

## **Achieving Work/Life Balance for Consultants (Or...Who Moved My Personal Life?)**

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Earlier this year I taught a resource management unit as part of the Master of Education degree at Monash University. The unit focused on the concept of sustainability as it applies not only to wealth creation and ecological sustainability but to human sustainability in terms of community and social well-being. Or as this is more commonly referred to, a 'work/life balance'. The term came into use during the late 1980s to describe the maintenance of a balance between the responsibilities a person has at work and at home (Benveniste in Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths and Sutton 2000).

Being involved in that unit of teaching got me thinking about how the work/life balance is experienced by self employed consultants or contractors, because I was certainly not a good example of managing it well. On a sunny Good Friday afternoon I was sitting at my computer marking 52 essays describing how the work/life balance was addressed by my students without realising the irony of my situation.... where was my balance and why wasn't I practicing what I preach?

The self employed will be nodding their heads knowingly, because they already know that answer – we often simply don't allow ourselves that balance, because the sole practitioner frequently serves many masters in a fiercely competitive world in which it is easy to put yourself last and risk burnout. Employees on the other hand, while not serving many employers may experience difficulties getting the work/life balance right because of other issues such as an organisational culture which rewards or emphasises long hours, a work environment which is not sympathetic to life outside of the organisation, or having to live up to unspoken expectations of supervisors or managers who themselves have no work/life balance (Kirby and Krone 2002).

A Consultant's Work is Never Done...

The beginning of a new year is a good time to not only reflect on the progress of your business, but to also consciously think about how you treat what is your business's key asset – yourself. Being a consultant often means saying yes to impossible deadlines. Finding yourself for example agreeing with a client at 5pm on a Friday to have a proposal '*on her desk by Monday*' and consequently spending the weekend doing that instead of going to the movies with your kids. It can mean travelling on your own time at ridiculous hours so you can be onsite in business hours, but not on a homeward bound flight until 8pm, or preparing a pitch for new work late at night because you have been in the classroom all day. And most of us simply accept this as 'the cost of doing business'. Nobody pats you on the back for burning the midnight oil or giving up your public holidays or private time, because the buck stops with you. You are in fact more likely to feel a knife than a pat on the back from the daggers coming your way from spouse, friends or family. De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott and Pettit (2002), actually use the term *work/life conflict*, to describe the problems people experience when their job

pressures are mutually incompatible with other aspects of their life such as family or relationships.

As well, people who are passionate about their roles in training and development typically put a lot of themselves into the task itself (which is why everyone wants us to begin with, we are good at what we do), and as a result training can be an emotionally demanding and draining occupation. Combining that with doing all the background effort of sourcing new work, keeping the current clients happy and the sheer paperwork of running a business can well result in some people experiencing burnout if they are not careful.

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of exhaustion, lethargy or fatigue that isn't solved by a good night's sleep. It happens when a person takes on more and more tasks and responsibilities until they wonder what the reward is, or indeed question the point of their efforts (Vajda 2007). Aside from ruining your own quality of life and jeopardising not only your health and personal relationships, you may actually damage client relationships and deliver less than optimal training sessions. The trainer who feels like a rat on a spinning wheel is eventually going to bring some of that bad energy and karma into her classes and will fail to invigorate, energise or inspire her learners, thus failing both herself and the participants.

But it does not have to be all doom and gloom. The beginning of a new year is a great time to reflect on yourself, your business and how you want things to develop. Don't just keep doing what you do, take a moment to work out your priorities are and think about how you can strike a better work/life balance. Here are my suggestions for achieving this, they are not fool-proof nor are they any type of guaranteed blueprint for success. They are simply intended to help you think about what might be realistic and work for you – remember you are your key asset and you need to start treating yourself that way.

Because You Are Worth It...

1. Actually put 'you' time into your calendar. Yes, it is obvious, but it is also surprisingly hard to do. I have finally managed it and I honour that commitment to myself when I make it. Let me give you an example. If I have scheduled a personal activity (say a chiropractor's appointment or an afternoon at the hairdresser), I treat this as a bone fide appointment. I don't actually don't need to share that information with my clients and as far as they are concerned I am simply 'busy', with a meeting or a class. It is not actually anyone's business. While people will schedule personal events for themselves, they are often quick to cancel them if asked to do something work related. If that appointment was with a client you wouldn't cancel it so treat it the same way, be strong and regretfully apologise that you have another commitment.

2. Set realistic goals. Do not say yes to everything and do not set goals that are unachievable. Of course it is good to set goals for personal achievement and growing your business, but if you make them all difficult you won't enjoy the journey. Planning to start a Masters Degree? Great, but should you also put your hand up to go on a board or bid for multiple competitive tenders, while knowing you have to keep your current business running, your child is starting VCE this year, or you have a parent going into care? Be realistic and try for success but not at the cost of everybody and everything else.
3. Learn how to delegate. A difficult one for folk like us (especially if you are a control 'aficionado' like my good self). There are so many things to think about when you are self employed or running a small business. You have to do the work, find the work, maintain the client base, do your BAS, promote yourself, keep yourself up to date, network and more. And who better to do this than you? An easy trap to fall into. Take a good hard look at what you can strip off your responsibility list, by doing a quick 'personal return on investment', which means asking yourself, "what is it actually costing me to sit here and bind manuals/do my BAS or do my filing?". While you will have to pay for services, there are actually people who can take over some tasks for you in a professional way that gives you the opportunity to do what you do best or allow you to simply relax and recharge your batteries.
4. Learn something new. Am I crazy suggesting you add something else to your list? No, because I mean learn something just for fun, something unrelated to earning a living, honing your skills or educating yourself. I'll give you an example. In the last two years of doing my PhD thesis I suddenly became a fabulous cook. This is only surprising because for years before-hand I threw any old thing onto a plate and said 'well its food'. I had no interest and certainly no culinary skills. Writing my thesis was hard work and while I did get up and go to the gym or Hoover the floors, I also started cooking tricky, fussy things late at night (most of which I would never eat), because it allowed me to use my brain in a whole different way. I now genuinely get excited about mastering meringue or the perfect shortbread and will choose to do this 'for fun' on a Friday night. A mathematics PhD friend of mine chose juggling, and while there never was such a clumsy person, he loves it. Learning a new skill 'for fun' uses your brain differently, adds a different dimension to your life and hopefully gets you excited about something!

5. If it isn't working for you move on. It is easy to get stuck in the groove of delivering the same course or product. Things do sometimes have a 'use-by date' in terms of what people want to learn and how, and if that is the case and you keep labouring to sell it, you will wear yourself out. So if you are having trouble selling your 'product', start exploring what is tangential and in your area of expertise or be brave and assess how your skills might be used in another area. You don't have to give up self employment, just widen your range of possibility. The same goes for clients. Not all suppliers and consultants are going to be ideally suited and sometimes you may find that the business relationship is just too difficult to maintain or costs you too much emotional energy. Don't wait to get shown the door, be brave and move on. You can always segue a colleague into the role or sub-contract the work and nobody needs to be any the wiser.
  
5. Be serious about taking holidays. If you were with a permanent employer you would be taking those 4 weeks every year and not agonising over what is building up in your inbox. Can't take 4 weeks because you feel your business will collapse? Take it in a couple of one/ two week periods and re-read all points above. People understand you must have leave and cannot be on tap 24 hours of 52 weeks of the year. Be sensible about it and think about getting a 'locum' colleague to cover for you. For those worried about that person 'stealing' their clients, then you should obviously pick someone who is not in exactly the same market as you. It is actually quite a sensible idea, as your friends and colleagues may be in similar positions, so you offer to cover their calls or keep an eye on their mail etc while they are away.

If you know you are about to take leave, then advise your key clients of the period of time you are to be away and give them a structure for how things will be handled, such as 'I will check webmail once daily', or that you will be completely unavailable and that a colleague is taking care of things. Start to reduce the volume of email coming in during your holiday period by doing this well ahead of time and by also adding an extra line into your email Auto signature for all email messages which lets everyone know what your period of absence will be. Those on an exchange server can of course use the Out of Office Assistant, but this will not work with all ISPs, so check with your own provider.

6. This brings me to email and the mobile-phone. Fantastic innovations for doing business and staying in contact regardless of time zones, business hours and personal availability. However...email does not need to be checked every two hours, all evening long, each weekend and via your Blackberry or laptop while you are waiting for your poolside massage or during a lazy weekend at home. Put some boundaries around it for your own sanity. If you place yourself on call 24 hours a day, or if you keep checking email 365 days a year, people assume you are always available. Before you know it you will have set up the expectation of 'I'm always available', whether you want to be or not – and it is a bit late to complain then.

My final observation is that it actually takes *work* to really enjoy life, because sometimes it is much easier to live reactively, simply dealing with what life throws at you on a daily basis. Stopping and reflecting on what you want, how you to want to it and then doing something about it takes thought, courage and action!

## References

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