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My Work/Life Balance Lessons

By Robynn Selle

My work-life balance situation isn't typical for Turner employees, but it's one that works well for me, my family and the company.

I left a rewarding full-time position with the company almost five years ago when the first of my three children was born because I wanted to stay home to raise my family. At the time, I was able to negotiate a significantly reduced, home-based, schedule of just eight to 10 hours a week with the Seattle business unit. One cross-country move and two more children later, I'm now working 20 hours each week, still from home, for the Indianapolis business unit.

When I doubled my hours, my husband decreased his to 30, a strategy that allows us to continue to avoid using outside daycare most of the time. On those two days a week when I'm working in our home office, he is with the children. I'm the parent-in-charge the other three days of the week. It's a fairly unusual work arrangement, but we are fortunate to work for companies that are willing to explore flexible options with employees who have earned their trust.

Here are some things I've learned that help make this work for us:

- **Part-time work has consequences.** Making this change created a challenge to my intended career path. I know that I would be in a more responsible, better-paying position if I hadn't made this dramatic change. You have to be okay with that – and I am.
- **Know your priorities.** It was probably surprising to some that I didn't return to work full time after my first child was born because I was so career-oriented. The energy and focus that I gave to my full-time career is now redirected to my family because that's my priority.

The Work-Life Balance Question

Is Work-Life Balance important to you? If so, you are not alone. It is the number one work related objective for professionals in 2008. It is the number one or two job criteria new business school graduates are looking for. It is the top reason senior executives turn down a promotion. Wherever you are in your career, here is a question that will help you achieve it everyday. (Reading time 120 seconds).

Work-Life Balance remains a top issue for the majority of people and organizations. Our work shows that the biggest reason individuals don't have as positive a work-life balance as they would like is...they aren't paying attention to it. Not the kind of attention that they pay to other areas important to them, such as their career or their professional growth.

Most of us tend to assume if we keep our heads down, work hard at our jobs, try and do the right things by our friends and family we'll end up with a rich and positively balanced professional and personal life. That was true a few decades ago. It is not true for most of us today.

Technology has changed the way we live and work in breathtaking ways. The impact of this growing tsunami of technology must be managed in order to maximize the benefits to our lives, and minimize the negative consequences of drowning in a huge wave of great stuff.

This starts with the right mindset about work-life balance. Recognize some facts. You are making 100 times as many choices today as your parents did a generation ago. That pace of decision making is on track to continue to double every two years going forward. The flood of ways to contribute more at work and to your family and community will continue to rise at a similar rate. This growing wealth of actionable choices will never recede...so holding your breath for things to slow down is not a viable option.

The Daily Work-Life Balance Question

The point here is that if work-life balance is important to you, then you need to focus on it. Just plowing ahead and assuming things will manage some how to work their way into the right balance for you won't work. Work-life balance is about living life fully today. It is about achieving and enjoying the things that are important to you now and each day as your life progresses, not when most of your life is over. You do that by consciously including a work-life balance choice as part of your day.

As part of your routine today you will make choices about what and where you will eat, how you will dress, and what you can do at work to successfully do your job. Add to that daily list the question, "What else will I do today to improve my work-life balance?"

Ask yourself the question now. What will you do today to create a better balance before you go to bed tonight? Or what will you not do? Will you call a friend on your way to work that you haven't talked to in years? Will you call the baby sitter for Friday night so you can have a real one on one date with your significant other? Will you stop on the way home to window shop for 30 minutes just because? Will you commit to coming into work early in the morning to finish that report that's been bugging you for two weeks? Will you decide to not check emails after dinner tonight? Why not?

There are a hundred little things you can choose – things that you can do in 3 to 30 minutes – that can make every day richer and more positively balanced for you. But they won't even occur to you unless you make work-life balance a part of your daily routine.

Since you are probably not in the habit of doing that, here's a suggestion. Tape this note up in a couple of places – the dashboard of your car and inside the door of your home to start. You can also write it in your calendar every other day for a month? Just write, "What's my work-life balance action today?" Or "WLB today?"

This may seem mechanical but it works to instill a new behavior. And making conscious choices about a positive work-life balance as part of your daily routine is new behavior for most people – in fact it is a new requirement for the population of the entire technologically wired world.



- **Working from home requires discipline.** My Indianapolis colleagues watched me go to law school part time while working full time before I had children, so they knew I could succeed at balancing a part-time, work from home situation.

- **Use technology to your advantage.** I wouldn't be able to work from home without e-mail or remote access to resources like TKN. E-mail lets me communicate at any hour of the day, which is essential with my schedule. My husband and I also share an online Google calendar that includes all of our work, family, and personal commitments. If I need to attend a meeting at the business unit on a certain date, the first thing I do is check our shared calendar to make sure our family has no conflicts.

My part-time, off-site situation isn't a good option for many employees or their supervisors, but it's one that has worked well for me and my colleagues, and it's a situation I find very rewarding.

Robynn Selle is training coordinator for the Indianapolis business unit.

Quote from Charles Buxton

In life, as in chess, forethought wins.

*You will never find time for anything.
If you want time you must make it.*

Charles Buxton (1853-1934) was a British politician.

Improve Your Work-Life Balance Skills

One of the answers to your WLB question should be to find ways to improve your work-life balance skills. Just by making a daily decision on one work-life balance action every day you will be improving your abilities. In addition though, you should consciously work on and reinforce specific work-life balance skills regularly.

People skills top the list, as much of our technology tends to undermine them. Politeness, focus, active listening, engaging people on multiple levels are key interpersonal skills that are more essential today than ever. Learn, relearn and practice new and better ways of engaging the people in your life despite the technology interruptions and roadblocks. The result will be a more positive balance in and between all your relationships.

Where you manage others or function as part of a team you also need to recognize work-life balance as a critical professional issue...and a key to motivating each individual to maximum performance. Recognizing and connecting to both the work and personal motivations of each person is essential to creating the most productive and positively driven team. Stay aware of opportunities to understand others' work-life interests better. Find ways to learn, improve and practice your ability to relate to each individual's life motivators both on and off the job.

Our advances have given us a wealth of opportunities to live a better life. In your desire and striving to live that richer life, include your daily work-life question as part of your routine. Doing so makes work-life balance a positive part of your today, not just a remote possibility for some future tomorrow.

What will you do to improve your work-life balance...today?

Smiles,
Jim Bird
Publisher

E-Tip

To achieve a positive work-life balance you have to have it on your mind. To do that put these two questions in your calendar on the last day of every month. What things did I do to improve my work-life balance in the previous month? What things will I put on my schedule now to improve my work-life balance next month?