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WORK AND LIFE: A BALANCING ACT

A funny thing happens when you Google the phrase “work-life balance.” Lots of websites come up from all over the English-speaking world: New Zealand, Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia. They feature a wealth of resources: government studies and initiatives, employer-funded institutes and union-sponsored programs, books and newspaper articles. Deep, ongoing national conversations are taking place about bringing professional and personal lives into harmony.

What about America? There are some helpful books, and private consultants offer online and onsite workshops. But the official silence is deafening. A healthy balance between work and life does not seem to be a policy priority. It is left up to individual employees and enlightened employers to address the question.

New Zealand’s Department of Labor has crystallized the central dilemma: “Are you able to make a life while making a living?” Balance gets neglected in the daily grind. Hectic days can become ongoing, relentless hamster wheels. We often forget how to step off.

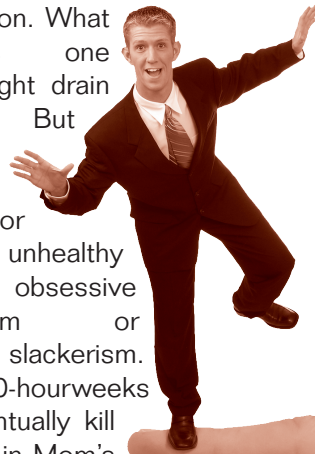
Employers realize that healthier employees are better workers, but a true definition of wellness goes beyond physical fitness to include emotional, spiritual and even social health. Over the long term, it becomes perilous to neglect the basic human need to nurture interests outside of narrow work and family responsibilities. Our horizons are broadened and spirits renewed through exploring creative pursuits and getting involved in helping the community.

What defines a healthy balance? Each of us has to craft an individual answer to this question. What invigorates one person might drain another. But there are obvious medically or financially unhealthy extremes: obsessive workaholism or layabout slackerism. Putting in 90-hour weeks might eventually kill you; living in Mom’s basement because you’re jobless at 35 might give her the same idea!

After talking with thousands of New Zealanders, Labor officials arrived at an eloquent definition: “A balanced life is one where we spread our energy and effort – emotional, intellectual, imaginative, spiritual and physical – between key areas of importance. The neglect of one or more areas, or anchor points, may threaten the vitality of the whole.”

The image of being anchored is central. In the past, one’s very survival may have depended on forging physical links, like farmers helping each other get crops in before a frost. The hyperconnectedness of today’s technology means individuals may have many superficial links to other people and the world around them, via cellphone, satellite, or computer. But deep ties to neighbors, communities and coworkers have sometimes loosened or been set adrift.

In this issue of the Messenger we will look at two important strategies for reconnecting to ourselves and to our communities: vacations and volunteering. Next issue, we will look closely at freeing up our schedules, at work and at home, with practical tips on organization and time management. The goal is to provide both inspiration and ideas for restoring balance to our busy lives.



WORK-LIFE BALANCE BASICS **6 Second Summary:**

- ☛ A healthy balance between work and life gets easily lost in the rush of everyday activities.
- ☛ With longer work hours and less vacation time, Americans must make a conscious effort and take creative steps to integrate breaks into their routines.
- ☛ Volunteering contributes to a balanced life by reconnecting individuals and communities, improving the physical and spiritual health of both.

VACATIONS: CHANGING ATTITUDES WITHOUT CHANGING LATITUDES

"Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, since to remain constantly at work will cause you to lose power of judgment. Go some distance away because a lack of harmony or proportion is more readily seen." Even five hundred years ago, Leonardo da Vinci recognized the importance of taking breaks. The prolific inventor and artist understood that stepping back from work enhances both productivity and perspective.

As a 21st century Italian, da Vinci would have plenty of vacation days, but he would wonder how his American friends ever find the time to go away and relax. In most of the industrialized world, governments mandate vacation time: British workers get 25 days, Germans, 30; virtually all of France takes August off. Not so in the United States – full-time workers average 10 days, but 26% of Americans report having no vacation time at all.

The statistics on hours worked are even more alarming. Between 1977 and 1997, Americans working full-time added 3.5 hours to their work week, taking it to 47.1 hours, compared to a European average of 40.3. That translates to Americans working 12 weeks more per year. Maybe it's something more than the antioxidants in red wine protecting the French from heart disease and cancer?

The great thing about a vacation is that it takes us outside of ourselves, away from the everyday routine and into a different environment. Sometimes a vacation challenges us, in a healthy and fun way, to go outside our comfort zone and explore unfamiliar places, activities and foods. Sometimes it's just a great chance to veg out, and let other people worry about making beds and preparing meals.

When your work schedule (or budget constraints) won't allow you a week in

the tropics, how can you recharge your batteries without changing time zones? One strategy is to try a virtual vacation: a day of adventure or relaxation close to home.

With as little as one day off and some creative planning, a virtual vacation can provide some of the same benefits as a trip far away. Part of the fun is the anticipation. Daydream and brainstorm: what adventures can you undertake, what treats can you indulge yourself in, close to home? Never gone snowshoeing in the moonlight? Never had a spa day of seaweed wraps and mud baths? Haven't visited some quirky local tourist attractions? Always wanted to take an all-day intensive workshop in watercolor painting or cabinet making?

To prepare, it's important to clear the decks of practical concerns and let others know you'll be "out of town."

Step one is to disconnect from the technological tethers that moor you to the daily grind – cell phones, pagers, e-mail. Your boss wouldn't be able to reach you in Borneo. For a virtual vacation to feel like a real one, you need to make yourself electronically unavailable.

If you have a family, step two is to make child care (or even husband and pet care!) arrangements to preserve the day from interruptions.

Step three? Put yourself in a vacation frame of mind and enjoy the activity, or pampered inactivity, you have planned – without dwelling on chores undone or errands unrun. Getting away from everyday concerns and letting go of stress, even for a day, can detoxify the spirit and launch you back into the busy world of work and family with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

Don't forget to send yourself a postcard!

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

The benefits of volunteering go beyond helping worthwhile organizations and individuals. Research has shown a remarkable array of positive effects – on the volunteer! Scientifically demonstrated benefits include:

↳ **Improved physical health:** better cardiac and immune system function; increased endorphins (a "helper's high"); decreased insomnia, pain and depression.

↳ **Enhanced psychological strength:** improved self-esteem and sense of purpose; greater feeling of social connection and responsibility; decreased sense of alienation; lower incidence of problem behaviors.

↳ **Increased longevity:** seniors who volunteer live longer, perhaps because social interaction buffers them against stress and illness.

In addition to these direct personal advantages, volunteering helps us keep a more balanced perspective about our lives. Working together – to help neighbors in need, to protect fragile environments, to promote a treasured cultural resource – these cooperative endeavors have a snowball effect of boosting community solidarity and pride. Volunteering creates healthier individuals and healthier communities.

Resources

- Robert K. Johnston, et al., *Life Is Not Work, Work Is Not Life: Simple Reminders for Finding Balance in a 24/7 World*. [Berkeley CA: Wildcat Canyon Press, 2001.] Charming, thought-provoking collection of brief anecdotes and meditations.
- Gordon and Ronni Lamont, *Work-Life Balance: Change the Way You Live with Work*. [London: Sheldon Press, 2001.] Busy pair of British professionals charts a practical course: streamline the unnecessary busy-ness out of your business life to make room for a healthier balance.
- CDC's Recommendations on Physical Activity and Volunteering: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/volunteering_table.htm. A multi-tasker's dream: chart of ways to serve your community while burning more than 200 calories an hour.

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