends. The fact is it's hard to distance yourself from something when you spend at least 40 hours a week focused on it. But too much focus on a job can lead to a life of failed relationships and bitterness. So what can people do to find an appropriate balance between life and work?

While the obvious answer is that people should not allow themselves to get caught up in their jobs and allow work to overwhelm their lives, in real life it isn't that simple. People know they need their jobs to pay the rent, send the kids to school, and have health insurance for themselves or their families. And situations may vary from individual to individual.

"It's not an exact science we're talking about here," said Dr. Richard Long, a family practitioner with St. Tammany Parish Hospital.

FAMILY TIME AND ME TIME

The first step in finding the right balance is to set priorities. Priorities will be different for everyone. For married people, family should come first. Even if there are no children, a spouse is family and if time is not set aside for a spouse, then the marriage will struggle. Something as simple as setting aside a date night once a week can help.

While it is important to set aside family time, it is also important to set aside alone time. "The biggest mistake people make is they don't set aside time for themselves," said Brenda Aranda, a licensed clinical social worker at East Jefferson General Hospital. People need time alone to have the time to process what's happened to them during the day and to unwind. It can come in the form of meditation, a walk in the neighborhood, a workout at the gym, or reading a book, but alone time should always be scheduled.

Obviously, alone time is easier for single workers to schedule than those with families. However, compromises can be reached. Long said that if you like to exercise, but have a family

and can't get away to a gym for an hour or more during the week, then exercise at home. You can even try to get your spouse and/or children involved in the workout as well to make it fun for everyone.

Vacations are important, too. They can help a person break out of a feeling of drudgery and routine. Dr. Dean Hickman, chairman of the psychiatry department for the Ochsner Health System, said people who tend to be hard-driving, busy types should take vacations that force themselves to relax and slow down (a cruise, a retreat in a cabin in the woods). On the other hand, people who tend to be more sedentary should take more active vacations (e.g. hiking, surfing).

Even if you set aside time to enjoy your family or some alone time, work can still interfere. Sometimes, people have a hard time mentally letting go of things that happened during the day. If you're still dwelling on things that happened at work or thinking about what you'll have to do tomorrow, then you're not fully engaged with your family or fully enjoying your free time. "When you leave work, close

your door and leave it in the office, do not take work home with you,” Aranda said.

And thinking about work while at home counts as taking work home with you. Avoiding this takes practice. It takes self-awareness to stop, realize you are still thinking about work, and re-direct your thoughts elsewhere. Aranda recommends visualizing a closed office door and when you start to think of work, tell yourself, “The work stays in the office.”

FRIENDSHIPS

While it is important to take time out for your families and yourself, it is equally important to maintain healthy friendships. Aside from being people to have fun with, friends serve a valuable function as listeners. Anyone going through a difficult time needs a friend to be able to talk to, vent anger to, or cry on his/her shoulder.

But if you fail to maintain the friendship on a regular basis, it will be hard to ask a friend for help during the difficult times. And if you don't have someone to share your feelings with, then you lose an important coping mechanism when dealing with stress, anger, or grief. “If you don't call people when things are going well, then it's hard to call them when things are bad and you really need them,” Hickman said.

WORK BOUNDARIES

Setting boundaries with your employers is another important step to finding the right work/life balance. This can be tricky - most people are afraid that if they refuse their boss one too many times, then they may lose their job. Hickman said it is important to set boundaries. “When you're asked to take on too much, the best phrase is, ‘Let me think about it and I'll get back to you.’ Don't be afraid to say no.”

Aside from missing out on your personal life, putting too much on your plate at work can affect your work life as well. Hickman said he has dealt with patients who were

afraid to say no to their bosses, so they agreed to do something they either were too busy to do well or not actually qualified to do. When this happened, the patients did poorly at the job, which led to negative ramifications at work, which led to decreased self-esteem for the patients. In the end, you are not doing yourself or your employers any favors if you take on too much.

If boundaries are not set, then stress can manifest itself with headaches, nausea, and irritability, among other symptoms. If relationships falter, then depression can set in. Long said many times people make the mistake of not setting boundaries because they associate their worth with their performance at a job. “The major problem is ego, thinking your self worth is tied up in your performance,” Long said. “When we're the center of our own universe, it becomes very self destructive.”

LOST TIME AND REGRETS

In the end, the one thing a person can lose and never get back in life is time. “The mistake people make is thinking they can always catch up on things,” Hickman said. But there are some things that can never be replaced, like witnessing your child's early accomplishments, or spending quality time with a friend who may be about to move out of town.

“No one ever complains during the final stages of their life that ‘I wish I'd spent more time at the office,’” Hickman said.

For most people, work is necessary. You should take pride in your work and do it well, but remember that it is not what defines anyone as a person. Accomplishments consist not only of work-related accomplishments, but family, friendship, and personal achievements, too.