

Work-life integration over work-life balance

In everyday parlance, we refer to the competing priorities of work and life as 'work-life balance'. However, this phrase creates an unhelpful dichotomy, suggesting 'either' or 'or'. Balance is a faulty metaphor that implies that an equal amount of time is split between work and all the other aspects of life.



It ignores quality of time, satisfaction and synergies. Work-life *balance* is seen as a zero-sum game or a problem to be solved instead of recognising that it is a *polarity* to be managed. It is better reframed as work-life integration. Adopting a both/and mindset.

Work-life integration is not about achieving the right equation of time and effort distributed among your commitments. It's more a matter of choice and trade-offs than time. This means aligning your behaviour and choices with your values, i.e. what's most important to you. For example, you might choose to work over a

weekend. Or you might choose to attend to personal or family matters during 'office hours'. Integration goes hand in hand with flexibility, a core value.

How to achieve work-life integration

Adopt a values-based approach

- ✓ Invest the time in clarifying your values and what is most important to you in your work and life.
- ✓ Identify conflicting values. You can't be unhappy at home and happy at work.
- ✓ Make the necessary trade-offs and choices to synchronise your values in both roles.
- ✓ Select behaviours that require you to be true to your values in both roles.

Manage the boundaries between your life and work

- ✓ Treat them as equally important in achieving your work-life purpose.
- ✓ Satisfaction in one rubs off on the other. This is a holistic approach.
- ✓ Learn to shift gear seamlessly from one to the other. This takes more thought and energy than you think.
- ✓ When required, consciously let go of one to devote time to the other without feeling guilty.
- ✓ Focus on the 'big rocks'; what's crucial before investing precious time in lesser priorities.
- ✓ Master the art of saying No. Preserve your time and energy for what truly matters.
- ✓ Plan and organise your time and activities to satisfy the values in work and life.
- ✓ Attempting to do two together can compromise both. Imagine pushing your toddler on a swing while managing a client's expectations on the phone.
- ✓ Use hybrid working to integrate work and home roles and manage boundaries.

Conclusion

Quality, fulfilment and meaning, not time, unify work and life. The opposite is loss and regret. Each aspect of your life is like a flower petal; when all are in full bloom, life radiates beauty and fulfilment.

References

In preparing this post, I acknowledge:

- ✓ Why leaders should aim for work-life integration over work-life balance by Jennifer Deal and Marian Ruderman, Centre for Creative Leadership, August 8, 2024.
- ✓ From work-life balance to work-life integration by Colleen Frankwitz, Korn Ferry, 2022.