

How to Achieve a Healthy Work / Life Balance (without risking one's professional integrity or success)

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Introduction

Work / Life Balance is a popular concept in today's Britain, gaining a lot of exposure due to nationally accepted good practice advice and employment laws encouraging employers to reduce their staff's working week. Is this an issue only for staff in employment or does it

apply to self employed professionals as well? Life Coach Charlotta Hughes' article addresses the issues surrounding Work / Life Balance including a challenge of the name itself, how the need for a balanced life is imperative to entrepreneurs, why it can be easy to ignore the signs of an "imbalanced life" and what the negative effects of doing so can be.

To start with let's have a look at the "Work / Life Balance" terminology. The problem with this is the fact that the concept appears to be separating work from life. If this notion were true it would imply that we are not living when we are at work. For self employed people this concept would appear particularly sad.

Nonetheless, there is something important to be said about having a good balance in one's life and sometimes this can be especially important for self employed professionals as we are often at risk of losing sight of that balance. Simply stated, we do not get the monthly pay check if we do not put the effort in. So how do we know where to draw the line? When have we put in just the right amount of effort whilst striking that balance?

Recent research carried out by Lloyds TSB Business Insurance shows that more than a fifth of small business owners say they are too busy to take time off. Almost 60% say they take less than ten days a year, less than 15% said they take more than five days, while just 22%

take six to 10 days and just one in five takes 20 or more days a year.

The next question is whether the holidays that are taken provide the well earned rest that helps to restore the balance. The same research found that more than 60% take a mobile phone with them, while almost 20% take a laptop so that they can check their work emails, more than 10% take part in conference calls, and almost 20% cut their holiday short to deal with a work issue.

This would imply a real need for those who are self-employed to take a look at whether their lives are in balance or not.

One important thing to be aware of is the tendency for us, as individuals to identify ourselves with our vocations. In a sense our work becomes part of who we are, not merely what we do. This is not necessarily a problem in itself but can become one if we use work to overcompensate for other things missing in our lives. Some people feel that because they have high success in their profession and not in their personal life they prefer to continue concentrating on work rather than confronting personal issues. This can in turn become a downward spiral as when we ignore the things that are not going well they tend to multiply.

Whilst having pride in one's profession can certainly be a positive and fulfilling emotion which ensures that we are authentic, successful individuals with a lot of professional integrity, it can have negative consequences if we utilise this as an excuse to avoid less comfortable, yet important issues elsewhere in our lives. Pushing the boundaries of our comfort zones can be daunting and what better excuse could one have to avoid them than building and sustaining a successful private practice? The issue for many people is the fact that they are not consciously aware that they are avoiding things nor that the very things they are avoiding are really important to them deep down. At some level, this

can result in a feeling of emptiness and a reduced meaning to life. Clearly not emotions we strive to experience and their presence may also eventually impact on our effectiveness within our profession.

The first milestone towards gaining a good balance in one's life is self-awareness. If we are not aware of something happening we are unable to address it. Self-awareness enables us to investigate how we spend our time which allows us to change things if they are not working in the best possible way for us. The awareness can allow us to explore what is draining us, how to set boundaries and how to address things we may have been avoiding and ultimately take control of our lives.

Gaining the awareness and then acting upon it to address the balance in our lives can often be a challenge. Here are some tips to get you going:

1. Create a weekly planner. Include certain commitments such as only accepting appointments at certain times, only working late one or two evenings, spend a certain amount of time with important people in your life, spend time with yourself in the activities you enjoy, i.e. visits to the gym, shopping or reading etc. Really make the commitment to yourself to follow your plan.
2. Create an annual planner. Ensure that you have a certain number of days holiday in a year. To do this, you may have to include relevant non-earning time in your business plan. Treat the cost of the holiday as a necessary expense. Budgeting for it will make it easier to take the break.
3. Delegate. As self employed individuals we often find ourselves doing everything ourselves, either because we do not trust others to do things as well or we do not wish to spend the money on outsourcing. Certainly the latter can be self deceptive as the time we would free up by outsourcing certain tasks could be used in different, more effective ways such as seeing clients, writing articles, undertaking research or whatever we would like to do to grow our practice and develop ourselves. Is there some false economy within your practice? Perhaps look into the possibility of using a virtual PA, an accountant or other consultant.
4. Scrutinise your time management skills. If they need brushing up be honest with yourself and make the investment to optimise your time.
5. Focus on the positive. Getting caught up in negative emotions causes stress, is time consuming and energy draining.

6. Trust and value yourself. You know you are a good professional and the fact that you need time to yourself and your loved ones does not detract from that. Your integrity is more intact if you value yourself and your own well being as much as that of your clients.

7. Break the long hour culture. We are all aware of its existence and whilst it may appear that self employed individuals should be at less risk of falling into its trap, particularly if they work alone, in reality we tend to judge ourselves against the norm and feel guilty or bad if we do not fall in line with it.

8. Get a good quality life coach. An objective partner who, without their own agenda, is totally focused on not only supporting and motivating you but also on holding you accountable and ensuring that you follow through with the promises you make to yourself, your practice and your life.

At the core of effective Work / Life balance are two key everyday concepts, namely, achievement and enjoyment. In this context enjoyment is not *just* about "ha-ha" happiness but also pride, satisfaction, love etc. You may agree that some of these values can also be true for achievement but the trick is to have both in order to attain happiness. Many "successful" people are not happy, or not nearly as happy as they should be because they are living a one-sided life. Achievement and enjoyment are in a sense like two sides of a coin, one cannot exist without the other.

References

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development website: Information and downloads on work life balance including fact sheets. <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/health/worklifebalance>

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