

I May Have Cracked the Work/Life Balance Dilemma; and It Is Awesome

Let's face it, divorce attorneys are expensive. So are child counselors, and so is rehab. About six months ago, these could have very well been new expenses on my monthly budget had I not decided to make a change.

I'll start by admitting that this article is geared more towards business owners than employees however much can be taken from the employee as well.

I started my business five years ago, leaving a comfortable corporate job of many years because I had the insane notion that I too can be independently successful and have the additional personal time, take the vacations and have the second home that I saw my employers have and enjoy. I knew it would be slow going and hard, however I didn't know that it would be as difficult as it has been.

Some immediate facts vs myths learned for those who may be considering making the jump...or rather "lies I told myself" in the beginning:

Myth: "I'm tired of working all these hours, late nights and weekends for someone else's bottom line, it's time I reduce my hours and go in to business for myself"

Fact: At first, your hours will get worse, much worse. The first few years I put in 80 hour weeks, working six days a week. It does get better, but not much until you build your business and decide to make a change. When all your efforts go to your own benefit though it makes the long hours easier to stomach.

Myth: "My family will understand as I'm doing this for the greater good in the long run"

Fact: Spouses need attention and children need to be raised. The good ones will wait and understand however in today's instant gratification culture combined with a loss of the old ideal of work/home roles and responsibilities, this attitude of "It will all be okay" needs to be addressed as a potential false ideology.

So what is the definition of work life balance and how can you make it happen? I'd define the balance as simplicity and happiness within your own brain and heart. Not to go all hippie peace and love on you but it really is this simple. A simple and happy brain and heart allow for a better clarity of mind and soul which in turn makes you into a productivity machine in the time you set for yourself to do so.

I used to start my day at 5am, get up, rush out the door, get to the office, work till 6 or 8 at night, come home, say hi, have a drink(s) and get about an hour of time in with the family before I passed out from exhaustion, to be repeated the next day. Yuck.

I asked myself "how much money do I need?" I have built this company that is now becoming more successful so now I can afford the bigger house, the nicer cars, the oh wait a minute, now I have to work as much or harder to maintain this lifestyle. What am I doing? I'm losing the one thing I wanted most at the beginning...more time to exist and be happy. I needed to make a change immediately. What are my priorities and what is the minimum amount I need financially to make this happen? If I build this big machine, I'm just going to have to keep feeding it and at what cost? My happiness? Screw that.

So I set out to make some changes...

Saying no to clients meaning saying yes to yourself. This is the biggest key to unlocking the mystery of the balance that I have found. That money looks great, and it would be great to invest or spend but do you absolutely need it? Are you constantly saying yes and taking things on when you really can't and say to yourself "oh I'll figure it out later"? I was because I wanted the financial safety net and it was stressing me out.

The weekend now means the end of the week not the post script. We have all heard of the ideas of leaving work at the office, leaving your phone off once you get home, etc. At first I thought "what kind of insanity is that? I have clients that expect answers and dilemmas that need resolving asap". But did it need to be done asap? I started to question this as my wife gave me a loving but passive aggressive glance every time I picked up my phone at nine pm and began responding to an email. I knew I had to leave work at work especially on a Friday, but how?

I had to retrain my clients and myself. I realized I had let my clients, my employees and technology train me and not the other way around. So I began a slow 6 months retraining of myself, my clients and my employees. I simply stopped answering emails after 6pm and on the weekends. I left my laptop at the office. At first there was a huge level of anxiety...what if my clients thought I was ignoring them and went elsewhere, etc. I just let it go and said "It can all wait" and you know what, it could. Occasionally I do get the odd comment of "well so and so is always available no matter what, you used to be too, what happened?" and my response is usually something to the effect of "my family and personal sanity takes precedence above all else. You know I'll always get the job done for you" and they always back off and mumble some sense of understanding.

Get an office. Speaking of leaving things at the office, if you don't have an office, get one. I don't mean your dining room. I mean go rent a small office. I asked around for a few months till I found someone willing to rent me a small office in their larger office for a very affordable price. At first it may seem like you can't afford the additional cost. Believe it or not at the end of the month, it's a small drop in the bucket. If you work from home, you never really leave work. Its 11 pm and you can't sleep so why not go answer a few emails. What are you doing to yourself? Stop it. Leave work at work. Renting an office was a huge shift for me in the ability to get away and focus (without the distractions of home that slowed me down) and it was a place that allowed me to separate life from work.

Create a spreadsheet. One other thing that worked is that I started a schedule. We are all spreadsheet slaves to an extent so use this to your advantage. Develop an excel schedule by half hour, and stick to the routine. I printed out copies and have them on my monitor, in my truck and at home on the fridge and on my nightstand to remind me to do this and that at that time- at first it seems odd and difficult but eventually you retrain yourself to stick to a schedule that is healthy, not one of winging it every day with what comes across your plate. When we do this, our plate is always overflowing and not with the stuff that makes us happy.

The importance of personal time is huge. I was working so much that my wife said "please get a hobby" and so I took her "advice" and found several things to occupy my time, an excuse to do something with my hands and brain other than work. I took up flying and stained glass work. Two things I never thought I'd want to do and these two things have refocused my negative energies and helped to output positive energy because I felt like I was doing something to reward myself. Remember the vacations, the extra house I mentioned? I realized its not necessarily these things that will make me happy but the idea of

them that does. And that underlying idea is time to be, for myself and for others outside of growing a business.

Give yourself time to wake up in the morning and give yourself time to go to sleep. I went from 5 hours a night to eight. I thought eight was a waste and impossible. It's not, your body adjusts surprisingly easy when you put forth the effort. Sleep feeds the brain and body and when these are fed you can go to the office and focus and crank things out with a remarkable, clear and concise speed- far better than limping by with no sleep and no time for yourself

You can easily say well yeah that works for you but not for me. When people say "that is it easier said than done" I think this is a cop out. Start small and simple. Adjust in baby steps. Retrain your clients. Set an early bed time for your phone and laptop. Set time for yourself- at least 3 to 4 hours a day. It's difficult at first, but by saying yes to yourself and no to the other things, you will begin to swing the balance in your favor. I've never been happier and more rich in spirit since I've started doing this.

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