

Finding right balance - never quite that simple

You first need to know what you want before negotiating with either family or the people at work, writes Charlie Lang.

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Hong Kong is known for its long working hours. A recent survey by British recruitment consultant Robert Walters showed that Hong Kong had the longest working hours in the world, with 43 per cent of those polled saying they worked 50 to 55 hours a week, or more.

Well, I belong to those who typically work more than 55 hours a week. Being an executive coach who is supposed to have his life and particularly his work-life balance in order, I often reflect on the question: "Am I out of balance?"

Late one Friday afternoon, a few weeks ago - I was just about to finish a week of very late nights of work - I voiced this question to one of my associates. The answer he returned was: "I feel you are very rarely out of balance."

This statement made me wonder: is there really a clear correlation between the hours one works in a week and what we call work-life balance? Do we need to balance our working hours with sufficient non-working hours? If that were true, then how can I be "in balance" even if I sometimes work 70 hours a week?

A possible conclusion could be that most people need to balance their working hours with non-working hours because they don't sufficiently enjoy their working hours. Consequently, assuming that they enjoy their time outside work, and if they spend too much time at work, they tend to be "out of balance".

For some people the opposite seems to be the case: they do not enjoy their time outside work and spend much more of their time at work. If you ask them to work less, you actually may not do any good to them and "push" them out of balance. Obviously, in such cases, there might well be something wrong with their personal life.

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This sounds normal to us, but actually is not the same also true if we do not sufficiently enjoy our time at work? Is there not also something wrong if we do not really enjoy that time? Would it not be better to balance both aspects - time at work and time outside work, and make sure that we enjoy our time at work and our time outside work?

I found that I am still "in balance" even after a 70 hour working week, provided that it is my choice to work such long hours, I truly enjoy this time, and I do not work so much just because I do not enjoy being outside work.

Apparently, if I truly enjoy both time at work and time outside work, then it does not matter how much time I spend in either area of my life, I will not get out of balance. Not everyone agrees. Consider the following comment:

Recently, I have taken up a responsibility which requires more managing and hiring than in my last job. In addition, I have to make sure that all the work is done on time, on budget, and without errors. I love my job. It is great and really interesting - but there are only that many hours in a day people can work without getting sick, burned out or having a nervous breakdown. They need rest, fun and distraction. I am at the point of losing my health over this and am extremely worried. So, I have to disagree. You have to have a basic balance in life with that much work and that much rest, the balance may not be the same for everyone but it has to exist.

Anastasia

Well, certainly it must be added that there should be sufficient time left for proper rest, exercise and healthy intake of food. These are basic necessities or "hygiene factors" that cannot be denied. Also, some distraction from work is certainly necessary from time to time to be able to perform at a high level.

My point is rather: is it generally unhealthy to work 60 or 70 hours a week? Does this qualify one to be labeled a workaholic? My take is that if you truly enjoy these long working hours, you might instead be a "workafrolic".

There is however another aspect that might make this concept a bit tricky, and that is the expectations of people around us, particularly our spouse and children on the personal side and our boss or customers on the professional side. Even if we enjoy spending time for both work and personal life, we might experience contradicting expectations. Consider this comment from Mark:

Can we negate the whole concept of work-life balance by rationalising the two as separate entities? I can relate to the working week with 11 to 12 hour days, normally arriving home once my seven-year-old is already tucked in bed after a day of swimming, or attending his karate lessons with his mum instead of his dad. This was totally my responsibility. I knew this without any doubt and in an ideal world my choice would be to ask myself whether to allow this to continue.

What I struggle to unravel is balancing my responsibility to provide stability for my family while at the same time being committed to a demanding organisation, and providing the same level of stability to both my peers and my own team.

It has never been more the case that there is more work to do than time or resources allow. Failing to commit to the organisation (by being more disciplined and devoted to the family) indirectly impacts on the stability of the organisation through lower performance, likely competency issues, possible reprimand and, at the worst case, job loss.

Failure to commit to the family directly affects the family's long-term stability as well as a person's well-being, self-esteem and their inner sense of balance and therefore, indirectly their personal performance which starts the process over again.

How do we find balance? Or do we need to seek out employers that are mindful of setting reasonable expectations?

At what point do we allow ourselves to say this is no longer good enough and not for me, the balance is ... well, not balanced at all? I would be delighted to understand how your approach encompasses the above. It is truly an area that I have wrestled with for many years and feel as though I shall do so for many more to come.

Mark

Mark has a point here and the question is indeed, how can we integrate conflicting demands from both areas of our life?

The solution can only be "negotiation". In such situations it is particularly challenging because there are three or more parties involved. One must negotiate with the family to reach an agreement of what is acceptable, and which in turn forms the boundaries for the negotiation at work.

If no agreement can be reached that satisfies all parties involved, then some tough choices might need to be made. They could include the necessity for a career change or a repositioning of your personal relationships.

The key is that people like Mark must first know what they want for themselves before negotiating with either family or people at work. This is to ensure that Mark does not become a victim of either the family or the people at work. This means Mark would establish first his own boundaries of what is acceptable to him and what is not.

The next step would be to establish the boundaries with his family and then see if and how his work life could be adjusted to assure he stays within his own and his family's boundaries. Let us not be mistaken, this could mean some very tough negotiations on both the personal and professional side.

To conclude, read the comment of Catherine who works as a relationship counsellor:

I also ask myself and am asked to speak on work-life balance. My current view is that we are using language that creates duality. How can life be separate from work and vice versa? Work is only one aspect of life. So too are relationships. And time for one's self. So a better, but not very "sexy" way of rephrasing our popular term "work-life balance" is simply to call it life balance or a life that is in balance. To achieve this, each of these aspects of our lives has to be aligned and in balance. A lot of my work is about this - about how we express ourselves most fully in our life through work, relationships and self.

Catherine

Vox Pop: Work-life balance

Recently, I went on a class about work-life balance. The essence of the class is that we have different things coming at us constantly. The most important thing is that are we consciously reprioritising "correctly".

Are we getting important things done or are we getting urgent and petty things done, putting off important things to another day?

Work-life balance is about constantly reprioritising and getting important things done.

Also, you probably have different importance assigned to different aspects of your life. Are you still respecting them?

If you have been working 12 hours for a few days in a row, do you feel that you have overworked as a pattern for some time or do you take time off to deal with other aspects of your life equally at another time?

If you cannot accommodate something this year because of other commitments, can you create this opportunity for next year?

Susie

I think work is part of life and it is our call, within the domain we can control, to decide the ratio and percentage of it.

Gavin

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About this "work-life balance" concept, I would like to believe that it is to remind people to pay more attention to life. We say that work is not all of life, or life should be more than work.

Macy

I believe the question of "balance" is a very personal one. Work affects life and life affects work. I feel that when my life is in "balance" then work naturally follows suit.

Rita

Charlie Lang is founder of training and coaching company Progress-U, and author of The Groupness Factor. This concludes our six-part series on how companies should incorporate work-life balance. Next series: corporate social responsibility

----- End of Article as published in SCMP -----



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/08) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community.

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