

Work-life balance: making it a reality

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ABSTRACT

The era has ended when people had a fixed and limited number of hours and their own skill-set which was adequate for providing job satisfaction and money for their entire life time. This was working out so well that - 'How do I find out time for my family, hobbies and interests and most importantly for myself?' - was a question faced by not many. Well, this has now become a 1000 dollar question for today's working population. Where Hurry, Curry and Worry have become an inevitable way of life, it has become critical to find an answer to this question.

In this paper, authors talk about the practical experiences over a number of years, what it takes to ensure that the proper work-life balance is achieved and maintained, and some tips about how to achieve it – again based on authors' own experience.

INTRODUCTION



A stage comes when you hit against a wall and realize that enough is enough! You cannot make it or take it anymore.

One should treat this as a trigger or warning that some action is needed to be done to address the issue. Finding the root causes of this situation is the first step in solving the problem.

As the saying goes, All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Being dull is the least of the problems faced, but it is a red flag enough to make us sit back, think and prod around in our work and life schedules to find out the bugs.

As we analyze the situation, it starts throwing light on certain aspects which we may have never looked at before.

Some such examples could be the time wasters e.g. emails. How many times do we visit our mail-box and could it be done in a more effective way? Another time waster could be meetings – do we really conduct meetings in an efficient manner with a proper agenda and do we ensure that they end on time?

As one sits back and tries to analyze the situation, we ourselves find out various ways in which we can do things differently. This in turn allows us to extract time for doing other things of our choice, which was not the case before.

There is neither magic wand nor an SOP for maintaining work-life balance; we each have to figure out our own key mantras and abide by them.

Some other points that need attention are:

- Work distribution – to balance workload evenly on team members.
- Delegation – both downward and upward (in some cases)
- Controlling the level and extent of multi-tasking
- Compartmentalization

Although some of these would seem quite easy and manageable, in reality, they do pose certain challenges. The true challenge is also because of the fact that most of us work in an environment where there is a lot of dependency

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on other tasks, people, availability of resources etc. So just self time management will not always do the trick, although it can be a significant start.

Achieving work-life balance and helping people achieve it is a joint responsibility of the employee and the organization. Each one of us needs to manage our own priorities, tasks, time available, commitments and responsibilities effectively and efficiently and the organization should make every effort to facilitate employees to achieve this balance. That way we will be able to move forward towards achieving work-life balance.

In this paper the authors discuss the concept of work-life, its importance, its dynamic nature along with some practical ways based on own experience which can help the reader. One important point to note and remember is achieving work-life balance is not a 'One size fits all' situation, rather it is an exclusive piece that must be custom-made for each individual. The crux lies in making the right choice of design and fit!

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

When I was studying in school, I remember my brother used to religiously prepare a timetable for his studies before the exams. It used to look somewhat like this:

6.00 am – 6.30 am	Wake up and get ready for studies
6.30 am – 7.30 am	History
7.30 am – 7.45 am	Timepass**
7.45 am – 9.00 am	Physics
9.00 am – 10.00 am	Get ready + Breakfast
10.00 am – 11.00 am	Maths
11.00 am – 11.15 am	Timepass**
11.15 am – 1.00 pm	Geography
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.....	

** Timepass in Indian context means leisure or a break from intense work.

As is beautifully obvious, the essential element of recreation - enjoyment, was built into the timetable! As we grow up, we unwittingly lose this critical aspect which came to us naturally in the childhood. As we grow up and start working, a day comes when we realize that it has been a month since I last visited my mom or it has been 3 months or maybe, years, since I saw the last movie! Initially this does not really impact us and we accept it as a part of life. However, it eventually reaches a stage where you realize that this impacts other aspects of your life, mainly family. That is when the much discussed topic called 'Work-life balance' raises its head.

This is how Oxford dictionary defines the two core concepts – Work and Life:

Work - Activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result

Life - The condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death.

Important point is how do I define it for myself?

Work – means of getting income, right use of my education and skills, place where I have an identity, a place where I go because I cannot stay at home for the whole day, place where I meet friends, chat, play, eat and do some work related activities?

Life – enjoyment? Family? Friends? Hobbies? Health? Parent care? Social commitment?

It is essential to define these two terms for oneself before getting into finding the answer to the million dollar question – 'Can I really achieve work life balance?'

What does it mean by 'achieving work life balance'?

For me, it is being able to do justice to both aspects of my life – my work and my family. It means I am able to pay required attention to both the important aspects – may be not always in equal proportion, but balance is the operative word. That brings us to an interesting point about '**balance**'. We always talk about the 'balance' and not 'equality' for work and life. Under normal circumstances, when we are walking on a plain road, we do not have to

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balance ourselves explicitly because that is how our body is designed – naturally. Only when we go against the law of nature and try to walk on a rope, do we struggle to maintain our balance. The reality is that only when there is an imbalance (mostly created by our own deeds), we talk about act of balancing. The question of work-life balance becomes important when we start realizing that we are missing out on something on either or both the aspects – Work and Life(as defined by us).

The other important point about this balance is that it is relative or time dependent. This means what combination works for me as of today may not work for me after a few years. This shows the dynamism of this concept. The dynamic nature is attributable to many factors such as age, stage at career, responsibilities at family front, own health, priorities in life etc. It is a concept which continuously needs to be revisited and redefined.

Out of the two core parts work and life, life relates to mostly self and we have a better control over it – or so is intended. The other part – work- is where the external factors like office, colleagues, boss, family, support staff, infrastructure etc jump in. For achieving balance, attention needs to be given to both. Considering the aspect on which we have more control, our individual lives -

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

REASONS FOR IMBALANCE:

CONFLICTING PRIORITIES

This is how I would define an ideal day for me. A day on which I wake up at 6 am, have a cup of tea while reading the newspaper, work peacefully at office, spend time for my exercise and my music class, be with my family in the evening and sleep early. However problem starts when I have much more to do than what fits in this schedule, and I am forced to make a choice between work and leisure activities. A call has to be taken what is my priority at that specific point in life – is it my project deliverable, my daughter's school meeting, my mom's doctor visit or my music class? Most of the times, we are compelled to push leisure activities to the back seat. This is the reality and we accept it and move forward. When the recurrence of this crosses a threshold, one starts thinking that something needs to be done about it.

Tried & tested approach: sit down and classify activities as critical, essential, good to do and can wait. This will help you to decide the priority at the broad level. Accept that because of the dynamic nature, the priorities are bound to change and can change from one day to other day or one week to other! That is wonderful – take advantage of this and plan your activities in such a way that you can get at least one timeslot for activities of your choice.

TIME (MIS)MANAGEMENT

As they say time is the only element which each one of us gets in the equal measure. Most of the days, most of us end up doing only the mandatory tasks, which go under the category of 'work'. Why does it happen that some people around us are able to manage everything that they want and some struggle to find time for things that we like to do? The key to this is that these people manage their time very effectively. Other important attributes which help to do proper time management are realistic planning, delegating/outourcing the right tasks, effective use of multi-tasking etc.

We all want to manage our time but many a time, we end up actually 'mis-managing' our time. On a personal level, I start with a big laundry list of tasks at the beginning of the day. At the end of the day, I realize that I could hardly finish half of them and some of the important ones were not started at all! Time to sit back and assess what went wrong. The main reasons that I have found for myself are unrealistic planning without considering the common obstacles/timewasters, dependencies on external factors and getting driven by events.

Most of us are very optimistic by nature, at least when it comes to estimating the time needed for an activity. In addition, there is an Indian mindset which tends to go towards unrealistic timeline expectations and commitments. Efficient work is one issue and getting stressed up when it is evident that they cannot be met is another.

Another typical problem faced is getting driven by events. While focusing on work, a colleague just peeps in, asks if I have time or sometimes even does not bother to check and pushes forward the topic. At such times, it helps to just stop that person and ask to come later, of course in a polite manner. This is easier said than done. But if we do not do it at the beginning itself, people make a habit of it. It directly impacts your work. Get into the habit of saying 'No' when you do not want any disturbance.

NON-DELEGATION

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Are you a perfectionist? If yes, then you will definitely have this syndrome. If you expect that everything has to be done in a specific way that you would want it to then most of the time, you would end up spending substantial time and energy. Instead learn to delegate. Effective delegation will help you to improve your productivity and at the same time empower someone and help them to grow up in the corporate ladder.

LACK OF LET-GO ABILITY

Remember only when you get rid of the old stuff, you have the place for the new additions – be it books, clothes, thoughts or some authorities. So if you have to find out some time out of the existing time available, then one way is let some of the tasks/authorities go to someone else. That way you will be able to find some time which can then be utilized for doing things of your choice. This is also a side effect of the non-delegation habit explained above.

For the delegation and let-go attitude, a major fact needs to be accepted and that is 'things will go wrong at some point of time'. This is because the other person may not be as skilled as you are in that task and so the two techniques have to be applied judiciously and gradually. Also a continuous monitoring up to the desired level is needed till the time the effectiveness is established. Also the ownership has to be shifted gradually and a sudden drastic move will not only frustrate you but will also hamper the project.

Ultimately all these factors creating imbalance go to a common destination which is 'Stress'. In my opinion, why one needs to pay attention to achieving and maintaining work-life balance is to reduce or avoid stress. To summarize, we will like to show it using diagram1.

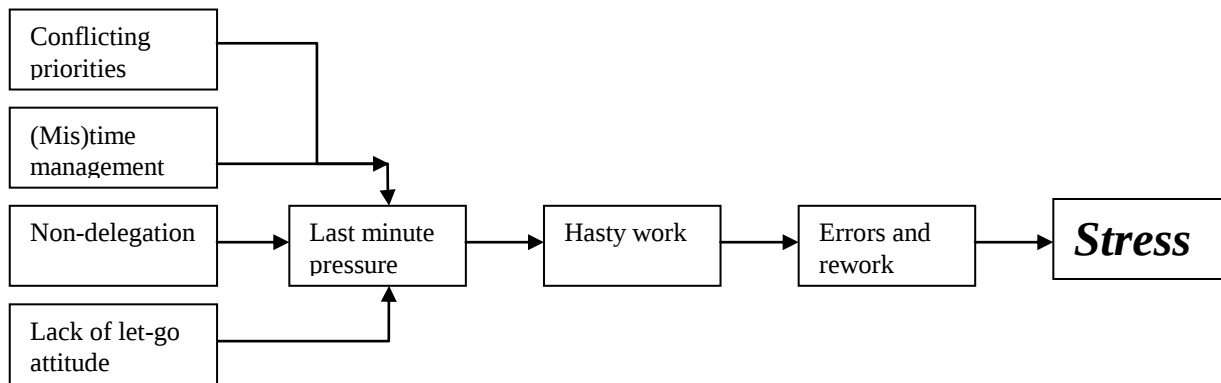


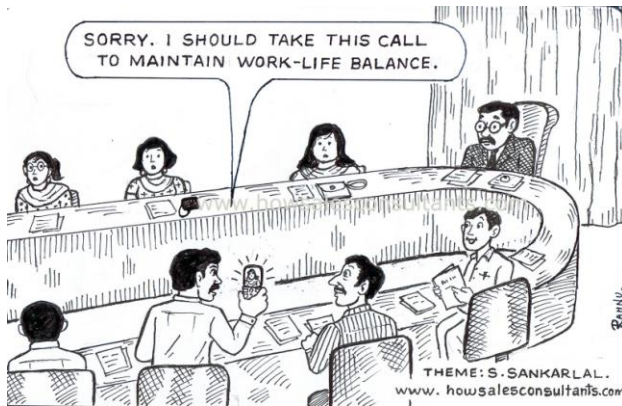
Diagram 1

SOME USEFUL TECHNIQUES

MULTI-TASKING:

This is an often debated idea. Some people find it quite useful and some people think it is one of the management jargon words commonly being used.

When used in an appropriate manner, this can help to improve the productivity in a huge way. This is more of an art and has to be developed. This is person dependent and so the productivity gain varies from person to person.



COMPARTMENTALIZATION

Another important yet not easily observed personality trait is the ability to compartmentalize. How many times have you been able to not think about a client meeting tomorrow morning when you are with your family? Has it been very common that you do not think of your daughter when she is playing a tournament and you are in office for some project deliverable?

Very often, the two core aspects are mixed up. This is unavoidable however learning to make the demarcation helps us to do justice to both. Switching the mind between the two areas dilutes the attention thereby hampering the output quality.

ORGANIZATION LEVEL

There are some things that an organization can offer, to help employees achieve good work-life balance. Some of the most common ways suggested are Flexi-time, work from home option, Teleworking, part time working etc.

Now-a-days, people pay a lot of attention to this factor of work-life balance, when they think of joining an organization. This sometimes is considered more important than the remuneration factor. Everyone has started realizing the importance that just by getting extra money or a good position in an organization is not something which is going to keep you satisfied for a prolonged period. Instead if we are able to strike the balance between our career/work and family/personal time, then that is a far better option to choose.

Some of the ways in which organization can help an employee achieve the balance are discussed below:

CREATE A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT:

Many of us spend more time at work than what we spend at home (when we are awake). So it is extremely important that the working environment is supportive and helps people to be happy, productive and efficient. Would you recommend your friend to join your company? If the answer is 'Yes' without thinking much about it, you should feel convinced that your work culture is capable of providing the appropriate work-life balance to your employees. This, of course, has many other factors as one can imagine such as salary, number of projects, commuting distance etc. but still the importance of the work life balance remains.

PROVIDE FLEXI TIMING:

This has become a buzz word in today's industry – especially which uses technology like computers, Internet, remote working extensively. This is extremely helpful especially when people have multiple responsibilities which need to be handled at the same time requiring equal attention. e.g. attending to old parents, managing the school timings for a daughter, doctor's appointment etc. when there are urgent project deliverables or important client visits. This would not be possible unless the organization allows the employee to work in flexi time. This helps the organization retain good people and help people to grow in their career by managing the demands on home front also.

OPTION TO WORK FROM HOME:

In today's world where most of the projects run with distributed teams across the globe, the boundaries of home and office are getting blurred. One can effectively work from home as she would from office, provided she has the technology support such as network connectivity with good band-width, telephone connection and a PC. This helps

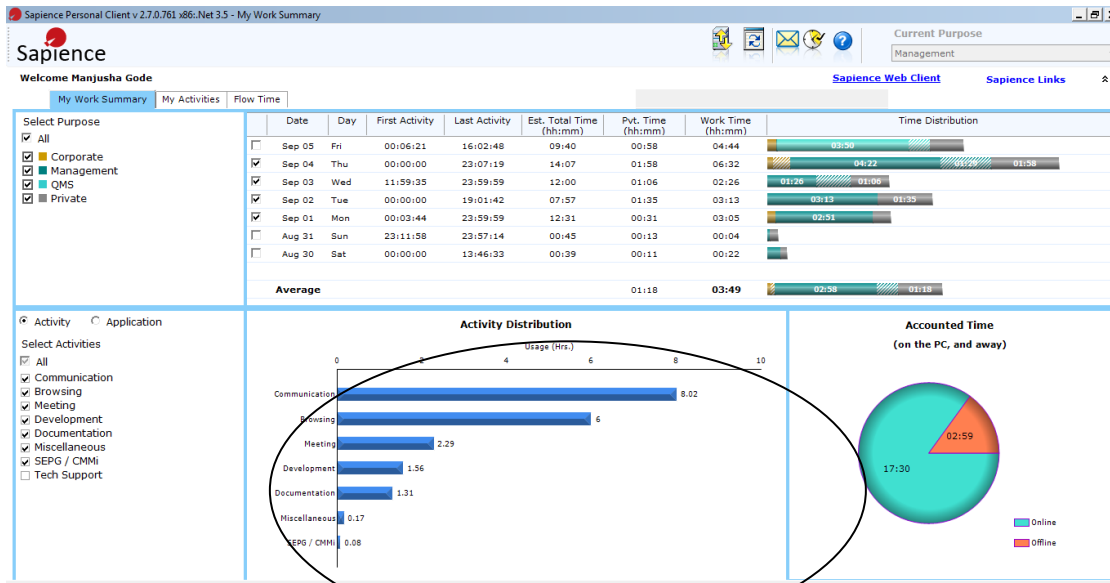
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especially when people have some medical situation which does not allow them to actually commute to their work but they can work efficiently from home. This is also very much helpful for young mothers.

In both the options of working from home and flexi-time, the organization has to play a key role in negotiating with the clients with this requirement and bringing to their notice the advantages of getting good people, able to provide more time overlap etc.

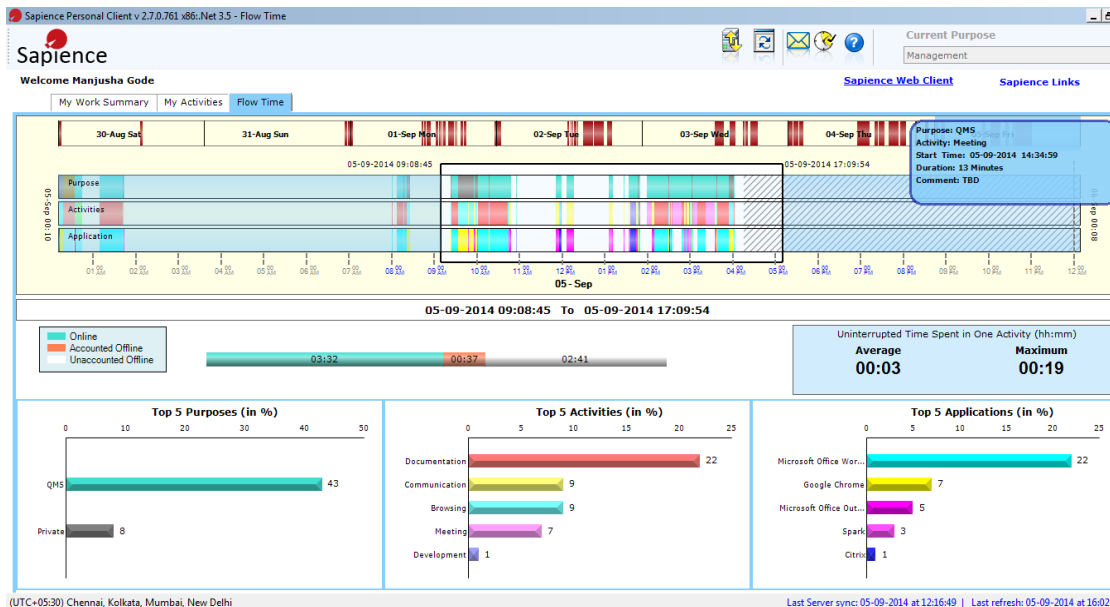
USE TECHNOLOGY AND TOOLS EFFECTIVELY TO MANAGE YOUR OWN TIME:

A time tracking tool on our PC which can silently run and generate various useful reports can be extremely helpful. Looking at those reports and analyzing it with an open mind helps us to identify areas where we can really have a better control. Look at some of the graphs below:



This graph helps to assess at a broad level, the time spent on various applications. This can be used to see the trend of our working throughout the day. e.g. if it is observed that too much time is spent on browsing at a programmer level, then that can be one of the indicators that the time is not being used efficiently. However if the same pattern is seen for a business development person, then it may be the right pattern.

Or look at the this one:



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This is at a more detailed level i.e. at the activity level. So now the trend observed in terms of the application usage is found to be right and one wants to go to the next level to see how much time is spent on each of the activities. Having the information available for time spent on top 5 activities or top 5 applications over a period of time helps one to rationally look at it and make changes as deemed necessary. The detailed time flow (highlighted in a box) tells me about the pattern in which I work in a day. I can assess am I really working in an efficient manner? Am I switching between the applications too frequently so that I am not able to focus on a single task? Some such things when they are visible to us, they really help to change our working habits to use the available time more effectively.

The other important information which was seen from some such graphs was the time on which one was most productive and was able to focus at a stretch. When such a trend is observed for a substantially longer duration, that is a hint for us to adjust our working hours accordingly.

Proper usage of such tools is not a fancy thing but is a very effective mechanism for moving in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

Achieving work-life balance is an ongoing activity which needs to be assessed periodically on an ongoing basis. The definition varies from person to person and so you cannot have a readymade recipe for it. You have to decide your own priorities, critically look at your priorities and available resources and create your own definition. One has to find out the reasons for the imbalance and then act on those systematically.

'Change is the only constant thing in this world' – this applies to our life as well. That is why one has to be good at change management for maintaining the balance. Since one of the core components is driven by external factors, it is quite likely to demand many changes. The success lies in adapting to these changes and keep on refining our formula to achieve the work-life balance.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Lot of the above ideas or thoughts have been planted in my mind by observing my seniors, family members, friends and many successful colleagues achieving their work-life balance and lead a happy life. There have also been contributors of the other extreme who helped me to get a 'what not to do' list. My sincere thanks to all of them.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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