



Business Basics

Basic Steps Toward Work-Life Balance

Tara Weiss, 03.17.09, 06:00 PM EDT

It's harder than ever to keep up with both your job and your life away from it. Here's how to start.



10 Steps To Work-Life Balance

Among the many things the average professional deals with daily: getting ahead at work; helping the kids with their homework; driving the school carpool; spending quality time with their significant other; caring for elderly parents; dealing with chores in the home; trying to get in just a few minutes to catch up with friends.

Life can feel like a constant battle between our professional and personal lives, especially now, with the economic distress making our lives more challenging than ever in so many ways. Before you beat yourself up about not being able to get everything done, consider these tips for achieving a better balance between your work and the rest of your life this year.

First, prioritize. "If you want balance--and not everybody does--you have to force yourself to edit yourself personally and professionally," says Jody Miller, founder of the executive staffing firm Business Talent Group.

Consider all the things competing for your time and decide what will stay and what will go. Perhaps you're on the holiday party committee at work. That's something you can skip next year. What about the three nonprofit organizations you belong to? Select one that means the most and focus your time on it instead of giving scattered attention to all three.

"Focus on the things that are important to you, and don't do the extraneous stuff," says Miller. "It's a discipline that doesn't come too naturally to most of us."

Sometimes gaining a few extra hours in your day makes all the difference. Find out if your firm has policies that would allow you telecommuting or flexible hours. In this economy it's hard to imagine asking for additional benefits, but imagine how much more you could get done if you telecommuted one day a week. By eliminating commuting and getting ready for work, you could likely get about three hours back.

When discussing this option with the boss, approach it from a position of strength. Consider saying, "I like my job, and feel I am an asset. I see a place here for me in the future. I'd like to talk about ways I can make my work here as productive as possible. I'm in a not-so-unique situation of caring for my elderly parents (or whatever your particular situation is), and working from home once or twice a week would give me much-needed extra time. I believe I'd be able to give you better work, since I'd be less distracted."

You might be surprised to find your boss sympathetic--particularly if you're a top performer--because he or she is in a similar situation. In this economic climate, when employers can't give raises, they may be willing to offer other benefits. They want to treat their best employees well, so that when the market turns around those employees don't immediately leave for another company.

Speaking of caring for elderly relatives, 57% of people who do so say they've had to go in late to work or leave early because of it; 4% say they've turned down a promotion because of it; 10% say it has led them to go from full-time to part-time work, according to AARP. "This is very much a hidden part of the juggling act, caring for elderly parents," says Elinor Ginzler, a senior vice president at AARP and co-author of *Caring for Your Parents*.

Keep in mind that technology is there to make your life easier, not to rule it. Identify certain times, like dinner, when your household must remain tech-free. During that hour no one can answer e-mails or texts or pick up the phone. Mention this tech-free hour to your manager and co-workers, and make sure your boss agrees. "Set up your rules and adhere to them," says Barbara Wankoff, director of workplace solutions for the professional services firm KPMG. "Be a model to your family."

Loretta Penn, president of the staffing company Spherion (nyse: SFN - news - people), takes it a step further: "You don't have to respond to every e-mail or voice mail as soon as it comes in. Just because someone else deems something a priority doesn't mean it's yours."

Wankoff also recommends having a support system of friends, family, neighbors and co-workers who are willing to jump in and help when something unexpected arises. Be willing to reciprocate for them too.

If this all seems a bit daunting, find a work-life balance mentor--someone who seems to have achieved this balance in their own life. Ask for tips and how he or she has managed to do it. Also, don't expect it all to happen overnight. Set small goals for changing your life. For instance, pick one thing you want to nix from your schedule and try to achieve that in the next month.

And remember, "None of these changes detract from your value," says Barbara Wankoff. "You've prioritized and are still getting the work done. The difference is you're not being pulled in different directions."