

A New Year's resolution: achieving work-life balance

By Jennifer Swanberg

Work/Life Columnist

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Happy New Year! Along with champagne toasts and a countdown synchronized to New York's Times Square dropping ball, the New Year brings well-intentioned resolutions for modifying our behavior. Eat less, exercise more, and stop smoking are classic resolutions, especially after indulging throughout the holiday. Other common changes people vow to make and resolve to integrate into their everyday life include spending more time with family and friends, enjoying life more, learning something new, and helping others. I have a new resolution worth considering, one that is conspicuously missing from all top ten New Year's resolutions lists: commit to having more work-life balance.

Work-life balance is a self-defined state that allows a person to effectively manage multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in their community without guilt, stress or feelings of regret. Finding work-life balance is no easy task. Endless e-mail messages, unpredictable deadlines, and long hours at work may erode the feeling of having a meaningful personal and family life. Likewise, attending to family or personal matters during work hours may leave employees vulnerable to being perceived as less committed to their jobs. Yet often there is little or no alternative but to take time off from work when an employee is caring for an aging parent, scrambling to find child care for school-age children, or needing to be home to meet the plumber.

Working long hours has become the norm for many employees. While some employees work overtime to pay routine bills, to save for a child's college education or to afford a dream house, other employees log long work hours just to get their job done. Extended periods of long working hours without adequate rest can have radiating effects on well being. Prolonged fatigue can impair judgment, reduce productivity and increase mistakes. Clocking in endless hours may result in missing important events in your child's, friend's or spouse's life. For instance, extra hours may mean missing a daughter's first home run, a son's first blue ribbon, or a best friend's wedding festivities. Repeated absences from important life events or from routine matters such as helping with homework or planning a holiday vacation can create friction in relationships. Sometimes working overtime or logging long hours is unavoidable due to job-related deadlines, the need to pay bills, or covering for other workers. Under these circumstances, the employee should communicate the situation to family and friends, inform a coworker or a supervisor when fatigued, and pace himself or herself.

Juggling the needs of work and family life is a constant challenge for most workers, and the stress associated with this can impact employee health. The Mayo Clinic, recognizing the impact that work-family strain can have on employee health and well

being, has identified several key strategies for achieving work-life balance. Some of these strategies are integrated into a few of the work-life balance strategies listed below:

Assess and simplify. Keep a log of all work and non-work activities you engage in during a given week. Identify what is most meaningful to you and what is most necessary. Stop engaging in or delegate the activities that you do not enjoy, do out of guilt or deem unnecessary. Discuss these activities with your supervisor if you do not have the authority to independently drop certain work tasks.

Inquire about flexible work arrangements. Ask your supervisor, manager or boss about your organization's flexible work policies and the criteria to use such policies. If your employer does not have such policies or practices, inquire about developing such initiatives.

Use time efficiently. Assess household chores and duties to determine if some tasks can be done on the same day or others spread out over time. For instance, run several errands at once rather than running back and forth in one day. When possible, run errands on your way to or from work. List important dates on a household calendar; this allows family members to plan ahead, preventing last-minute panic. Consider scheduling more than one medical or self-care appointment on the same day; this strategy minimizes missed work-time.

Re-examine cleaning standards. Tidy beds and empty sinks are nice, but they are not a necessity. When time is tight, let go of "extreme clean" expectations. Engage the entire family in the cleaning process. Assign children or a spouse their favorite cleaning task. If affordable, hire someone to help clean the house, even if only once a month or a few times a year.

Nurture yourself. Managing a household, working inside and outside the home, and/or caring for loved ones is exhilarating and exhausting. Replenish your energy by nurturing yourself. Take a walk at lunch, stop by the library to pick up a favorite music CD or talking book, exercise, take a cat nap or meditate. Take time to engage in an activity that you most enjoy.

Establish a work-free and chore-free day. Carve out at least one day of the week that does not require engaging in chores or job-related tasks. This time will allow you to relax, gain your equilibrium and possibly enjoy a hobby.

Earlene Huckleberry, professional life and executive coach located in Lexington, suggests that work-life balance is imperative for an optimal quality of life. "To achieve fulfillment and success at home and work, leisure and personal time must compliment one's job passion and work responsibilities. The key to achieving work-life balance is to understand what is causing the imbalance and to be able to do something about it."

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