

Work/Life Balance

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And I had lived out my dreams, in great measure, because of things I was taught by all sorts of extraordinary people along the way . . .

There is more than one way to measure profits and losses. On every level, institutions can and should have a heart.

Some people learn that the timeframe of their lives has become painfully short. They need to consider how they will adjust their work-life balance (WLB), how they will spend their time—a resource that is now at a premium. If we were given that reality, what would be our last actions, our last choices, our last lecture? What would be the message we'd want to leave with our loved ones and colleagues? How would we spend our last weeks or months? Or day? Might the result of reading *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch or watching the 1949 movie *D.O.A.* be to encourage each of us to think about how we fill our hours, to evaluate our priorities, and possibly reorder our lives? Our hours are numbered—for most of us without any clear estimate of how many we have. But even with the deadline unknown we can choose how to live the time we have; that choice is individual. One thing that research has shown is that balance is necessary for a healthy life. All work is not healthy, nor is all play.

Just about everything depends on perspective. What might seem insurmountable to one is an interesting challenge to another. Things that are deemed impossible to some (landing on the moon, winning eight Olympic gold medals) are possible to others. The perspective of an eighty-year-old is different from an eighteen-year-old. The perspective of one fortyish full professor is different from that of another who has been given a medical death sentence. There is much to learn from all perspectives and this column will review both scholarly and personal views of WLB. However, the inspiration of the column is based on the insight offered by Randy Pausch, author of the

book *The Last Lecture*.¹ It brings front and center what is important in the too short life of an extraordinary person. And there is much for each and every one of us to learn from his insight. Read the book and watch the video (www.thelastlecture.com) as well as some of the reviewed studies on the role of WLB in our lives.

The brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.

Valcour begins her article by stating, "The challenge of balancing work and family demands is one of today's central concerns for both individuals and organizations."² A great amount of research has been done on time conflicts and priorities. Time and the pressures of life, the time bind, is a confusing, complex circle. As Stefan Klein writes in *The Secret Pulse of Time*,

No previous generation has had so much leisure time and such a long life span. Still, more than a third of all Americans report that they do not have enough time. And the number keeps growing with each new survey. These numbers are dismaying in light of new neurological findings: the feeling of being under constant pressure triggers stress. Chronic stress can have a lasting impact on the brain; it is injurious to our health and lowers our life expectancy. An incessant time bind is insidious particularly because time pressure feeds on itself, and the result is a vicious circle: once we fear that we won't be able to get all our tasks done on time, we lose our grasp of the situation and things go from bad to worse.³

Klein feels that each of us has a role in our perception of time—we can effect how we develop our sense of time, our reaction to the "rhythm of our surroundings."⁴

This is a philosophical, almost spiritual look that is not for everyone, but the wide-ranging illustrations and the imagery of time, stress, and the facets of our lives are fascinating and insightful. The epilogue is especially recommended. The section headings include: Sovereignty over Time, Living in



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Harmony with Your Biological Clock, Cultivating Leisure Time, Experiencing the Moments, Learning to Concentrate, Setting Your Priorities, and Taking It Easy. If interested, read a chapter a day and think about his scenarios for a relaxing but challenging exercise.

In his introduction to *Work to Live*, Joe Robinson says we need to “indulge in things that feed the soul, not just the resume.”⁵ He uses some interesting phrases—standard of non-living, fried brain cells, zombie gait overwork ethic. He notes the book is “for all of you who don’t want to sacrifice your brief stint on this planet . . . for everyone who feels that a standard of living is meant to be lived, touched, felt, and tasted, not treated as a statistical bludgeoning device.”⁶ “You have to play your own game, one that’s in accord with your view of success and happiness, one that reflects our priorities.”⁷ Witty, informative, with breezy writing, Robinson, the founder of Work to Live (www.worktolive.info) makes his points very clearly. Well worth reading from cover to cover; if time is an issue (and given the message of his book, this would be very ironic!), at least review the chapters “The Office Commandments” and “Principles for a Sane Workplace.” Well worth reading to help find balance and understand why that balance needs to be maintained.

One-time Harvard professor and successful businessman, Mark Albion begins his book contrasting things that happened on one day in his life—his purchase of a new Jaguar and his discovery that his mother had stage-four cancer.⁸ What follows are a number of stories of people that Albion calls his heroes. Written almost as if he was talking to the reader, each of the heroes tells the story of their challenges and choices and how they moved from just earning a paycheck to so much more. Albion closes with details of his mother’s life. One of her quotes is “When you realize your time is limited, and you don’t know which day will be your last . . . it really frees you up to live to the fullest.”⁹ He writes “Many of us do things backward. We blindly seek the jobs that will allow us to make the money and obtain the status that we think we need, and then we try to find out what is really important in our life. Instead, you first need to express your own truth and serve it through your work.”¹⁰ This is a fast-moving book interspersed with dozens of appropriate quotes from people ranging from Albert Schweitzer to Ellen DeGeneres. This is a must read. It will make you think about, and maybe reorganize, the balance in your life.

Byock, author of *The Four Things That Matter Most*, is a doctor of palliative care.¹¹ However his advice pertains not just to the end of life, but to all stages of life. “Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you . . . Comprising just eleven words, these four short sentences carry the core wisdom of what people who are dying have taught me about what matters most in life.”¹² With these few words he begins a remarkable book. Maybe in our work environment using the word love is too extreme but could the words respect or admire be substituted and

thereby give a new and useful perspective to our work endeavors? He uses what he has learned in his work with the dying to give a fresh, caring perspective to the living and by extension, to the workplace and home. Case studies abound and the book is fast, easy reading, but very moving. He ends by writing, “If I can become the change I wish to see, my friends and family may take notice and respond in kind.”¹³ These worlds are just as applicable in our workplace as in our personal lives. A must read with some time to contemplate what he is saying.

The brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough. They’re there to stop the other people.

Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich writes the forward for *The Myth of Work-Life Balance*.¹⁴ He begins with his own realization that his job was consuming his life. As he wrote, his job was “eating away at my time, energy and sense of self” and he decided to leave his position in President Clinton’s cabinet.¹⁵ The underlying theme of the book is that we must look beyond policies and other limited initiatives to solve the WLB issue. Work is becoming increasingly demanding but both giving and receiving care is essential to personal and societal well-being. This international study used interviews, group meetings, and country profiles to gather information. After the introductory chapters, the authors explore changes in the workplace, leisure, family issues, and gender issues over the last half of a century. The last chapter, “Vision and Strategies for Change,” begins with, “If people cannot harmonise their lives in equitable and satisfying ways, individuals, families, communities and organizations will suffer.”¹⁶ This clearly states the importance of the issue. In the increasingly technological world of the library, constantly changing, seemingly constantly accelerating, this need for harmonizing life seems to be a given. The book’s concluding reflection is that there is no easy fix, that “changes that foster equitable, satisfying and sustainable opportunities for harmonising the many parts of people’s lives have to occur at multiple levels.”¹⁷ Change also needs collaboration to address this complex issue and courage to work toward social justice and well-being. A very interesting book that brings a broad perspective to the issue.

For an in-depth look at a number of important, but often ignored, issues in WLB and the family, see Paludi and Neidermeyer’s book.¹⁸ Chapters focus on parenting issues; pregnancy; flexibility in the small workplace; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. The chapter on resources is especially pertinent. Another more scholarly than practical book, but it is interesting and provocative.

Work Less, Live More? has an international perspective with chapter contributors from around the world.¹⁹ The editors state that good WLB ensures “that workers can satisfactorily combine paid work with private life and, moreover, gain satisfaction in both.”²⁰ Three factors are

summarized: there is “a gap between employer’s work-life balance intentions and employees work-life experience,” current WLB articulation of the relationship between work and life is conceptually limited because work and life are assumed to constitute distinct spheres and there are differing viewpoints with “myopic readings of life and work importantly overlook work as a source of satisfaction and life as encompassing more than just (child) care.”²¹ They review the use of the term balance, summarizing the work of C. Nippert-Eng that boundary might be a better term than balance. Nippert-Eng classes people as segmentors (distinct boundary between work and home) and integrators (home and work are “one giant category of social existence”).²² Other chapters discuss aspects of work and home in a decidedly complex, academic manner. Much of the work is outside the sphere of librarianship (hairdressing and sports) but chapters on working at home, Hochschild’s “On the Edge of the Time Bind: Time and Market Culture” and Ransome’s “The Boundary Problem In Work-Life Balance Studies” are especially interesting. A critical chapter is MacInnes’s “Work-Life Balance: Three Terms in Search of a Definition.” Each chapter is well-referenced. While not of practical use, this is an interesting academic review of the topic for those interested.

For a detailed review of the literature and an analysis of WLB, *Striking a Balance* is worth a look.²³ Drago identifies three gaps: care (those in need receiving care versus those with substandard or no care), gender (professional careers versus no career or low pay), and income (increasing gap between high and low pay) and three norms: motherhood (women should be mothers, low pay jobs), ideal worker (total commitment to career and rewards for this), and individualism (no government help for those in need). Each of these gaps and norms are developed in a chapter. The book ends with The Work and Family Bill of Rights from Take Care Net (www.takecarenet.org) and an excellent bibliography. The book is worth a careful review and discussion.

Brick walls are there for a reason. And once you get over them—even if someone has practically had to throw you over—it can be helpful to others to tell them how you did it.

In the forward to Meiksins’s and Whalley’s book we read that “The general consensus is that Americans of all sorts are overworked and saddled with so many obligations that we no longer have time to enjoy our lives as we thought we would. . . . Yet few researchers have explored what people actually do once they decide they’ve had enough and intentionally set out to restore balance between work and everyday life.”²⁴ This book looks at this very issue. The authors state, “We wanted to find out how a sample of contemporary employees managed to create work environments that gave them time to do other things.”²⁵ The book focuses on people involved with technology (engineers, computer professions, technical writers) in a wide range of work envi-

ronments. The format is case studies and discussion. They conclude, “putting work in its place is not always easy, but it can be done.”²⁶ Chapters discuss the various reasons workers want to reduce hours, how this affects their perceptions of self and of work, the logistics of reconfiguring work, effect on home life, and suggestions for addressing a customized work life. Easy to read, the book may address problems with usable solutions. Definitely worth a look.

While not directly about WLB, *The Mismatched Worker* looks at “the structural conditions that affect people’s ability to find jobs that match their qualifications, interests, and needs.”²⁷ Work is much more than a place where a certain number of hours is spent doing something. Instead, Kalleberg writes, “Work is a central activity in all societies. For most people, work is the major source of their income and social status. The workplace is also where people develop social relationships and are integrated into social life. Not surprisingly, studies show that work has an important impact on one’s identity and psychological well-being and is related to a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, both on and off the job.”²⁸ For many, work is miserable because there is a difference between skills and job requirements (both over-skilled and under-skilled) or contrary demands between the job and the worker (too many or too few hours, too little pay, too little time with family). These mismatches can be summarized as skills, geographic, temporal, earnings, and work-family mismatches, and each is explored with some suggestions on how to alleviate them. He provides a good review of the literature, case studies to clearly illustrate his points, and insightful suggestions. As he writes, “Workers increasingly expect their jobs to satisfy their preferences for challenging work and meaningful social relationships in addition to economic success.”²⁹ Work is becoming more than a paycheck. Understanding the mismatches in the workplace may lead to happier, more productive employees and a better work environment. Worthwhile reading.

Life Matters is a title that clearly articulates its theme.³⁰ The Merrills write, “it has become more and more apparent that work, family, money, and time are not simply isolated arenas in which people can make incremental improvements and reap huge success. They are the essential elements of a highly interrelated and complex system.”³¹ In the first chapter there is a twenty-five item evaluation on work, family, time, money, and wisdom to give a “holistic picture . . . and the degree to which you feel you integrate them into a satisfying, balanced whole.”³² The book has bulleted lists, personal accounts from each author, and case studies to help guide the reader to a balanced life. In their final chapter they write, “In our busy, entertainment- and media-saturated world, it’s easy to get so focused on *events* that we forget that the real joys and contributions in life are in day-to-day living. But the truth is, while events are like punctuation in writing—and great events may even be the exclamation points—the meaning is not in the punctuation. It is the crucible of day-to-day life that renders knowledge, experience, and wisdom. And most

often it is in the crucible of day-to-day living that our greatest contributions—often unknowingly—are made.”³³ Life—all of it matters—and the Merrills provide practical information to keep that life in balance.

If you’d like a way to gauge your own status on WLB, read *Career Management and Work-Life Integration*, which is targeted to “anyone faced with the challenge of succeeding in a career while trying to live a happy, well-balanced life.”³⁴ The authors “help readers develop their own view and reference points on what it means to be successful or to have a life that is balanced. We believe there is no such thing as actual success, at least not as judged by others. Success, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.”³⁵ There are a number of exercises in the book to help in self-assessment. This practical book is based on courses taught by the authors. Easy to read, it may be the exact mix of information and encouragement needed to begin a self-examination of one’s own beliefs about WLB.

Complaining does not work as a strategy. We all have finite time and energy. Any time we spend whining is unlikely to help us achieve our goals.

The number of articles that look at some aspect of WLB is staggering. Many deal with particular countries or specific types of jobs, most in business or human resource publications. A few will be discussed here but a search in a number of databases may turn up others that address your particular interests.

The March 2007 issue of *Journal of Human Resource Management* is devoted to WLB. It has a number of intriguing articles that raise some points not addressed in other readings. The editor’s comments include:

The phrase “work-life balance” tends to imply that “work” and “life” are two distinct spheres of activity when the former is, clearly, part of the latter that our lives are divided only between “paid work” and some other, undifferentiated, (and under elaborated) activity called “life”; that work is somehow bad and life is good, so we need less of the former and more of the latter . . . and that WLB might be attainable if governments could only find the appropriate regulatory frameworks, and employers and employees could only change their (possibly old-fashioned) inflexible ways of behaving.³⁶

He further states that “it is unclear who is driving the WLB agenda,” who is responsible for WLB, who benefits from it, and the extent of the issue with different geographic, gender, age, and income factors.³⁷ The nine papers in the issue “illuminate, and investigate, at least some of the problems that lie buried within the discourses and practices of WLB.”³⁸ All are scholarly, different perspectives on the topic that are worth a look.

Sturges and Guest present an interesting statistical study of British graduates and their beliefs about work and life outside work as well as their actual working situation. The study shows a strong desire for balance while “the hours graduates work undermine the possibility of achieving it.”³⁹ Noting the need for additional study, the paper presents some interesting insight into newer workers and their conflicts. Worth a fast read.

For a more personal and very different look at WLB, read Caproni’s article. She suggests “that the well-intentioned efforts of organization researchers and practitioners to promote work/life balance may simultaneously undermine men’s and women’s ability to live fulfilling and productive lives.”⁴⁰ She used both an analysis of the literature and her own personal history to make an alternative interpretation. She concludes with, “Balance no longer was my goal; living a full life was. . . I realized that beauty, not balance is a very worthwhile guide to life.”⁴¹ It is an intriguing article that is worth reading for the perspective.

Valcour used a telephone survey on work hours, job complexity, and work-time control as compared to satisfaction with work-family balance. She found that there was a positive correlation. It’s worth a look. It might even give ideas for running a study locally.

For a global perspective see Bloom and Van Reenen’s survey of business on competition, productivity, and WLB. They find that

tougher competition raises management quality, but does not reduce work-life balance. In other words, employees and managers end up “working smarter” rather than just “working harder” . . . There *was* a positive correlation between higher productivity and superior WLB policies. But this was seen to be spurious—once we controlled for management practices, the correlation between productivity and WLB policies was essentially zero.⁴²

This calls into questions some other WLB research. Interesting insight for the manager, if not necessary reading.

Reinforcing the complexity of work and family situations, Premeaux, Adkins, and Mossholder survey workers about the effectiveness of family-friendly policies and job satisfaction. They are looking mostly at conflict between work and family roles, noting that these are “multi-dimensional, multi-role, and multi-form phenomenon.”⁴³ They “suggest that researchers and managers alike must approach the balancing of home and work holistically.”⁴⁴ This is a detailed statistical look at complex interactions that is interesting if not necessarily essential reading. Quick, Henley, and Quick also focus on work-family conflict and balance.⁴⁵ This is a good focused bibliography. Worth a look for its perspective on the topic.

Just because you're in the driver's seat . . . doesn't mean you have to run people over.

This column began with the statement that we all have a limited number of days; how we use them is a decision we all will make. While most of the works cited are academic looks at the research field of WLB, the glue that holds this column together is the profound insight of Pausch. In his very honest talk available on YouTube and his extraordinary book, we learn a great deal about life and what is important, how we need to consider the balance we put to those aspects of our life. As he notes “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.”⁴⁶ May we all play our hand with the integrity and love that he did.

This column is dedicated the memory of Randy Pausch and the family, students, and all of those people affected by the teaching and thoughts of this exceptional person. Pausch quotes advice given by Krishnamurti, an Indian spiritual leader, about what to say to a dying person. He said, “tell your friend that in his death, a part of you dies and goes with him. Where he goes, you also go. He will not be alone.”⁴⁷ I think it can be said that the reverse is also true—that something of the person who has died can stay with us and we are not alone. The truth of that person can stay with us. That is the case with Dr. Pausch. May we all learn from the way he lived his life and the gift he left for us all.

Author's note: Quotations and bold headings are taken from The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch (New York: Hyperion, 2008).

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