

FAST COMPANY

Balance is Bunk!

It's the central myth of the modern workplace: With a few compromises, you can have it all. But it's all wrong, and it's making us crazy. Here's how to have a life anyway.

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It may be that you recently had a week that defied sanity. You faced an impossible deadline at work. You were expected at your daughter's dance recital, at a soccer game, and at a meeting with the kitchen contractor. Then another big project landed in your lap (thanks, boss!). You were exhausted, and your spouse was miffed. And your job? Well, at 11 one night, you finally bailed on that deadline.

And you wondered, What's wrong here? Whatever happened to balance?

The truth is, balance is bunk. It is an unattainable pipe dream, a vain artifice that offers mostly rhetorical solutions to problems of logistics and economics. The quest for balance between work and life, as we've come to think of it, isn't just a losing proposition; it's a hurtful, destructive one.

This is not, of course, what many of us want to believe. In the last generation, balance has won huge cultural resonance. No longer mere cocktail conversation fodder, it has become something like a new inalienable right, creeping into the American ethos if not the Constitution: life, liberty, and the pursuit of balance. Self-actualization and quality time for all!

This hopeful premise, born of the feminist movement, has been promulgated relentlessly since the 1980s by writers like, well, me. (At one point, in the name of balance, I actually diapered my infant daughter on CNN.) The froth fed a sort of industry, as consultants rushed to help businesses help employees balance work and life. That's the point of on-site day care, of breast-feeding rooms, of flextime and telecommuting and take-home dinners from the company cafeteria -- and, more notorious, in days of dotcoms past, of take-your-pet-to-work policies and foosball tables.

But the balance movement is fatally flawed. For those of us trying desperately to keep up with everything that needs doing, it poses two mythical ideals. If we work hard enough at it, one goes, we can have everything. Or if we cut back, we can have just enough to be truly content. The first obliges us to accomplish too much, often at too high a price; the second doesn't let us accomplish enough. Either way, balance is a relic, a fleeting phenomenon of a closed, industrial economy that doesn't apply in a global, knowledge-based world.

There's a better way to think about all this, one that requires us to embrace imbalance. Instead of trying to balance all of our commitments and passions at any one time, let's acknowledge that anything important, and anything done well, demands our full investment. At some times, it may be a demanding child or an unhappy spouse, and the office will suffer. At others, it may be winning the McWhorter account, and child and spouse will have to fend for themselves. Only over time can we really balance a portfolio of diverse experiences.

For now, the balance mania persists: Media mentions have soared in the past five years, and executive coaches say their clients are as consumed by the problem as ever. Employers, meanwhile, are trying desperately to say the right things: Accenture, the big professional-services firm, knows "how important it is for our employees to strike a balance between their work and personal lives." Google offers workers a slew of benefits (On-site dental! Dry cleaning!) billed as "balance enhancers."

But this passion and fury is misspent. All our striving for balance is only making us crazy. Here's how to think about living in a postbalance world.

The Happy Workaholic

Sigmund Freud suggested it first: Imbalance is part of the human condition. The father of psychoanalysis observed that anxiety is a crucial "signal" function, a response to danger -- either external physical danger or internal psychological danger.

That is, anxiety is a central part of our existence. It is a source of creativity and drive; it spurs us to accomplishment. Great leaders, serial innovators, even top sales reps may be driven by a kind of inner demon -- the need to prove themselves, to achieve for fear of being worthless (or, as Freud postulated, for fear of castration).

But it's hard to argue with the result: Such people are incredibly productive. They drive change. And that cuts to the problem with a reductionist view of balance. Simply cutting back on work inevitably fails, because in real life, success in work is predicated on achievement. In a competitive business environment -- which is to say, every business environment -- leadership requires commitment, passion, and, to be blunt, a lot of time.

This isn't a cynical argument in favor of clocking the hours -- though let's face it, in some organizations, that pressure is all too real. Rather, building something great, leading change, truly innovating -- "it's like falling in love. You have to abandon yourself to it," says John Wood. "There's the risk of inherent contradiction between wanting to do something entrepreneurial and wanting to have balance."

Wood is 40 years old. He helped build Microsoft's business in Asia until 1998, when, trekking through Nepal on vacation, he saw villages with few schools and bookless libraries. In response, he started Room to Read, a not-for-profit group that builds schools and libraries and provides books and scholarships to Asian children.

Wood isn't married, though he does date. He loves biking, running, and the annual trek that he takes with friends through Southern Asia. Mostly, though, he loves Room to Read. He'll do 11-hour days in his San Francisco office, have a working dinner, then check email late at night. He works seven days a week, year-round.

But here's how he thinks about it: "I don't look at balance as an ideal. What I look at is, Am I happy? If the answer is yes, then everything else is inconsequential. If you look at the number of hours I work, it's probably extreme. But those hours talking with an adviser over dinner -- is that work? Well, yeah, but it's also stimulating.

"At Microsoft, my definition of balance was getting a decent number of hours outside the office and off email. Now I don't care about that, because the email I check at midnight may come from a person who says he wants to endow a school in Vietnam. So I can't help but read that email, because it's a chance to change a kid's life."

Most achievers don't work hard just at work. They think about their work a lot of the time outside the office. Even if they acknowledge the value of paying attention to their families or their health, they're consumed -- and thrilled -- by the task at hand. Stewart Friedman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, and Sharon Lobel of Seattle University have a term for such folks: "happy workaholics."

Friedman, who has long encouraged business leaders to pursue "whole" lives, thinks it's possible for leaders to be "poster children for balance," as he says. But he also agrees that conventional arguments for balance devalue the work half of the equation. "Work is an experience through which much of life's rewards and opportunities for service can be realized," he says. "Creating value for the world, for the next generation, all our high-minded ideals -- much of work has the potential for giving voice to that sort of aspiration. And most executives are passionate about what they do.

"So if people are fulfilled through their work, why do we question that?"

Balance Is for Fat People

Pavan Vishwakarma is a 25-year-old freelance Web and e-commerce software developer. He lives and works in Bhopal, India, but he has done work for companies in Illinois, Nevada, and Canada. And he has, as he advertises, "no working hours limitation. I can work up to any stretch of time."

You want balance? Vishwakarma doesn't, particularly. He wants to work, and he'll work cheap -- a lot cheaper than you will.

The global economy is antibalance. For as much as Accenture and Google say they value an environment that allows workers balance, they're increasingly competing against companies that don't. You're competing against workers with a lot more to gain than you, who will work harder for less money to get the job done. This is the dark side of the "happy workaholic." Someday, all of us will have to become workaholics, happy or not, just to get by.

Tom Patterson has spent the last year setting up a technology operations center in Hyderabad, India, for MarketTools, the Mill Valley, California, marketing-research company where he's senior vice president of technology and operations. And he has been stunned by what he sees there.

"I'm amazed at the work ethic," he says. "People are hungry, entrepreneurial, and willing to do whatever it takes at great sacrifices. These kids are working for a change in economic status. Things that we take for granted like housing, health care, vacations -- this is what they're looking at. And the difference to them between \$6,000 a year and \$10,000 is huge."

Protest, if you like, against labor exploitation or unfair competition. The reality is, workers in India, China, Brazil, and, inevitably, everywhere else aren't stopping long to worry about it. They make our developed-world notion that workers actually are entitled to balance seem quaintly dated.

For years, work-life advocates have held up as a model the "work to live" ethic of Europeans, who historically have toiled fewer hours than Americans. But those would-be paragons are failing, too. The French government is reconsidering its decision in 2000 to reduce the national workweek to 35 hours. And two of Germany's largest companies, Siemens AG and

DaimlerChrysler, have (with popular support) won union concessions that will force longer hours for employees.

If you're competing against Pavan Vishwakarma -- and ultimately, we all are -- you can't have both a big paycheck and reasonable hours. The laws of economics won't allow it. If we want time with our families, time to give back to our communities, time to stay slim, we're going to have to accept a pay cut -- and even then, we'll have to work darned hard. Hungry beats fat, every time.

The Superman Trap

For many, the great fallacy is not that we aspire to accomplishment but that we aspire to everything else, too. Unwilling to prioritize among things that all seem important, we instead invent for ourselves the possibility of having everything.

In part, this is the inevitable result of the rush of women into the workforce and the proliferation of two-income families. Can any couple facing two full-time jobs, kids, aging parents, groceries, the dog, the bills, and telemarketers at dinnertime expect anything but all stress, all the time?

But it's not just demographics; it's also desire. If women's inner voices in 1963 were saying, as feminist writer Betty Friedan surmised then, "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home," then today many (and many men, too) are saying something different: "I want it all."

So it is that Tina Sharkey, AOL's senior vice president of life management and community, finds herself on a plane two or three days a week, taking photos of her meal, the flight attendants, everything, so her two young kids will know what she does.

Sharkey's routine seems, to many who know her, mind-boggling. She and her husband, fully employed entrepreneur Seth Goldstein, live with their kids in New York. But many of her 250 employees are at AOL's Dulles, Virginia, headquarters. So she spends one or two nights a week at a hotel nearby. Even at home, her workday is a whirl; she typically breaks at 6 p.m. to go home but is back online from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. As "chief everything officer" of her family, as she puts it, Sharkey coordinates the children's care and family meals, and participates in what school functions she can.

She is an extraordinary woman who evinces both intensity and empathy. But her regimen poses a trap for the rest of us. If we work hard enough, we imagine, we can do anything -- and, therefore, everything. "Balance is misleading people," says Laura Nash, who with Howard Stevenson surveyed hundreds of professionals for their new book, *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004). "The problem is, they're looking for a magic bullet, a one-stop solution." It is a peculiarly American quest for perfection, for "a solution in achievements."

You've seen supermen and superwomen: They're the ones at their kids' baseball games, half-watching while tethered to their cell phones (been there). Or they're on the phone at work, sorting out child-care schedules and meal assignments with their nannies and spouses.

The problem, as Nash points out, is that while success at work is largely rooted in achievement, success outside of work mostly isn't. The things most of us say we value in our nonwork lives -- simply caring and being there for others -- aren't a function of accomplishing

anything per se. Contentedness in that realm is less a matter of doing more than of cutting back.

Obvious enough, isn't it? Life is about setting priorities and making trade-offs; that's what grown-ups do. But in our all-or-nothing culture, resorting to those sorts of decisions is too often seen as a kind of failure. Seeking balance, we strive for achievement everywhere, all the time -- and we feel guilty and stressed out when, inevitably, we fall short.

The Book of Life

Do we throw up our hands then? We can't do everything, but neither can we retreat from the things that are important. How do we make work and life happen on our terms?

The short answer is, we don't entirely. But there are saner ways to confront the problem. One is rooted in the short term. In their interviews and surveys, Nash and Stevenson learned that successful professionals who were also happy had found ways to "switch and link" -- to switch the focus of their full attention with lightning speed among activities and people in different realms.

David Zelman, a psychotherapist and executive coach, sees this as a crucial skill successful people must learn. "Can you leave the office in the office? Can you give someone outside the office the same attention you gave your CEO? If you can give your children or your spouse 100% of your attention, even for a brief period, it goes way longer than compromising and giving them some time because you think you should."

The other solution is more about structure. It forces us to take a long-term view. Give up on the promise of balance at any point in time. Instead, consider a life and career as a portfolio. In each chapter, we have different responsibilities and priorities: children, home, travel, aging relatives. We face a corresponding variety of roles and opportunities on the job: a big project, moving up the managerial hierarchy, consulting, a startup, a top leadership role.

Balance, for what the word is worth, then becomes a lifelong quest -- balance among chapters rather than within each chapter. "It gets in people's heads that the ultimate goal is a 50-50 split between work and life," says work-life consultant Cali Williams Yost. "But there are times when I've happily devoted 80% of my time to work -- and other times when I couldn't." The tough part is recognizing the chapters for what they are -- just temporary episodes that together make up a coherent and satisfying whole.

That's why Sharkey finds her current manic lifestyle acceptable -- because, she says, "this is just one chapter in my life." The opportunity to fix and build a business at AOL -- and to create something that brings lasting value to women and families -- is, she believes, worth the frenzy and the compromises. "I feel like I have so much to contribute. I have to leverage myself and contribute in the way I can."

Consider it an exercise in continuous redesign, in adapting to ever-changing circumstances and priorities. For couples, this also requires constant rebalancing of roles and responsibilities: You got the promotion, so I'll telecommute for now -- until my next big opportunity comes up. Those who succeed, says Zelman, are "the people who learn to dance with change, who create and ride the wave." They don't make decisions once or twice, but all the time.

And here's what's crucial: With each decision, these people invest themselves, their passion, and their time in what is most important to them. They also agree to give up something

important; a portfolio life doesn't excuse them from the need to make trade-offs. The decision to reject the mirage of balance requires the discipline to continually prioritize and compromise.

Is that balance? Only in the sense that, over time, things more or less balance out. But that doesn't make it perfect, or easy. In some ways, it's counterinstinctual. It forces us to think differently about our careers and about the contributions we make in all realms of our lives. And it gives us a plan that's valid only until the next baby, project deadline, layoff, or illness.

But all things considered, it could prove a lot saner.

Rethink the mission.

Balance per se isn't a goal. "It's an afterthought, a way of describing the outcome," says executive coach David Zelman. Seeking balance is futile because it's an intangible and, so, impossible to measure. Better to set concrete objectives in areas important to you and plan concrete paths to each goal, Zelman advises.

Design a life of chapters.

Take your life for what it is -- a rich and varied story defined by ever-changing circumstances and priorities. Work determines just some of those. The object is to achieve balance not at any one point, but over the long haul. Doing so means deciding what's important, then ordering your work and life accordingly.

Within each chapter, do what you're good at.

A small portion of what you can do at work accounts for most of your value. So focus on that, and cut out the rest. For Bill Shore, founder of Share Our Strength, "the issue is, if someone else can do it, I shouldn't." The corollary: Find capable colleagues who can pick up where you leave off.

Redesign continuously.

Work and life are like a kaleidoscope, with many pieces shifting all the time -- and the chapters aren't always so distinct. "As my priorities change, I have to reevaluate," says Elizabeth Vandever, a vice president with the BOC Group, the British gas company. "I have to revisit what I'm doing regularly and justify it to myself."

Switch and link.

Harvard professors Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson say some high-performing executives can switch their focus "with lightning speed" among activities that provide happiness, significance, achievement, and legacy. That can mean taking a break to celebrate a staff win -- or leaving your cell phone behind on your vacation.

Pick your spots.

Not everything goes according to plan. And that's okay. "It's about not sweating the little things," says Tina Sharkey, an AOL senior vice president. "That's the only way I'm able to cope." When caterers came the wrong day for a brunch she was hosting, she didn't blow up; she just ate the extra fee and asked them to come back the next day.

Lower your standards.

Achievers are slaves to their own standards. Relax them, and odds are no one will notice. "Let's define what's negotiable," says executive coach Madeleine Homan. "Maybe there's a report that's expected -- but I'm going to do one that's twice as long and a day early? Really, nobody cares."