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My Work/Life Balance Lessons

By Kathy Sherry

Achieving work-life balance in the construction industry can be a challenge because job sites located far from home create long commutes. Moving closer to the site isn't necessarily the solution because we will eventually get reassigned to another site when the current project is finished.

I've managed this in the past by being able to work from the business unit or a home office two days and the job site the other three. When that option wasn't available, as it isn't for many, I have worked a "normal" work week – five days on the job site – with a long commute. All that changed, though, when I was assigned to a project in a small community that is so remote that my family had to relocate there to do the job. We now live five hours from Sacramento; we'll stay here for 2.5 years. The lifestyle change is amazing and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it.

My commute is now five minutes, not two hours. My daughter's preschool is two blocks from my office, so I can pick her on my way home for lunch with my younger child and my husband. While I admit that my work-life balance is better than it's ever been, I still struggle with the fact that my husband is the one home with the kids, not me. Here's what I've learned through the years that helps me accept this and get the balance I need, regardless of my commute:

Be open-minded about solutions. It is sometimes hard for me to be the one going off to work because I enjoy being with my children so much. I know, though, that it was the choice that made the most sense because of our employment situations. It is also important to be open-minded about potential career opportunities. My current

Tethered by Your Technology?

Is an immediate response to every phone call, text message or email mandated to show you are committed to your job, family member or friend? No it's not. By understanding that commitment is NOT synonymous with constant availability you can relieve counter-productive stress and improve your work-life balance. (Reading time 120 seconds).

Our advances in communication technology have created a common distortion of expectations that can reduce a positive work-life balance and increase negative stress. Commitment to your job in too many cases has become equated with being constantly available. But, just because you can be constantly accessible and responsive doesn't necessarily mean you should.

Being expected to respond - anytime and any place - can create serious stress that over time diminishes our results and our motivation. Doctors whose patients depend on them for immediate or emergency procedures long ago moved to alleviate the personal negatives and performance risks associated with the 24/7 required response status. They joined together in groups so that they could divide responsibilities and each take only one or two days a week as their "on call" expectation. They did this to help maintain a more positive work-life balance and to avoid the consequences of underperforming professionally and burning out.

There are similar risks and consequences of underperformance and burning out in any occupation when we equate professional commitment to 24/7 availability. Certainly we need to be available in an emergency. But every work-day evening or off time and every weekend should not include one.

Similarly every organization needs to quickly respond to its customers' urgent needs. But most after hour emails and phone calls are not of the emergency kind. It's probably just a convenient time for that person to knock out the correspondence. If it is an emergency the sender or caller will let you know.

You, your boss and team should communicate about these availability issues openly and clearly. Otherwise, you may be suffering from self-imposed work-life imbalance. You may think everyone expects you to be constantly tethered, but they don't.

In general we need to be kinder to each other in our expectations. If it's convenient for you to work on the weekend to send emails, but you don't expect a response until next week, let others know, "Response not needed until Monday." When you are sending an email after hours that you don't need an immediate answer to, put that in subject line: "Response tomorrow is fine."

Unfortunately when this is not done I've seen the cry or imply wolf syndrome strain work relationships with unnecessary negative consequences. We know in romantic relationships that a boyfriend or a girlfriend that keeps the reins too tight can run off the very person they want to depend on. Similarly, tethering those who work with you with an "everything's an emergency - respond now" expectation can have the opposite effect of the one desired.

A friend of mine experienced this recently. Shawn's a very talented and professionally committed technology wizard in his late 20's. Because of his commitment Shawn did not mind being generally available nights and weekends when needed. And he was called on frequently after his normal work hours. Over time though the perceived "expectation" grew to almost a 24 hour on-call status and it began to wear on him. It was also wearing on his serious commitment and relationship with his girlfriend.

On a recent Sunday Shawn took almost an hour to respond to a question his boss had posed to him by email. When Shawn did answer his boss came back, criticizing him for taking that long to get back to him. Shawn's response, within a week, was to tender his



assignment provides both good career and work-life balance potential. But it does not go without sacrifice.

Set a time to leave work and stick with it. We could all work very long hours so it helps to give yourself boundaries. I try to leave at a reasonable time every day so that I can enjoy my children before they go to bed. My colleagues understand this and adjust accordingly.

Schedule personal activities, too. Sometimes I feel like my whole life is scheduled, but being structured about how I use my time is the only way I can fit in everything I need or want to do.

Get your office and home calendars in sync. My husband helps manage our time by sending me meeting requests through Outlook. This is a big improvement over our earlier method, which involved him updating me on family activities as I was walking out the door and unable to write the information down.

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Quote from Guillaume Apollinaire

“Now and then it’s good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.”

*Guillaume Apollinaire, 1880-1918
French poet and critic.*

resignation, accepting a position that had been available to him elsewhere for some time, but he had not pursued.

Shawn committed himself to a new job and a new life style of hard work, being available for emergencies whenever, but not expected to be on call absolutely all the time. My observation of the result is that Shawn is working more hours than he did in his previous job, BUT, when he is off – he is really off. He can really relax and recharge knowing he is not expected to respond to work issues at a moments notice all the time. His commitment is even higher...because he can manage times NOT to be available.

Now, many of us thrive in high pressure, long hour environments and we knew that was an expectation of the job when we took it. But if you are experiencing levels of negative stress that are beginning to weigh down your motivation...just disconnect periodically. Tell your associates “I am off this weekend. You won’t hear from me unless it’s an emergency.”

And remember too that the best work-life balance for each of us is different and regularly changes. The best work-life balance for me today may be to send you a work related email at 9:30 at night. That doesn’t mean I’m out of balance. It also does not mean that I expect you to respond! The same is true on weekends. If it is an emergency and I need an immediately answer I will find you – I’ll call you.

Help yourself and others find a better balance. Don’t feel obligated to check and respond to every email at any hour. Don’t answer the phone or check incoming text during dinner. Don’t even take your communications device to the table. Periodically tell your work and personal associates you are going to have an unplugged weekend. And certainly, take unplugged vacation days.

In doing so you are able to fully focus on getting the most out of the moments you are in now, whether it’s dinner, an evening or an entire day. You will not be constantly looking down at your pda as if to say to those you are with, “Any minute now I’ll find someone more important to talk to than you.” Such focused time can seem magical, multiplying the value of the moments for you and everyone you share them with.

So, to improve your work-life balance, make sure you periodically disconnect from your technology to enjoy, decompress, renew and re-energize yourself. Un-tether yourself.

Jim Bird
Publisher

E-Tip: Plan Your Unplugged Time

Tell your co-workers in advance you plan an unplugged weekend or vacation. If they have any time sensitive items for you to complete ask them to get them to you early in the week before hand. If questions may need to be answered while you are unplugged ask someone to cover for you. Brief them and if necessary forward them your business emails or calls. Then unplug and relax.