



# A JUGGLING ACT

Pick Up These Strategies to Address Work-Life Balance

by Pamela M. Schumacher, MS, CCMP

**A**n educator's life is a constant balancing act of juggling personal and professional responsibilities while managing competing expectations. Achieving a semblance of balance between work and personal commitments takes careful thought and boundary setting, because ignoring work-life balance can lead to burnout, stress, and a diminished passion for teaching.<sup>1</sup>

## Up in the Air

Definitions for *work-life balance* vary. Research suggests that work-life balance is the ability to accomplish the goals set in both work and personal life and achieve satisfaction in all life domains. Other definitions say the term “balance” implies equal engagement in and satisfaction with work and personal life roles.<sup>2</sup>

“An accepted definition is the proportion and balancing of time someone spends

working compared with the time spent on other dimensions of one's life. This is not a static balance because work and life demands will shift,” says Sean McCandless, PhD, an associate professor of public and nonprofit management at the University of Texas at Dallas. “Work should not dominate one's life, and as people with many aspects to our lives, we must have time for ourselves, our families, our friends, and our interests in order to be healthy and happy.”

“My personal definition is accomplishing what I want to at work and balancing that with what I want to accomplish at home. This includes not worrying about work while at home or vice versa,” says Joy Mendez, CMA (AAMA), CBCS, an allied health programs director at Apollo Career Center in Lima, Ohio.

Laurence J. Stybel, EdD, cofounder of Stybel, Peabody & Associates Inc., in Boston, sees it differently: “I don't like the phrase ‘work-life balance’ because it creates the

image of a scale, which is a binary framework—you're either working or taking care of your family. If you frame the problem from an ordinal perspective, it's no longer an either/or situation. Ordinal thinking refers to conceptualizing something within a list of things that can be shifted or combined.”

Dr. Stybel explains that thinking in terms of trade-offs is a better way to approach work-life issues. For example, Dr. Stybel connected with potential clients for his company by joining a committee at his church. “Eventually one of them became a client, thanks to the relationship I made working on the committee,” he explains. “This activity supported my professional goal of business development, and it assisted my family life. It's important to look for synergies that benefit all areas.”

## Don't Drop the Ball

Work-life balance among educators has been a topic of intense discussion for decades.

## Eyes on the Prize

Use these tips for resetting<sup>4</sup>:

- **Budget your time like you would your finances.** Set an outer limit of how much time you spend per week on work.
- **Set boundaries.** If you're working at home, have a designated workspace so you can keep work out of your family-focused space.
- **Streamline lesson planning.** Use plans others have developed and tweak them to fit your needs. Pair new units that require more planning with familiar units that demand less time.
- **Delegate.** Allow others to step in and help. Can students do any of your tasks? Are there family members who can help with meals, errands, or cleaning?
- **Take breaks.** Give yourself permission to meditate for 10 minutes or go for an afternoon walk. At a minimum, stop throughout the day and take three deep belly breaths.

It's no surprise, given the wide range of challenges they face<sup>3</sup>:

- Increased administrative tasks
- Expectations for extended availability
- Pressure to meet testing benchmarks and curriculum standards
- Budgetary issues and declining student enrollment

"These challenges cause pressure, stress, and burnout," says Dr. McCandless. "Professionals such as teachers and medical assistants experience acute stressors implicating our emotions, and when emotional stressors get to us, our burnout goes up. And when we do not have solutions for burnout, of which work-life balance is a key solution, then we become less productive, and our emotional and physical health suffers.

"Workplaces are stressful," he notes. "Getting what we need to survive—whether it's food or money to purchase other resources—is

stressful. Burnout is the exhaustion that results from workplace stressors and pressures that go unmanaged. These stressors can be caused by heavy work burdens; being treated unfairly; not having clear job expectations; poor work dynamics, especially in interpersonal situations; not feeling valued; and just being tired of what the job entails. Without some release of or control of these stressors, mental and physical exhaustion will only compound, and there is only so much we can take."

Prolonged stress and lack of attention to work-life issues has many negative consequences for educators, including decreasing job satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of leaving teaching, withdrawing either physically or psychologically from work, inappropriate anger, and increased alcohol and drug consumption. It can also cause an individual to experience excessive anxiety, mental fatigue, and burnout, while increasing depression.<sup>1</sup>

Mendez, an educator for 22 years, has seen work-life challenges for a long time: "I think the struggle with work-life balance has always been there. ... [And yet] it's more of an issue now because having emails on your phone and access to them 24/7 has exacerbated the issue."

### Finding a Rhythm

Strategies exist on multiple levels to improve work-life situations. "Personal-level strategies include relaxing, exercising, sleeping better, engaging in meditation, taking time to reflect on one's day, and writing down stressors in a journal," notes Dr. McCandless. "At an interpersonal level, having friends and colleagues with whom you can vent and even have fun with and seek support is essential.

"Personal-level strategies ... can do only so much if the work environment has perpetual stress," he continues. "Bosses should find ways to mitigate stress by providing greater clarity on tasks, finding more resources for support, being supportive, and advocating for employees with higher-ups. Workplaces can structure time to relax and even offer mental and physical health programs to aid in overall health. At the societal level, having greater awareness of the extent and implications of work-life balance is critical

because this awareness could inform broader policies regarding workplace dynamics."

Dr. Stybel recommends setting clear boundaries with supervisors, colleagues, and students using something akin to a pain chart. "Educators are getting maybe 120–150 emails daily, and they're all important, but are they [all] urgent? Create a system like a pain chart to deal with emails ... using a scale from 1 to 10 to describe how urgent the message is. One can mean, 'Get back to me in a week,' whereas 10 means 'Something exploded; I need to talk to you now!' This can be used in all areas of your life. When you're interviewing [for a job] you can ask, 'On a scale of 1 to 10, how flexible are you about me working from home if I have a sick child or need to take care of an elderly parent?' Again, you're better served by adopting an ordinal—instead of binary—way of thinking."

Michael Drinan, AS, HBOT, CEIS, CMA (AAMA), a hyperbaric oxygen technician at Beverly Hospital Wound and Hyperbaric Medicine Center, in Beverly, Massachusetts, agrees that work-life balance starts with the job interview: "Make sure to surround yourself with people who are team-oriented and very, very communicative and that your manager cares about you as a person and not just about the company. Team culture is just as important as the salary."

The benefits of working toward harmony and balance in work and life spheres are tremendous, summarizes Dr. McCandless: "You are far likelier to be happy and healthier, both in work and in other aspects of your life. You may even enjoy work more!" ♦

### References

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