



Career Corner

The Work-Life Balance Demystified

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Introduction

As a recruiter, I get an inside look at the concerns and frustrations that people experience on a daily basis in their professional careers. "Work-life balance" is a top concern of many professionals today. With increasing demands and unprecedented connectivity, people are finding it almost impossible to break away from their work.

For most, this makes work-life balance an oxymoron. Part of this challenge is because "balance" is a 50/50 ratio. Thinking this way about balance is too concrete and unrealistic when dealing with the inconsistencies of everyday life, not to mention work requirements. The reality is that highly effective professionals need to focus almost all of their attention to work at certain times, and as a result, their personal life takes a back seat. Instead of viewing this as negative and stressing over it, embrace the imbalance and recognize the payoff in the long run. This is the ebb and flow of work and play. We can't plan to have "perfect balance" in an ever-changing world. This is not to say that devoting 100% of our time to work is possible or acceptable all the time. There must be a tradeoff, but at times, there is going to be an inverse relationship between the two when working to achieve one's goals in the grander scheme of things.

Work-life balance viewed too myopically can seem unrealistic and can be a source of stress. Different circumstances make it impossible to maintain an even balance on a consistent basis.

Since we've just started a new year, let 2006 mark a new chapter in your life. Be proactive by taking last year's experiences and reflect on both of the positives and the negatives. Then work to determine ways in which you can strike a better balance. From here you can put together your own strategic plan to achieve this goal and start fresh.

Five Key Steps

To get started, here are five key ideas to consider when formulating your work-life balance action plan.


1. **Be proactive:** Commit to prioritizing the areas that need improvement and actively work towards changing them. I want to stress "actively," as many of us (I'm no stranger to it) spend the time, do the research, pat yourself on the back for being so ambitious, and then stop there. Before you know it, you'll be halfway through the year, and your grand scheme is buried under a heap of papers or drenched in espresso. To avoid this, set a timeline and use your calendar to provide reminders to help keep you committed and motivated.

2. **Be introspective:** Take time to figure out what motivates you and

where you would like to be at year's end. Really give some thought as to what it is that will make you and your family happy and think creatively about how you might achieve it. Then you can come up with realistic ways to get closer to your goals.

3. **Be realistic:** When developing your personal road map for success in 2006, be realistic. Setting unrealistic goals is self-defeating and highly de-motivating. You are more likely to work towards and achieve goals if they are within reach. However, resist setting goals that fall too far within your comfort zone. The trick is setting goals that motivate and challenge you yet aren't so tough you'll never achieve them. You may also need to cut yourself a little slack. Don't beat yourself up about last year's failings and misfortunes. It serves no purpose to dwell on what you could have done differently unless it leads to a better way. You empower yourself when you wipe your own personal slate clean and take the initiative to re-shape your own success from the ground up.
4. **Remain flexible:** Senior executives and dedicated professionals at all levels have unexpected deadlines and fires to extinguish. As a result, personal affairs may get put on the back burner and relationships suffer. Do your best to accept this and "roll with the punches" by being as flexible as you can while scheduling and prioritizing personal and family time in the near future. You may have to accept tradeoffs, but that doesn't mean that career requirements are more important than personal needs. Strive to address the inevitable problems at hand while staying committed to family and your personal life.
5. **Set boundaries:** Learn when to leave work at the office to devote attention to life's important events. Learn to give your family the same respect and attention that you give your boss or CEO. At times this may mean closing your laptop, shutting off your phone, and leaving your Blackberry behind. It's important to learn to manage your time in such a way that this is possible. It's also important to be able to rely on others and delegate responsibilities so that you can break away from time to time.

Conclusion

In summary, don't think of "work-life balance" as a concrete 50/50 ratio. Instead, work to develop a working solution that is tailored to you and your family's needs. Base this on a clear analysis of your values, priorities, commitments and responsibilities. We can come close to "having it all," but only after we realize that we can't have it all at the same time. 

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