

Work-life Balance

What exactly is it?

By Jeff Davidson



T In 1988, when I started formulating the concepts in my book, *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped Up Society*, I had no idea how correct I would be. In the 1st edition of my *Breathing Space* (www.breathingspace.com), which appeared in 1990, I discussed five major trends - what I called mega-realities - that influenced every aspect of our being, and from which no one was immune. Briefly, these five mega-realities include an expanding volume of knowledge, mass media growth and electronic addiction, the paper trail culture, an over-abundance of choices and population growth.

Knowledge: In one way or another, everyone fears being under-informed. The enormous volume of new knowledge broadcasted and published in every field exceeds our ability to keep pace. More words are published and broadcast in a day than you could ingest during your lifetime. America leads the world in sheer volume of information generated and disseminated.

The impasse of this over-information era is that the time necessary to learn the rules for effective living now exceeds your lifetime. This is why management books so often miss the mark: they list dozens - if not hundreds - of rules, when you are already grappling with more rules than you can handle.

Mass Media: The effect of the mass media on our lives continues

unchecked. More than four out of five American households own DVD players. In 1972, three major television networks dominated television - ABC, NBC and CBS. Now, there are more than 500 full-power independent television stations. Many cable TV subscribers receive up to 200 channels that offer more than 72,000 shows per month.

With its sensationalized trivia, the mass media glut obscures fundamental issues that do merit concern, such as preserving the environment or feeding the poor.

Paper Trails: Like having too much data and eyewitness reports, having too much paper to deal with makes you feel overwhelmed and overworked. Americans today are consuming three times as much paper as ten years ago. There are two basic reasons why society spews so much paper:

- We have the lowest postal rates in the world.
- We have the widest base of paper-generating technologies.

The typical executive receives more than 225 pieces of unsolicited mail each month -- about 12 pieces daily. The average family receives more than 200 catalogs that they did not request, on top of those they did request.

An Overabundance of Choices: Having choices is a blessing of the free market economy, but it's overwhelming, increases time ex-

penditure, and is a mounting form of exhaustion. More than 1,260 varieties of shampoo are on the market. More than 2,000 skin-care products are for sale. An excess of 75 different types of exercise shoes are available, each with scores of variations in style, function, and features.

Population: From the beginning of creation to 1,850 AD, world population grew to one billion. It grew to two billion by 1930, three billion by 1960, four billion by 1979, five billion by 1987, six billion by 1999, and seven billion by 2010. Every three years, nearly 260,000,000 people are added to the planet.

Each day, world population (births minus deaths) increases by more than 275,000 people. Geometric growth in human population permeates and dominates every aspect of our earth, its resources, the environment, and all living things.

The Quest for Work-life Balance

Against this backdrop, the quest for work-life balance is more vital than ever. Predictably, a preponderance of speakers, trainers, authors, journalists, and others whose professions entail regular communication with the masses, proclaims the virtues of achieving and maintaining work-life balance.

However, a glaring question arises. What, exactly, is work-life balance? Compared to the legions of instances in which the term is cited, surprisingly little has been written in articles and books about what the concept actually entails.

During my 26 years in pursuit of understanding why the pace of society has sped up, what the impact has been on the typical individual, and how each of us can forge our own sense and experience of breathing space throughout our lives, I have honed and refined the tenets of what I consider work-life balance.

Work-life balance is the ability to experience a sense of control and to stay productive and competitive at work while maintaining a happy, healthy home life with sufficient leisure. It is attaining focus and awareness, despite seemingly endless tasks and activities competing for your time and attention.

Work-life balance entails having some breathing space for yourself each day; feeling a sense of accomplishment, while not being consumed by work; and having an enjoyable domestic life without short-changing career obligations. It is rooted in whatever fulfillment means to you within 24-hour days, seven-day weeks, and however many years you have left.

Supporting Disciplines

Several disciplines support work-life balance, though individually, none are synonymous with work-life balance:

1) Self-Management

Sufficiently managing one's self can be challenging, particularly in getting proper sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Self-management is the recognition that effectively using the spaces in our lives is vital, and that life, time, and available resources are finite. It means becoming captain of our own ship: no one is coming to steer for us.

2) Time Management

Effective time management involves making optimal use of your day and the supporting resources that can be summoned, for you can only keep pace when your resources match your challenges. Time management is enhanced by creating appropriate goals and discerning what is both important and urgent versus what is important OR urgent. It entails understanding what you do best and when you do it best, and assembling the appropriate tools to accomplish specific tasks.

3) Stress Management

By nature, societies tend to become more complex over time. In the face of increasing complexity, stress on the individual is inevitable. More people, more noise, and more distractions independent of one's individual circumstances - require each of us to become more adept at maintaining tranquility and being able to work ourselves out of pressure-filled situations. Most forms of multi-tasking ultimately increase our stress, while focusing on one thing at a time helps decrease stress.

4) Change Management

In our fast-paced world, change is virtually the only constant. Continually adopting new methods, adapting old methods, and re-adapting all methods are vital to a successful career and a happy home life. Effective change management involves offering periodic and concentrated efforts, so that the volume and rate of change at work and at home does not overwhelm or defeat you.

5) Technology Management

Effectively managing technology requires ensuring that technology serves rather than abuses you. Technology has always been with us, since the first walking stick, spear, flint, and wheel. Today, the rate of technological change is accelerating, brought on by vendors who seek to expand the market share. Often, you have no choice but to keep up with the technological "Joneses;" still, you rule technology -- don't let it rule you.

6) Leisure Management

The most overlooked of the work-life balance supporting disciplines, leisure management acknowledges the importance of rest and relaxation -- that one can't short-change leisure, and that "time off" is a vital component of the human experience. Curiously, too much of the same leisure activity, however enjoyable, can lead to monotony. Thus, effective leisure management requires varying one's activities.

As we move into the brave new world of ever-accelerating flows of information and communication, the quest to achieve work-life balance on a regular and continuous basis will be increasingly difficult, but it is a challenge that is entirely worth pursuing. We owe it to ourselves, to our families, to our communities, and to humanity in general to achieve work-life balance.

A world that consists of human "doings" -- not human beings -- scurrying about to get things done, with no sense of breathing space, is not a place where you or I would likely want to live. I don't want to be part of a culture of overwhelmed individuals who can't manage their own spaces or the spaces common to everyone. I don't want to live in a society, or a world, of time-pressed people who have nothing left to leave for future generations. My guess is that you don't either.

I choose to live in a society composed of people leading balanced lives, with rewarding careers, happy home lives, and enough space to enjoy themselves. For much of the world, the pace of life will speed up even more. The future will belong to those people who steadfastly choose to maintain control of their lives, effectively draw upon their resourcefulness and imagination, and help others to do the same. **PE**



Jeff Davidson is "The Work-Life Balance Expert" whose passion is helping organizations achieve rapid progress for their employees. The premier thought leader on work-life balance issues, Jeff is the author of 59 books, among them "Breathing Space," "Simpler Living," the "60 Second Innovator," and the "60 Second Self-Starter." Visit www.BreathingSpace.com LinkedIn [Jeff Davidson](#)