

The Truth Behind Work-Life Balance

Firms should define 'balance' and professionals needs to be realistic

People at practically every business or firm that I have worked with make eager and well-meaning statements about balanced lives. But in most firms, both the leadership and the staff struggle to define what exactly that means.

Consider this problem: It is a Tuesday and your son has to go to the doctor for a physical at 4 p.m. Is it okay to leave the office at 3:30 so you can go? More importantly, does leaving at 3:30 result in you being labeled a “lifestyle professional” and seen as not working very hard? What if this is a recurring event like you being your child’s soccer coach with practices every Tuesday at 4 p.m.? No firm is going to say “No, you can’t go to your child’s event” but the problem is there’s a hidden price you pay for the perception that you’re choosing family over career and not working hard enough.

Defining Balance

The best thing a firm can do for everyone is to define what “balance” really means. A more open dialogue begins with the expectations of the firm for their employees and the consequences for not meeting these expectations. Employees can then make their personal choices while being fully informed of the repercussions.

Firms, of course, need to be more open in listing everything they expect of their professionals in order for them to be successful. How many clients should they handle? What should their new business development look like? What participation is required in the firm’s management and what about community involvement?

With all of the work commitments defined and considered, some hard questions should also be raised such as:

- Are the only people who can achieve the expectations are those with no kids or a spouse willing to take care of the family?
- Are we creating expectations that cannot be met by some employees – specifically working parents?
- How much are we really dedicated to giving our employees a balanced life?

One approach could be to define the annual hours worked for your professionals. For example, the expectation is for all to work 2,500 hours a year, which is 500 more than an average 40-hour work week. With this explicitly stated, professionals can then decide whether they can take on the extracurricular activities like coaching soccer.

Professionals, Be Realistic

Professionals have to be more aware of the realities of their career. If you’re in a firm that has the culture of an Olympic team, you should expect to work hard. If you want to have the success and income of a star professional, you have to match that level of effort.

While businesses need to explicitly state their expectations of work, overall, the work-life balance is inherent in a firm’s culture, set by the behaviors of its leadership. If they work 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., you should expect to work the same hours and understand the negative impact that leaving early could have.

And, remember, your career has stages. You can break it down into four parts and the worst life balance issues will only last a few years, in the growth phase. As you start gaining trust and grow within a company, making more money, taking on more responsibility, there will be growing expectations of how you perform and how long you work every day. Tough it out for the growth years and you'll have the payout as you enter the next stage. You can also do it at your own pace. It's your professional journey and everyone gets to different levels at different times.

There's no equation to achieving a perfect work-life balance. It's something that changes as your career changes and will need adjusting along the way.

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