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The hot topic of Work-Life Balance

While Work-Life Balance (WLB) is a term that has been around for a number of years, it has practically become a household phrase since the arrival of the pandemic and the many pandemic-related changes in our lives. One of the most notable changes brought on by the pandemic is the new way of working, which has been the case for so many. Specifically, more people are working from home today than ever before. It doesn't take much to figure out that when we work in the same space as where we live our lives, there's bound to be some kind of issue that develops. When the workspace and non-workspace are the same physical space, it's easy for the boundaries separating work and non-work to become blurred.

What is WLB?

The phrase WLB is fairly self-explanatory. In simple terms, WLB can be described as the relationship between one's role at work and one's other life roles. What makes the concept of WLB important is the fact that it speaks to the availability of *resources* for the work and non-work domains. Specifically, it's the interplay, or interaction, between such resource availability that is key. Let's look this from beyond the technical lens.

Time and *energy* can be viewed as examples of resources that are critical for both work and our lives outside of work. In fact, one could argue that time and energy are the two major resources as we examine WLB. If the time that you devote to work is well-balanced with the time given for your life outside of work, your chances of achieving WLB increase. Similarly, if the energy that you devote to your work matches the energy available for your life outside of work, the likelihood of achieving WLB improves. However, as you probably already know, achieving such WLB nirvana is not as simple as it may sound.

Let's say that the amount of time that you devote to work is well-balanced with time that's made available for your life outside of work, but all of your energy is spent at work. The quality of your non-work time may suffer. If you're in overdrive while at work, but too exhausted to do anything other than binge-watch Netflix after work, then your work and your life outside of work are not well-balanced. The same can be said for energy. If your level of energy is similar whether you're at work or at home, but the time that you allot to each is skewed, then you've likely not achieved WLB.

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Different strokes for different folks

It should come as no surprise to you that there is no magic WLB formula. The balance that we're all trying to achieve is different for everyone. It will vary from one individual to the next based on a number of factors. Personality will play an important part in what the WLB formula looks like for you. Some people like a true balance between work and non-work, while others have a preference for one or the other. If you're doing your life's work, your idea of WLB will likely differ from someone who has a J-O-B that serves as a means to pay the bills. Similarly, if you have invested a great deal of time, energy, and money preparing for your job – this could be through formal education, apprenticeships, or work experience – your view of what you do for a living may differ from someone whose job requires little or no skill/training. In turn, your perception may influence your personal WLB formula.

It's important to remember that WLB can be viewed through different lenses. While we tend to see WLB in terms of our own lives and experiences, employers have their own ways of looking at it too. What you may consider to be a well-balanced experience of your work and non-work domains, may not work for your employer. The ability to find the balance of what works for you and is acceptable to your employer adds an important variable to the equation. Once again, WLB can be a little more elusive than we'd like it to be.

Technology and WLB

It's fair to say that advancements in technology have had a profound effect on WLB. Our ability to connect to our jobs from outside of the office has made it possible for us to work from virtually anywhere in the world – as long as we have an internet connection. While technology has created many conveniences, it has also tethered us to our jobs. In some cases, our ability to connect to our jobs has created the equivalent of being on-call beyond our regular working hours. In essence, for many of us, technology has become an invisible leash.

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The Jetsons was a cartoon that debuted in the 1960s and came back for a brief period in the 1980s. It gave us a rather attractive version of what a futuristic, high-tech world would look like. As computers and robots did most of the work, humans got to enjoy a life of leisure. Our reality turned out to be a bit different. So, what's the takeaway? The takeaway is the importance of finding ways of making technology work for us, not against us.

Expectations

Technology moves fast, and that which is “new and shiny” can easily become a “must-have”. This is where caution should enter the scene. Just because we *can* connect and be on-call, doesn't mean that we *should* be connected and on-call beyond our regular working hours. Technological advances can lead to expectations that are seldom discussed, reviewed, or evaluated. While some such expectations are communicated by the employer, there are many instances where they are unspoken expectations, or even only perceived expectations. This is where open and honest communication is critical. Not only do employers have a responsibility to clearly define their expectations in terms of technology and their workforce, there also needs to be an agreement between employer and employee. Simply put, if an employer expects the employee to be available beyond regular working hours, both parties should be on the same page regarding things like specific expectations and compensation.

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Labor Laws and Internal Policies

While general labor laws may encompass topics related to technology and its effects on the employee's work experience, internal policies are lacking for countless organizations. Many companies simply have not taken the time to develop and implement policies that specifically address technologies that allow employees to connect to their jobs from outside of the workplace. Establishing and implementing such policies is a responsible move on the employer's part. It's also a great way to dispel ambiguity and confusion. Imagine how many employees are working beyond the regular working hours simply because they feel forced to do so by the available technology. Now that many people are working from home, this is an even more important issue. It's easy to see how establishing and implementing clear policies plays a critical part in WLB.

Why does all this matter?

What's so important about WLB, anyway? Study after study has shown the importance of disconnecting from our jobs in order to recharge. This should be done every day. Failure to disconnect and recharge on a daily basis can be viewed as an imbalance between work and life outside of work. Such an imbalance can lead to a wide range of problems. Potential issues may include health problems, decreased performance at work, decreased engagement at work, burnout, and various difficulties in our personal lives. So, whether your WLB is not where it should be because technology has tethered you to your job in an unhealthy way, or because you work from home, which has blurred the boundaries between your two worlds of work and home, it's important to get back on track and find that balance again.

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What's the answer?

Identifying the problem is a big part of finding a solution. Take a look at your own WLB and assess where you are today and where you would like to be. Having that baseline will allow you to devise a plan of action. Of course, nothing changes unless you take action. If your WLB is not where you want it to be, roll up your sleeves and be willing to do the work. Your efforts will yield results. Keep in mind that higher quality efforts are more likely to yield better results. You may have to be flexible, creative, think outside the box, collaborate with your employer, and seek out support from other sources. The bottom line is that change is possible, and you *can* do this. I caution you to approach this with an understanding that your WLB should not be written with stone, but rather grow and change with you. It may differ from year to year, maybe even from day to day. It should serve you, and it should reflect your needs and desires. The best thing about all this is that you can start as soon as right now.

