Work/Life Balance

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Perspectives on Work/Life Balance

On an afternoon not long ago, Australian CEO and outspoken advocate for work/life balance Nigel Marsh left work early to pick up his young son, Harry, from school. The senior Marsh reports that they played games in the park and then shared a pizza for dinner. When they arrived home, Marsh gave his son a bath, put on his Batman pajamas, and read him a story. As Marsh wished him a good night and started to walk out of his son’s bedroom, Harry said to him, “Dad, this has been the best day of my life, ever.”

In describing this experience later for an audience, Marsh says that he had done nothing huge for his son. However, he affirms, it is the small things that are a reflection of a balanced and thoughtful life. Marsh is convinced that small acts can transform our lives.

This is but one perspective in the recent conversations about work/life balance. The Internet is full of assorted definitions of work/life balance, questionnaires for measuring your level of balance, articles by experts expressing their opinions, and classes offering participants the true key to work/life balance. There seems to be little agreement about how to describe such a balance, the goals of the balance, or exactly how to reach it.

We all have our own experiences with the challenges of achieving balance in our lives. We each have a story to tell about the meaning of our work and our lives. As Christ’s people, we bring a unique perspective to the value of life and work. As we seek to make sense of the questions about work/life balance, a faith perspective and its values can inform our actions and our choices.

Definitions of Work/Life Balance

Popular definitions for work/life balance vary, but perhaps they can inform our understanding as we look for common threads. Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines it very simply. Work/life balance is “the amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy.”
WorkLifeBalance.com sums up the definition in two words: *achievement* and *enjoyment*. The site encourages us to ask what we can achieve and what we can enjoy each day. Integrating achievement and enjoyment in both work and life will bring us balance.

State Services Commission of New Zealand maintains that work/life balance "is about creating a productive work culture where the potential for tensions between work and other parts of people’s lives” is minimized. The guidelines go on to say that principles of work/life balance should benefit both the organization and the individual.

The Magic Trio website, which lists personal finance, physical fitness, and enjoying life as “the three elements that you need to master in today’s world if you want to make the most of your human potential,” suggests that the key to success is in how you spend the 168 hours you have on a weekly basis. A person should spend a minimum of 50 hours per week doing activities that he or she enjoys. According to the site, one’s work/life balance definition “should allow you to enjoy your life while still making progress towards long-term goals.”

Speaking at a symposium in Paris in 2001, David E. Guest, a professor of organizational psychology, shared the work of other social scientists and identified five models for the relationship between work and life outside work. The *segmentation* model understands that the two are distinct domains of life that exist separately and don’t influence each other. The *spillover* model hypothesizes that both work and life influence each other in either positive or negative ways. The third model, *compensation*, proposes that what is absent in one arena in terms of demands or satisfactions can be made up in the other. The *instrumental* model understands that activities in one sphere can facilitate success in the other. For example, a young father may take a routine job to enable his family to buy a house. Finally, the *conflict* model suggests that given high levels of demand in all spheres of life, some difficult choices have to be made. It is therefore possible for conflicts and some significant overload on an individual to occur. It is, Guest concluded, the conflict model that has gained a lot of attention in recent years.

Guest also reminded listeners that a first step in defining work/life balance is to consider the definition of *balance*. He invited his audience to consider whether balance is to be understood as an objective scale in which both elements have equal quantity, or as having a more subjective physical and psychological meaning as in “stability of body or mind.”

**Understanding Work/Life Balance**

Guest’s points seem to underline two assumptions behind the work/life balance conversation. One assumption is the idea that life and work are in conflict, and the second assumption is that it is possible to establish a balance—a lack of conflict—between the two compartments of our lives.

In the e-book *Get a Life, Try This!* author Judith Welles advises managers that they have a role to play in helping employees reach balance between work and their personal lives. She points out that doing so will result in increased productivity and the retention of gifted employees.

This is also evident in the marketing of WorkLifeBalance.com for their program “5 Steps to Better Work Life Balance.” The system promises that these five steps will drive “performance, accountability, and commitment” and provide “bottom-line results for the organization and more value and balance for the individual.”
One response of the workplace to this conflict has been the introduction of flextime. According to sociologist Phyllis Moen, US labor laws are “perfectly suited to 1960,” a time when men went to work from 9 to 5 and women stayed home. Since that is no longer the case, more and more companies are offering both men and women the option of choosing their hours as well as, in some cases, whether to work at the office and/or from home.

The Mayo Clinic advises readers to “reclaim control” if your work and personal life are out of balance. Suggestions for reclaiming the balance are: (1) tracking your time; (2) taking advantage of options such as schedule flexibility; (3) learning to say no; (4) leaving work at work at the end of the day; (5) managing your time; (6) bolstering your support system; and (7) nurturing yourself by eating healthy food, exercising, and getting enough sleep.

By accepting the reality of Guest’s two assumptions, work/life balance is a problem to be solved though tricks and tips for time management, efficiency, and flexibility. They seem to imply that if everyone tries harder, balance between work and personal life can be achieved. However, not everyone agrees with this perspective.

**Listening to Other Voices**

Writing in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Paula J. Caproni suggests that the work/life discourse as it exists “reflects the individualism, achievement orientation, and instrumental rationality” of bureaucratic thought. Her thoughts are seconded by Dr. Ellen Kossek of Michigan State University, who states, “It is rare for most people to have equal balance.” It is, Kossek says, like trying to reach perfection and can only lead to fatigue and frustration.

Caproni goes on to record her own attempts as a working mother of two children under the age of four to find balance through greater efficiency and setting goals. Through these efforts, she discovered that in attempting to achieve an ideal work/life balance, she “might have been trying to solve the wrong problem.” Instead, she decided to create for herself “a new language that privileged tranquility over achievement, contribution over success, and choice over status.”

**Our Real Treasure**

These values of tranquility and contribution to others reflect the words and ministry of Jesus. “Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus’ words encourage us to rethink our perception of work/life balance and to redefine what we do in work and in life in light of the real treasure, our relationship with God.

Be sure to check out FaithLink, a weekly downloadable discussion guide for classes and small groups. FaithLink motivates Christians to consider their personal views on important contemporary issues, and it also encourages them to act on their beliefs.