

**My Work/Life Balance Lessons
By Beverley Shull**

I love being a project manager but when I became pregnant, I knew I didn't want to be an absentee mother. I talked to my supervisor about my schedule options before my daughter was born 18 months ago; we agreed that I would continue to work full-time, but that I would work from home about one-quarter of the time.

There are disadvantages to this flexible arrangement. I realize that not being in the office full-time means I might miss opportunities to work on the best projects or be on the fast track for a promotion. But I feel that I need to be at home more often right now to be as good a mother as I am a project manager.

I've learned a lot about flexibility and realistic expectations for being a working parent since my daughter was born. Here are some of the things I've discovered:

- **Things don't always play out the way you expect them to.** When I was on maternity leave, I created a schedule outlining how I would spend my time in the office and at home – with little overlap between work and home life. I soon discovered that my plan wasn't realistic. I'm now more flexible with schedules than I thought I would need to be.
- **Get the most flexible daycare you can afford.** With a little advance notice, I can get in-home help whenever I need it.
- **Take your child's schedule into account when planning your own.** Nap time at my house is 1 p.m. If I arrive home just before then, my daughter will want to be with me, not in bed, even though she needs to rest. So in this case, I make sure I arrive after naptime, not before.
- **Consult with other family members on career decisions.** Before registering for the LEED accreditation course, I talked to my husband about what was involved because the time I spent learning and studying would have an impact on his schedule, too.
- **Don't expect perfection.** I can't always be the star performer at work because that wouldn't let me be the hands-on mom that I want to be. And I can't always have a home-cooked meal on the table every night. It has taken me awhile to realize that I sometimes have to lower my standards.
- **Remember to slow down enough to appreciate the little things.** People talk about how we sometimes "can't see the forest for the trees," but I've learned that those trees shouldn't be overlooked. Spending an occasional afternoon blowing bubbles in the backyard with my daughter is important, too.

Beverley Shull is a project manager in the Carolinas business unit.

Quotes

Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer's day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time

***A day of worry is more exhausting than a week of work.
Happiness is a thing to be practiced, like the violin.***

We often hear of people breaking down from overwork, but in nine out of ten they are really suffering from worry or anxiety.

*Lubbock, Sir John 1834–1913,
English banker, statesman, and naturalist.*

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The River Never Stops Flowing

Work is like a river. It never stops flowing. You are standing in the middle of it, and the water is rising. What to do?

We all experience the river every single day: the work, the demands and the unremitting flow. Think about it. When was the last time you went home from your job and had no work left to do? Everything was checked off? You had it all done? Ever?

If you're not mindful...

...that never ending river will wear you down, push you back...

...and you will become less effective as a leader and individual contributor.

Believe it or not, back in the 1950's and 1960's having a clean work slate at the end of the day was the routine for many employees. The unending expectations and demands that are common to all of us Monday through Sunday, fell primarily on management, often just upper-management.

Not today. For almost all of us, we are standing in an uninterrupted river of opportunities and expectations to do more, provide more, create more. And that's a good thing, because if the river stopped flowing for long, then we would be out of a job.

But too much of a good thing can overwhelm you. Water, often referred to as the source of life, is a good thing. But in an incessant form it can literally drown you. Work too is a good thing. It can and should provide a great sense of self-worth and joy in accomplishment. It certainly provides the economic wherewithal to support our achievements and enjoyments in the personal sides of life. But like the river, the constant pressure can wear you down, make you less effective and potentially push you over, to where you feel like you are drowning. But none of that is necessary.

Instead, what you need to do on a regular basis is to step up on an island.

Get out of the river by forgetting about work; relieving the pressure. The result is you can quickly regain your balance and strength. To do this you don't have to fly off to an exotic atoll. That takes a lot of time anyway. Create your own little islands in different ways daily and weekly, and you will find the river, instead of being a strain, is a very refreshing place to be.

Personally I make it point several times a week to have breakfast or lunch alone and read my favorite paper or occasionally a good book that has me engaged. During that time I'm out of the river, even if it's just for 20 to 30 minutes. When I grab a bit more time on an occasional late afternoon or weekend, I love to fish. It is an engaging enough activity to keep my mind from turning to work, but not so demanding to be stressful.

Recently a good friend explained to me the special island she steps up on every week. She and I worked together for years so I know her very strong work ethic. For some time she has been running her own business where her work not only constantly flows but often floods. As a young girl she was had been fascinated by her mother's skills to paint landscapes. She always longed to be able to bring art to life as well but never took the time to pursue it in any meaningful way.

About six months ago, while shopping she saw a painter doing a demonstration, was impressed with his work and made arrangements to join a 2-hour weekly class that he taught in the evenings. When I asked her about the experience, she said, "I love it. This is just my time that I look forward to every week." Her skills have progressed substantially and she is now planning on having a show of her work later this year. More importantly, she has created a bridge to an island that she goes to during her class, as well as some evenings and weekends when she paints at home. It takes away from the pressures of her work and home life. It relieves her and recharges her to do even better when she is back in the river. And it is an extra reward and motivation for being in the river. "I deserve this."

A word of caution. Your island should be a healthy one that invigorates you and makes you stronger and better. Often, because we don't give ourselves permission to consciously step out of the river and do something just for the joy of it, we unconsciously slip into "escapes" that involve too much food or too much alcohol. Now I love good food and wine, but like you, know that in excess they will de-charge you rather than recharge you.

Remember, the answer is not to wistfully hope the river would go down or stop flowing. Nor is it to jump into a different river. All the rivers flow. It is instead to understand and VALUE the need to step up on an island on a regular basis.

So give yourself conscious permission to take those island breaks that are healthy and invigorate you to get back in the flow stronger and better. My partner knits and gardens. A regular physical work out is a great escape and the endorphins are wonderful. Plant a rose or an orchid. Initiate that hobby or interest you have let slide or have never gotten around to pursuing. And when you do, don't think or worry about work. You and your work will be the better for it.

Enjoy the flow by enjoying the islands as well. You deserve it.

Smiles,

Jim Bird, Publisher

Editor's Thank You:

My good friend Dave Ferenchick explained this river analogy when we were much younger and managing many exciting and stressful business challenges together. It has provided me with an important positive and helpful perspective for many years. Thank you Dave.

Etip

To get a reprieve from the river of work, write "Island Escape" or a similar reminder in your calendar on at least four selected days over the next month. Write specific times and note a specific thing you will do to step out of the flow to relax and recharge your mind and body. You can go alone to the island, or you can be there with others: lunch by myself; family around the dinner table; your daughter joins you for a walk (no cell phones); your spouse joins you for a workout. Remember, no personal or professional business on the island.

To view the Four Life Quadrants click here: [Big Picture](#)

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