

The Blurred Line Between Work and Home

By Greg Varhaug

Many people look back with nostalgic longing to the 1950s, when American families were just beginning to realize the benefits of postwar prosperity. Folks imagine a magical time of tranquil contentment. They remember it as a time, maybe the last time, when most of us had “balance” in our lives.

Of course, the reality wasn’t that simple. Back then, most families had just one breadwinner; today, neither parent wants to forgo a career to raise a family. People have been talking about the concept of work-life balance for decades. But in just the past few years, societal changes have opened up new categories of work-life issues. These changes are forcing people to reexamine their own work-life equations.



To decide what your own work-life balance looks like, you must first answer a range of questions for yourself: What do I want from life? What do I want more of, or less of? What do I have to have now, and what can I put off until later? The topic of work-life balance doesn’t fall into any one professional category. But it’s a topic that often finds its way into areas like counseling and personal coaching. Dawn Nelson, LCSW, CPC, is a licensed counselor and hypnotherapist. She and her business partner, Sherry Shrallow, LCSW, CPC, have both seen firsthand how everyday work-life issues have evolved over the years. So how are things different today from 20 or 30 years ago?

The Way We Were

Dawn points out that people used to have more time at the end of their workday—time that used to be spent with family, on personal relationships, on civic participation, or on simple

TIPS TO SAVE TIME AND TROUBLE

Effective planning is one key to taking back time for our lives that's otherwise wasted. Two big time-killers are meals and travel. Meal planning is essential if you intend to save time, stay healthy, and not spend a fortune doing it. For many people, it's half the battle won. To help you stay focused on a healthy diet, print copies of your weekly grocery list and check the things you need, instead of writing a separate list for each grocery trip. An "approved grocery items" list is especially helpful if you are counting calories, carbs, or fat grams. Cut down on the number of times you cook each week. Make extra portions on the days when you do cook, for quick reheating later. Less cooking means less cleanup time. This is where kitchen gadgets like juicers and high-powered blenders, as well as cooking devices like crock pots and electric smokers, can make a real difference in how well you eat and live.

Plan your daily driving as efficiently as you can, to save time and reduce trips. Everybody should have roadside assistance—ask your insurer about programs and discounts. Packing a few extra items in your vehicle can make life easier away from home. Of course, you should always carry a big flashlight, an umbrella, a plastic rain poncho, bottled water, and pain relievers. Small hand weights or other exercise gadgets can help you fashion an impromptu workout away from home. To reduce stress in traffic, try listening to music or books on CD instead of news and talk radio.

If you can afford it, look for ways to buy back some of your time. Many people are having groceries delivered, even though it costs more. Hire someone to mow the grass or weed the flowerbeds. Hire the neighbor's kid to wash your car. Shopping online is usually more efficient than shopping in person, so shop online where you can. True, you often pay shipping costs, but for now, there's no sales tax.

Want to free up a lot of time and save money doing it? Try getting rid of your cable TV for a couple of months. (You can still keep the web.) Give The History Channel time to produce something you haven't already seen. Try reading a few real "dead-tree" books and magazines instead. Your cable provider is likely to offer you a sweet deal when you decide to return.

Eliminating clutter in your home can also help. A cluttered environment makes everything you try to do a little more challenging. Some of the hardest things to get rid of are the odds and ends you keep for sentimental reasons. But you can only fill so many memorabilia boxes before they start getting in the way. If you want to remember something, take a picture, then throw it out.

If you have a lot of unfinished projects, consider using a work-flow system, like David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, which relies on a series of flowcharts to help you prioritize your projects. It can even help you organize your possessions. (GTD flowcharts are posted online.)

Of course, none of these things automatically improves the overall quality of your life. You have to be mindful of the time you save and purposefully redirect that time to the goals you've set for yourself. Otherwise, it's easy to turn around and waste the time you've gone to such trouble to save.

things like talking with neighbors. Time for personal interactions has diminished because people are working significantly longer hours than they were two or three decades ago.

Dawn also says that recreation is "kind of a lost concept today." We used to hear the word "recreation" quite a lot, but the word that has nearly disappeared from our everyday lexicon, except as an adjective followed by the word "vehicle." Recreation has always been associated with exercise and the great outdoors. These days, Dawn says, we also need to think of recreation as slowing down our lives long enough to allow for thought and quiet contemplation. Dawn describes it as taking the time to "be a human *being*, rather than a human *doing*."

It's Your Phones, People!

Asked what the biggest, most obvious change of the past ten years has been, Dawn and Sherry both point to our fixation with electronics. Dawn observes, "We didn't have computers to the degree that we do now." Sherry adds, "We didn't have smart phones. We didn't have Twitter and Facebook." We now have a generation that has grown up with smart devices. All of this has led to a new cultural phenomenon. "Now, people are accessible 24 hours a day—and more people are falling into the temptation to stay connected to people all day and all night."

The obsession with smart devices, especially among young people, is unhealthy for several reasons. People currently in their twenties have never experienced life as an adult without computerized devices. Sherry refers to a TV news segment about a group of twenty-somethings, separated from their phones and computers for a few days, who experienced strong anxiety and symptoms of withdrawal, including feeling physically sick. They worried that by being "disconnected" they were missing something. Sherry observes, "What they were really missing was their own lives. And that's the sad part."

Dawn reminds us, "Electronic devices are tools. And every one of them has an 'off' button. One of the things that I do for myself is to take



an electronic holiday, meaning there are some days, usually weekends, where I turn off all of the electronics. I let people know that Saturday and Sunday I won't be returning texts or calls, e-mails, or anything else. I'll tell people up front, 'If you haven't heard from me in 24 or 48 hours, don't worry about it.' We get to choose how we use tools in life. And this comes back to conscious awareness—to asking, 'What do I want to script for myself?'"

Dawn describes how the same electronics that bridge us together can create barriers. "Electronics can be a huge challenge to being present and in relationships. When I say 'being present,' everybody's been with someone who is answering their cell phone or texting while you're trying to talk with them. When we're on the phone, we're not 'being present' to the other people we are with. We've become immune to the fact that everybody's walking around with some electronic device on them, and that people are using their devices while we're interacting with them."

Assessing Your Personal Situation

If you're serious about achieving a better work-life balance, start with the same type of self-assessment you would make to better manage your time or your money. Put pencil to paper and take a look at your weekly activities, including your spending. Identify the people, places, and things that stress you out. Only then can you formulate a plan to balance your life. And the experts do agree that "planning" is the key word. A balanced life almost never happens by accident.

Sherry describes an exercise she used recently with a group of executive women. "I had them draw a circle. And I said, 'Tell me about your life, and how you spend your time within the circle. How much time do you spend for yourself? How much time with family? How much time on work?' It was such an eye-opening exercise for them. Some of them were very dissatisfied with their pie charts once they saw them. It was a motivator to take a look and ask, 'What do I

need to do differently?' As soon as you can identify what you want to make better in your life, you're on your way to achieving it."

The key for many of these women was setting boundaries on the people around them. Sherry describes the same women's reactions a month later:

"They couldn't believe how good it felt to just set up some real, clear boundaries for themselves, boundaries that they actually stuck to. And it didn't hurt their productivity. It didn't hurt the people that they were responsible for. In fact, they actually felt that they were more productive."

HOUSTON'S SHELTERING ARMS SENIOR SERVICES

Sheltering Arms is a Houston-based organization that provides help to those caring for the elderly.

One of their primary functions is to provide the support necessary for their elderly clients to continue living in their homes. Much of their work revolves around providing assistance to dementia patients and their families. They operate a day center especially designed for elderly dementia patients. They offer advice and counseling for caregivers, as well as programs that allow primary caregivers, who often neglect their own needs, to take time for themselves. Their home-care services include light housekeeping, preparing meals, and reminding patients to take their medications. Founded in 1893 by Houston's Christ Church Cathedral, Sheltering Arms is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Their fees follow a sliding scale, depending on the service.

Go to www.shelteringarms.org for more information.



Balance at Work

Look for opportunities your company may offer that you're not aware of, or that you haven't taken advantage of. (It's a fact that many people don't use all of their annual vacation days.) Large companies have gradually gotten on board with accommodating some of the needs of busy, two-income families. For instance, more companies now offer short leaves for "small necessities." Dawn states, "Work-life balance is more than a slogan. Corporations have caught on to this. They see that their employees are more productive and have a greater degree of happiness and health when they have some work-life balance. I think they see the research and the literature. They see that their employees are less effective when they are multitasking. They know that we're not effective when we are hyper-challenged—not for any length of time, anyway."

Does a balanced life always "feel" balanced? Not necessarily. Dawn explains, "We all have things that stress us every day. None of us can escape that. And that's where you have to train yourself not to get caught up in the event. You have to stay centered and understand what's really important, so that everyday events don't take on a life of their own, and turn into something much bigger." Real balance is sometimes only visible when you're looking back.

Sometimes we accept a degree of imbalance to achieve something we really want. Before you take on an added challenge, like a part-time job or college, you've got to question the value of "balance" in your life today, relative to your long-term life goals. In the end, the rewards of accepting a temporary imbalance can outweigh the inconveniences you endure in the short term.

Place Yourself First

The concept of "self-care" is central to attaining a personal sense of balance. You can't take care of anyone else if you don't take care of yourself first. You can't mount a rescue, for example, if the rescuer is exhausted.

Dawn explains, "Self-care includes getting physical activity, exercise, good nutrition, proper hydration, adequate sleep, and rest. It includes not getting derailed by stressors in life, and learning how to self-regulate our emotions. But it's also about recreation and having fun, laughing, and connectedness to other people."

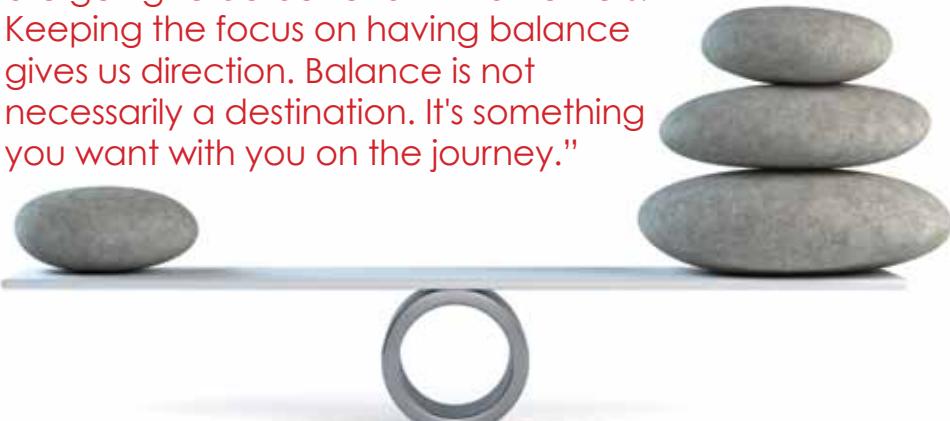
The "self-care" concept is extremely important to medical caregivers.

Studies have shown that a high percentage of caregivers to the elderly or terminally ill actually die before the people they're caring for. This phenomenon is attributed almost entirely to the added stress of caring for someone needing round-the-clock supervision.

Sherry relates a personal example. "I have a stepfather with Alzheimer's, and my mom is the caregiver. We talk about this all the time. I say, 'Mom, you've got to take care of yourself first,' because she says, 'I'm going to die before he does. It's so stressful.' She makes it a point to find time to go out. She has support from other people who can be with him, so she can get out and have a bit of time for herself to regroup."

But you don't need an illness in the family to find that your life is completely unbalanced. Everyday life can be enough of an uphill climb. Many women who started work in years past to "get ahead" now have to

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work just to keep up. The fact that a work-life balance is simply not possible for many people has led some to call the very concept a "myth," while others call the two-income family structure a "trap."

No matter your personal situation, most people can make real improvements to their lives by making more conscious decisions and living more mindfully, leaving less to chance and to habit driven by inertia. (The older we get, the more we're governed by habit.) Dawn notes, "It's about bringing into our conscious awareness that our behaviors equate to making choices for ourselves."

Dawn sums it up this way: "Working toward balance is an ongoing process. I don't know that we ever reach the destination. Some days we are going to do better at it than others. Keeping the focus on having balance gives us direction. Balance is not necessarily a destination. It's something you want with you on the journey." Sherry adds, "It takes practice to get good at it." **N**

Greg Varhaug has written software instruction manuals and procedural manuals for many Houston companies. He operates HoustonGuitar.com, a commercial music-instruction website.