

Fiction

Work and life



By Laurie Hillis, M.A.

Sorry honey, I can't make it to Bobby's game tonight can you take him? Oh oh, Sue, I have to cancel our luncheon meeting. Sorry kids, I'll take you to the show next weekend. Gee Gerry, can you lead today's meeting, I'm double booked? ... Sound familiar??

I took this summer off from work. There! I said it. There! I did it. And I feel proud about both. It was a long overdue and very rewarding experience. Part of the summer was set aside to evaluate my own work/life balance and time was devoted to reflecting on the work and life balance of other important relationships in my life – family, friends, and clients.

If you are like most people, the frenzied pace of work and of life today means that you are often double or triple booked, scrambling to meet commitments and not feeling particularly competent or satisfied with many things you do. If you don't think this is a serious issue, here is a rather frightening fact about our current work and life dilemma:

"Almost half of Canadians are experiencing a moderate to high level of stress today as a result of trying to balance their work and home lives; 10 years ago, only 27 per cent felt this way."

The Conference Board of Canada, June 1999
MacBride-King and Bachmann

Why? aging demographics? over-commitment? achievement drive? personality uniqueness? trying to give the best possible life we can to our kids? There are no simple answers, just lots of possibilities.

A recent study conducted by The Conference Board of Canada reports some interesting statistics for organizations, leaders, and individuals in today's workplace that might help us understand the why.

What's happening to cause stress?

- ❖ shifts in the employment contract between employers/employees
- ❖ use of new, faster technologies at work and home (repeat, home)
- ❖ restructuring of our health and social systems
- ❖ enhanced diversity in our population
- ❖ marching demographic trend towards an older society

Top reported reasons for increased work-life balance stresses in the past five years:

- ❖ have had children in the past 5 years
- ❖ have taken on more responsibility at work
- ❖ am busier, demands have increased, feel more pressure
- ❖ hours of work have changed

Sound scary? As noted Canadian author and colleague Barbara Moses states in a recent Globe & Mail article:

"...And so we remain work-addicted, frenetically busy, and ever closer to the breaking point..."

The virtues of strategic laziness
The Globe & Mail, July 2, 2001

or Reality? balance:

fiction or reality?



What is the impact to organizations and individuals as a result of our current work and life pace? Here are more of The Conference Board's findings:

The impact?:

- ❖ when work/life balance is a challenge, people tend to ensure their families, partners, and work are covered first
- ❖ what's lost? Time for self is lost – for rest, for self-development, and for enjoyment
- ❖ sleep is cut back and health suffers
- ❖ work has been made more difficult because colleagues' difficulties in balancing work/personal responsibilities impacts the team
- ❖ lost productivity at the organizational, business unit, and individual level, demonstrated by: absenteeism, lower quality of performance, less loyalty, lower morale, lower punctuality, retention, and recruitment challenges

What are the solutions?

The Banff Centre, along with many of our valued clients has recently looked at this important social and leadership issue. While there are broad variations in what Canadian employers are offering, they are indeed offering policies and practices that support a balance between work and life.

It is important to note that offering programs is merely the beginning. Organizations must encourage and support a culture and an environment in which employees feel comfortable accessing the options that will best suit them.

Leaders at all levels in the organization must provide the support, commitment, and safety needed for program success.

Action needs to be taken at both the organizational and the individual level. Here are just the beginnings of action ideas.

Organizationally:

- ❖ flexible work arrangements: flextime, compressed work weeks, job sharing, and work from home
- ❖ special leaves: special leave policies over and above the legal requirements (extended parental/maternal leave, leave in lieu of overtime, educational leave, retirement transition leave, sabbaticals, etc.)
- ❖ childcare and dependant programs
- ❖ employee assistance plans
- ❖ training, support, recognition, and guidance around the importance of work and life balance

Individually:

- ❖ be selfish – think about your own needs, wants, and dreams first
- ❖ examine why you say "yes" when you should say "no" – Harriet Braiker calls this the "disease to please," the need for the uncontrollable approval of others
- ❖ examine your values and life priorities – if your schedule and your actions don't reflect your priorities, and values, you'll feel stressed and be zapped of energy
- ❖ evaluate your commitments – friends, hobbies, community participation – cleanse if necessary

- ❖ start doing those things that you've promised yourself you'd do "someday," even if it's only one thing each day to creatively expand yourself towards your goals
- ❖ listen to your inner voice – you need to nurture your spiritual well-being

I encourage you in your leadership role to have these important conversations about work and life balance. Have the conversations in your organization, with your teams, with those you lead, and more importantly, with yourself.

Perhaps you'll be enjoying some downtime too, as you begin to purposefully take time for yourself and your life.

References:

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