

Striking a Balance

That seemingly elusive ideal of work/life balance may not be as difficult to obtain once we recognize that, like everything else, balance is not a static place but a dynamic state that changes from day to day.

By Jill S. Tietjen, P.E., F.SWE and Mary D. Petryszyn, F.SWE

Sometimes it seems like an impossible dream – striking the right work/life balance. Many of us struggle to balance the conflicting demands of our families, our careers, and our service to the community. Between the demands of travel, our spouses/partners, our children, our parents, and our interests, there just never seems to be enough time in the day. The authors face these concerns constantly. We urge you to remember that it is *your* balance – not anyone else’s – and that you will need to set your priorities and establish your boundaries in order to reach the mental and physical stability that results from achieving balance in your life.

It’s your life, your balance

As you work to strike a balance in your life, remember it is *your life* – what is right for you isn’t going to be what is right for anyone else. After all, it is your job, your family, your interests, and your energy level and capabilities. And, it is also the right balance *for this point in your life*. As many people have said, change is the only constant. Children will be born and grow up. Your parents will age. You or your spouse/partner will change jobs and possibly move to a different house or community. So the only balance anyone can work on is what is right at this point in time in life.

Mary is often asked how she handles traveling extensively with her job. The uncomplicated answer is that she has worked with her family to agree on this “career versus time at home” trade-off at this time in her life (and theirs!). Each person’s individual balance is affected, and each has to pitch in differently.

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Keep in mind that priorities change. This week, traveling for the job takes precedence in your life. Next week, ensuring that you are able to attend your daughter’s math day with the Girl Scouts might be your most important

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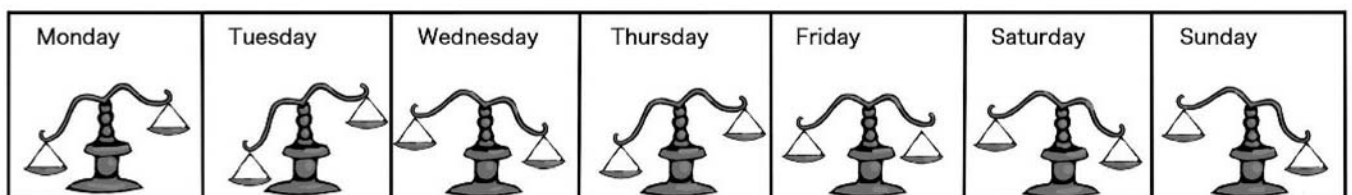
Their agreement and support help to harmonize the situation and create a sustainable balance for each one.

Setting priorities

Just like during any day at the office, striking a balance in your life will involve setting priorities. What are the things that are most important to you – and how will you find the time to tend to them? One of Jill’s colleagues recently asked her how she found time to write a book. Jill’s answer was that you find time to do the things in your life that are important to you. Interestingly, her col-

league responded that he knew she was going to say that.

priority. Just like the balance itself, you will always be reordering the priorities depending on the issues of the day. We recognize that all of this is easier said than done. Setting priorities means pushing some of the things you’d like to do to the bottom of your list or even off of your list. Life, like business, is often about collaboration and compromise. Creating balance may require that you engage your spouse/partner or your co-workers. You will need to successfully negotiate with yourself and others – what stays on your plate, what goes off your plate, or what moves to



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someone else's plate. By taking the steps to create your priorities, and revisiting them regularly, you can establish and maintain balance.

Establishing boundaries

You will need to determine what activities you want to take part in — this is key to establishing boundaries. You will want to learn how to say “no.” For example, if you love animals, it might be important to you to volunteer at the local humane society. But, maybe you are not into gardening — so opportunities that arise for you to work in your neighborhood's communal garden aren't of interest to you. Understanding where your interests are and what you enjoy — and don't enjoy — are key to establishing boundaries.

Perhaps one way to improve your ability to say “no” is to consider it as a way to

create the opportunity to say “yes” to the things you have prioritized as most important. Feel free to suggest a friend or family member whom you know whose interests may align better with an activity or volunteer position. In this way, you not only maintain your boundaries, but you may also create a productive connection for someone else in the process.

A recent experience we both had was an interesting exercise in boundaries. We were on vacation — in a locale where there was no Internet access and no phone service. Could we really stand being unplugged for that long? Not only did we survive, but it was a wonderful break — and a true vacation. Now, we know that there are additional boundaries that we can establish. It certainly helped our mental and physical states to really unplug and take a break from the normal pace of our lives.

Striking a balance in your life requires constant attention. There is not a “set and forget” control button here. As change is constant, so is the need to readjust your balance. Remember, it is your balance for this point in time in your life. If you set priorities and establish boundaries, you can attain the mental and physical stability that comes from having balance. ■

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