

BALANCING

ACT

By Desiree R. Lindbom-Cho



When I was a full-time teacher, the work-life balance of the business employee seemed enviable. I would rise at 5:30 a.m. while friends with MBAs complained about rolling out of bed at 7:30. I would have working

lunches to call parents, grade papers, or stand on duty to ensure student safety at recess while friends working the nine to five shift would tell me about the power lunches they ate with three gourmet courses. I would rush home to help my son with homework, run him to soccer practice, and scrounge up dinner while my friends working regular day jobs did the same but without the extra tasks of lesson planning, assessment writing, and extra grading looming over their heads.

Also, I figured no one in the business world could possibly know the pressure I felt to serve the students and families I worked with daily to the very best of my ability. After all, weren't my friends employed in the corporate world just stuck to a desk each day? Their computer screen probably didn't make them feel guilty if they had to take a sick day or some personal leave, right?

Now that I am self-employed, running an educational consulting business and freelance writing and editing, I know that allocating one's time to work versus home is a balancing act that everyone faces. The nation concurs: numerous research studies and media outlets have been starting conversations about the work-life balance. No matter what field a person is in, most agree that finding ways to not only balance precariously at the edge of scheduling insanity but to soar through to a healthy lifestyle often seems like an impossibility.

Leaning In: Motherhood, Guilt, and Privilege

I recently talked with a friend about the *New York Times* bestseller, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. "She just makes me sick!" my friend raged. "She missed an opportunity to really show what it's like for mothers facing the work-life balance!" I agree with my friend that Sandberg comes from an enviable place of privilege that many other working mothers may not: 1) she is married with a spouse who supports her career aspirations; 2) she is in a position of power at her company and can institute policy change; and 3) she has the means to obtain high quality childcare.

I also see Sandberg's point: if women are truly going to gain equality in the workforce, we must be unafraid to speak up, "lean in," and participate fully in our careers. This is easier said than done when studies show that women experience guilt when choosing work over activities with their children and vice versa. Luckily, society seems attuned to the issue of the work-life balance. From television producer Shonda Rhimes to General Motors CEO Mary Barra, women are regularly asked about how they manage the work-life balance.

The very asking, however, can be a double-edged sword, offending these prominent business women, who often note that their male counterparts are not asked the same question. Those same male leaders they point to express their frustration over the work-life balance and can likewise become affronted when they are not asked about how they allocate time and attention to work and personal matters.



Fathers Feel Guilty Too

“When is the field trip? Where is it? Oh, no, I didn’t sign up, and I wanted to go, but I didn’t know my schedule. Is it crazy if I ask the teacher if I can meet them there?” my husband’s usually calm voice crept up a decibel or two. My spouse isn’t the only man who faces the work-life balance dilemma. A recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that approximately half of both mothers and fathers feel that maintaining the work-family balance is a difficult act. Additionally, about 50 percent of fathers feel that they do not spend enough time with their children—mothers reported at about 68 percent.

Perhaps even more telling is that the media is taking notice. Recent articles in *Time*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and the *Wall Street Journal* show that society is not ignorant of fathers and their desire to strike the work-life balance. Solutions include taking appointed days of the week off to forgoing the old taboo of not combining business with pleasure. Some CEO fathers were excited to take their children on business trips that became family vacations when their presence wasn’t required elsewhere.

All the Single Ladies—And Men

According to the most recently available U.S. Census Bureau statistics, the amount of single-parent families is



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on the rise with 27 percent of families headed by a mother only and 5 percent of families headed by only a father. These numbers are important, as the issue of work-life balance is compounded for single parents who are the sole providers for their children. They may have little to no support systems in place for child-care, and their household income falls below the poverty line more often than married or two-parent households.

Even First Lady Michelle Obama has noted that one income is not enough to raise a family: “It’s even harder for single parents, and there

are millions of them all across this country who are trying to build a life for themselves and their children, and they find in an economy that’s tough that they’re not just holding down one but they need a couple of jobs just to make ends meet.”

The problem of work-life balance is just as difficult for single people without children. “Grandpa’s not doing so well, and he isn’t going to make it too much longer, but I don’t know if I can go to his funeral,” a close friend confided in one, long breath. She works for a small company and feels that she gets dirty looks every time she has to leave early, even though she recently had regularly-scheduled physical therapy appointments and is efficient and timely with on-the-job tasks.

Another friend mentioned not wanting to take time off from a private school where he teaches. “Well, we have to sub for one another, and even though I know I have the legal right to the personal time, I feel guilty taking it. I eat up another teacher’s planning period, and it’s not like I have my own children to attend to [the way other teachers do].”

Taking Time Off

In fact, only 51 percent of paid vacation time and paid time off is used by employees, according to a

Harris Interactive survey. Why does this happen? There are a number of reasons, but mainly, an employee might worry about falling behind, losing his/her job, not having an edge for a promotion, and/or wanting to outperform colleagues. These reasons are not mutually exclusive, either. For instance, when an employee falls behind, he/she may individually have difficulties catching up in the short term, but falling behind due to absence may also mean that an employee could be fired for poor performance in the long run.

In addition to physical illness, the World Health Organization (WHO) touts the importance of people's mental health. Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan of WHO notes, "Good mental health enables people to realize their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities." In fact, WHO has even declared that October 10th should annually be celebrated as "World Mental Health Day" in an effort to raise awareness over the importance of mental health issues. Topics run the gamut from simply taking a mental health day to serious mental diseases such as how to live a healthy life with schizophrenia.

Businesses Who Support the Balancing Act

What, then, can business do to support their employees? Because work-life balance is a national issue, businesses are doing what they can to help their employees. Mike McLaughlin, founder and president of Houston-based Core Benefit Services, a firm specializing in employee benefits, says that employers are seeking to provide benefits that promote the work-life balance. In fact, a range of options is available, and McLaughlin notes, "Everything from an on-site medical clinic to just a phone-based Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is in the market place." McLaughlin himself tries to promote the work-life balance in his own business, offering a wellness program with the health insurance plan as well as an EAP.

In fact, Glassdoor, a self-proclaimed "career community that is changing the way people find jobs and companies recruit top talent," is touting the top businesses for striking the work-life balance. For instance, Shell, a

Texas-based business, ranked 10th in Glassdoor's list of Top 25 Companies for Work-Life Balance. Employees noted that Shell offered good vacation plans, opportunities for international assignments and the ability to travel, and excellent benefits packages that were available upon hiring without a grace period. Austin-based National Instruments rated 2nd on Glassdoor's list and

is noted for providing its employees with flexible work time and options to work from home.

While not specified in the reviews at Glassdoor, flexible work time manifests in a variety of ways: job shares, leaves of absence after major life events or for education and job training, and reducing hours for those phasing into retirement are just some of the ways

noted in a 2010 report by the Council of Economic Advisers to the Executive Office of the President, *Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility*.

The *Work-Life Balance* report also notes that other forms of workplace flexibility exist. Specifically, management can adopt an evaluation procedure based on a “results-only work environment” (ROWE). Using such a tool promotes managers to allow workers to choose when and where they work as long as they are productive. Of course, this model does not work for certain fields such as education, retail, manufacturing, or medicine, where face-to-face interaction is not only desired but necessary to accomplishing the highest level of productivity.

Jared Polak, author of *Entrebalance: Principles to Balance Your Life and Pursue an Entrepreneurial Mindset* and founder/owner of Houston-based Entre Results, a coaching business concerned with the work-life balance, agrees. He says, “Employers should challenge the employees and hold them accountable for efficiency throughout the day, so they don’t have to work as much from home during the weekend or evenings.”

Challenges to Employers

Although employers do try to invest in packages to support their employees, promotion of the work-life balance is not without difficulties. McLaughlin notes that just getting employee buy-in is an issue: “I believe the number one challenge is getting employee participation in the program.” A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* concurs, quoting Rich Paul, a senior vice president at Value Options, a behavioral healthcare company: “Despite [EAP’s] widespread availability, just 4 percent to 6 percent of people with access to the programs use them...because employees don’t know what the programs offer and those who do often associate stigma with their use.”

McLaughlin warns, “Keeping the program fresh and engaging is another challenge.” EAP, however, offers a wide range of services, and support is usually available 24 hours a day, every day of the year. While the primary focus is to provide mental health counseling, other resources are available such



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as child-care referrals, elder care assistance, and financial counseling. In fact, the *Work-Life Balance* report found that providing such benefits reduced absenteeism, lowered turnover, improved workers’ health, and increased worker productivity.

However, quantifying just how beneficial programs that support the work-life balance are is a difficult task. Costs and benefits may vary widely across industries, and a lack of data exists. McLaughlin notes that providing benefits to employees can have a huge impact on the bottom line for small businesses. The simple cost of benefits packages alone is also complicated by government regulations. McLaughlin points out deterrents: “Laws such as ERISA, HIPAA, the ADA as well as applicable state laws all have requirements which may adversely impact the agency for being generous.”

Achieving the Balancing Act

How, then, can individuals achieve the work-life balance? Brian Roberts, owner and computer programmer for Houston-based Software Alternatives, found a way to become self-employed

over 20 years ago when he became interested in PCs in the late 1980s. He began to work on his own in the evenings, maintaining his regular day job. When he had enough saved, he began his own company, and working and waking at any hour is one of the biggest benefits he has: “I have the flexibility to get up in the morning and say, ‘You know, I’m going to take the day off. I’m going to take a mental health day.’”

Roberts also said that taking time to synchronize calendars with his wife, a nurse who works three 12-hour shifts per week, on a regular basis has contributed to his work-life balance over the years. He notes that because they both work, “It’s a 50-50 proposition.” They have shared everything from cooking and clean up duties to who helps their child with homework for a particular subject. In turn, he has been able to do more with his free time such as refereeing local high school soccer games.

Polak gives similar advice for how to start small with changing an unbalanced work-life situation. People can take one day off per week and master their calendars. He recommends that individuals learn to say “no” without feeling guilty and falling into the trap of trying to please everyone all the time. Finally, he says to take 5 to 15 minutes per day to just be still, pray, or meditate.

On his website, Polak notes that he has invested in doing what he loves by taking time to work with the poor in Honduras. When I asked Polak what individuals can do if they are unable to financially participate in something as drastic as an intercontinental trip, Polak said, “I would first challenge the mindset of that question. How can they do something as life-changing as serving the poor in Honduras for a week? That is what coaching is all about. It challenges your/our limiting beliefs and fears and then facilitates action and accountability to make those things happen.” **N**

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