

Chapter 15

SIR RICHARD BRANSON



Richard Branson is chairman of the Virgin Group of Companies, a venture capital organisation with investments in the travel, retailing, leisure, music, communications and financial services industries. He is president of the British Disabled Water Ski Association, a committee member of Friends of the Earth, a trustee of the Healthcare Foundation, which he founded, of the National Holiday Fund, of the Trevor Jones Trust, of the Paul O’Gorman Foundation and of the London School for the Performing Arts and Technology.

He was born in 1950, educated at Stowe and is married with two children.

“**A**chieving a satisfactory work/life balance depends, above all, on working with the right kind of company. If you are running your own company it will obviously be easier than if you

are not, and if it is easier for you, you should try to make it easier for your managers and staff as well. I am a great believer in the philosophy of 'work hard, play hard'. If you can keep yourself physically fit and mentally alert, and have time to relax, then you will perform far better than people who work every minute of the day and never manage to break away from work.

The thing that forced me to really start taking time off was having children. Fortunately I was reasonably successful from quite a young age, so that by the time I had my children, when they went on holiday I could go on holiday with them. I forced myself to find time to spend three months a year away with my kids, travelling the world, and I managed to get to know them really well – perhaps better than a lot of fathers. Hopefully this has meant that they are more level-headed than they might have been, now they are reaching adulthood.

I was also fortunate in managing to find a tiny little island when I was 25, just before having the kids. It was a deserted island and we built a house there, and that is where we retreat. We spend time there with our friends and family and so on. That is where my kids really got brought up, in the holidays. It is run as a business, like everything I do. When I go there I pay rent for it, because I do not feel you should have personal extravagances the company pays for. Anyway one needs to be sure things like that stand on their own two feet, financially. And if you are in the public eye it is quite nice to be able to go somewhere where you can be completely among friends and not feel you are in a goldfish bowl.

We push off when term breaks up. The family knows that when we are there I am going to have to get up early in the mornings and do some work, but I am around, not at an office. Being in the Caribbean, by the time lunch-time comes, phones are beginning to

stop ringing, because people are starting to go to sleep in Europe. Then I can spend a lot of time with my family in the afternoons and evenings.

I try never to break into holidays. I had to come back when the decision about the National Lottery was coming through. But generally speaking, I have not broken into holidays. If holiday times are pencilled out of my diary well in advance, people know they are just not going to see me then. Occasionally I might get somebody to fly out to visit me on holiday, but even that happens seldom. There are obviously some reasons for meeting people face-to-face, for certain kinds of deal arrangement, or if you are trying to judge somebody you are taking on, but so much can be done on the phone. You can do lots on the phone.

I read an article the other day that argued it should be against human rights to phone staff at home at weekends and so on. I do occasionally ring staff in the evenings or at weekends. I do not think they mind. I think they would rather hear from me than not hear from me. But if I am abroad I do check what time it is, and try not to wake them up. Generally speaking, they try to do the same for me.

And the wonders of fax machines, e-mails and telephones mean many people can work from almost anywhere. I have always really worked from home. I began to work from a houseboat when I was about 17 years old. Later my children and my wife were living on the houseboat, so kids would be crawling through the office, and nappies would be changed in the office. It was a little bit cramped and perhaps a little bit unfair on my wife – but in those days she would rather have had me around than not around! Then, as the company grew more successful, we managed to buy two houses. The office house was next door to my home. We ended up moving

back into one house where I work and the kids, though older, are here as well when they are around.

I generally prefer to have people around rather than not to have people around. At the same time, I often work on my own. There are times when I even find it distracting to have secretaries around. I have four secretaries who work in an office just down the road, but I very rarely have a secretary who actually works with me, because if I have somebody in the same room I just find I have not got time to think – or I feel guilty that I am not giving them something to do.

I do my best to get back home at weekends. I spend 250 days a year travelling overseas, believe it or not, as most of our businesses are overseas now, but I always do my best to be back at weekends. Not every weekend, but as many as possible. And I have done my best to get back from abroad to be at my children's school events. I suppose one of the advantages of owning an airline is that I can get cheap air travel. As long as the airline is making money, anyway.

When I am away I make some of my biggest decisions. If I am lying in a hammock, looking out over the Caribbean, I have lots of time to think. Instead of people bombarding you with things that they want, as they do at the office, you can think about the things you want and the company needs. People at Virgin jokingly say they are more nervous when I am away than when I am here, because it is then that I come up with lots of new ideas.

I do not see business as work. I do not see what I do as work. I see what I do as a way of life, as a challenge. It is a fascinating challenge, trying to change things and create things. In the same way perhaps that an artist enjoys painting, I enjoy creating things, and changing things, and seeing what I am capable of. What I do is so varied, it never gets boring. It is just great fun, fantastic fun.

I was brought up with praise lavished upon me by my parents. Even if I did not deserve it, it made me feel good. I have done the same with my children. Kids know when they have done wrong and they do not need it rammed down their throats. The same applies with people who work for companies. All of us love to be praised and love to feel wanted, so a lot of my time is spent out and about with my staff. When I am on one of our planes I am always on my feet in the aisles, talking to the staff and to the passengers. I always stay in the staff hotels, always go out partying with them. If we are in the Caribbean, and there is a crew nearby in Antigua, we will invite them down to the island.

Getting to know the staff well is important. Even at two in the morning, after a few drinks with them, I have a little notebook in my pocket and I scribble down what I am learning at the bar. I learn more from being in touch and out partying with them than I would behind a desk. And it's fun. It is fun for me, it is fun for them, and it is a damn sight better than sitting in a boring businessman's hotel with no company.

If I invite 18 cabin crew down to the island while I am holidaying, I know they will be fun people, and we'll have a party. It is not a bad existence. My children are of an age where they can enjoy the company as well – and my wife is very understanding and is used to it. Ever since I have known her – we got together 26 years ago – we have always had lots and lots of people around us, and if she wants to retreat, she can retreat. In any event I spend more time with her and the family than most fathers, let alone fathers who are as busy as I am. With my first wife – I was married when I was 19 – I was building the business and I had no children. Trying to build the business from scratch was all-consuming. I had to work 20 hours a day, and that certainly put a strain on the

relationship. She is still great friends with Joan and myself – we had dinner with her last night – but when we were married she just gave up on me in the end. We were married only for about three years. I think when you are building a business it is really difficult to get the balance right, because survival is all that matters. You are not going to enjoy your holidays and your time off if you think there is a danger of your company going bust all the time. So 20 hours a day working was the norm in those early days. But once you have climbed over the wall and you have things on a slightly more level keel, then you can get the balance right. I suspect you ought to get the balance right earlier, but it is very difficult to do.

And during the course of the year I still work long hours on weekdays, but I try to make sure I disappear to our cottage in the country at weekends. I do try to do lots of sports at weekends – tennis, hot-air ballooning, cricket, occasional golf – and try to find time for friends. Yes, it can be very, very, long hours on weekdays. But when the children are at school and doing their homework late into the evenings, you are not really going to have valuable time with them. If I go out socially with friends during the week I am so exhausted I am not really giving of my best anyway, so I might as well work really hard on weekdays and then enjoy the holidays and the weekends.

How does my approach ricochet down the company? About six months ago I sent a note out to all our HR people, throughout all the Virgin companies. It said that if people want to go on unpaid leave, we should have a system where they can go on unpaid leave; if people want to work part time, we should introduce systems where they can go part time; if people want flexible working, they should have flexible working; if people want to work four days a week instead of five days a week, we should work out ways

of allowing them to do so; and if people want to work at home, we should do our best to make it so they can work at home.

It is a real struggle to get that through. Managing directors and HR departments are set in their ways. Sometimes they come up with good reasons, sometimes they come up with poor reasons. But at Virgin Atlantic, if our flying crews want to go on unpaid leave they can, and so many volunteer to do so that we have ended up taking on about 300 to 400 extra people, to cover the crew members who are taking unpaid leave. That means 300 or 400 extra jobs have been created on a permanent basis.

If every company did that there would be far fewer people unemployed in the country. And the people who were employed would be doing jobs that were tailored to their needs. Mothers would have more time for their children. Fathers would have more time for their children. Parents who did not need to both work full time could have one person working full time and one person working 50% of the time. One must aim at trying to get the right balance in all this. Saying everybody should work four days a week, or that nobody can work more than 35 hours a week, is taking things to extremes. Some people want to work 60 hours a week; others want to work 30 hours a week. It is up to employers to try to achieve that ideal situation, and I think it is for government to encourage it. At Virgin it is up to me to make sure people are able to feel they have the right balance, and we still have a long way to go to achieve that. The country as a whole has got a long way to go. We have to be much more adventurous.

We have 50,000 people who work for Virgin. So, how much time should one spend on one's own two children, and how much time should one spend on the 50,000 people? Obviously they are all important, so it is an important balancing act. But all the other

people have got their own families, so you have to make sure you are a good father to your own children. For example, my son has just turned 16 and I went away with him on a boat for six days, just the two of us.

My wife and I are fortunate in that we are opposites. Joan is a Glaswegian who is not really interested in business. We were away last weekend and my telephone battery had gone wrong, so I swapped phones with her and was just about to put her SIM card into my phone when she said, 'There's no need for that, because Holly and Sam are with us. So I don't need the phone.' She is a mother whose principal interest is the kids and as long as everything is well with them that is her main concern. At the same time, she has been a fantastic person to lean on. But I do not really discuss business at home too much. Joan is understanding, but strong-willed. She says what she thinks, is extremely down-to-earth, has no pretensions. We obviously lead a good life, but she is not interested in jewellery or expensive cars or anything like that. She has her priorities right basically, and her main priority is to make sure that we find the time for the kids.

Some of all this goes back to the way I was brought up. I was very fortunate in having a happy upbringing with parents who were happy together and I am determined to pass that on to my own children. It has worked out that way, and we are still as happy together as we were 26 years ago. That gives enormous stability to me in my working life too.

I think it extremely important that you 100% believe in what you are doing, or there is no point in doing it. Unless you feel you are going to make a difference and that you are going to change the world in some small way in whatever field you are in, then there is no point in bothering. That applies throughout our company. It is

critical that people who work in our train division know that they are going to make a difference, they are going to transform the rail network in this country, and that people who work in our planes know that they are offering the best service in the air. People in the financial services company, hopefully, believe that the financial services industry will never be the same again because Virgin has gone into it. One has got to make a difference. We use the money that we make from these companies to reinvest in more companies, or we may try to use some of it to tackle internal social issues. I think a company needs a mixture of both, if for no other reason than the morale of the staff will benefit from it.

I stumbled into being an entrepreneur. Originally I just wanted to be an editor. In order to be an editor, I soon found that I had to become an entrepreneur to keep my magazine going. Ever since then I have generally gone into things where I have found that I have been frustrated. Flying on other people's airlines, I did not like the experience. I thought things were being done pretty abysmally, and felt I could go in and make a difference and do better. Almost every single business we have gone into has started from that premise. I get my satisfaction from people saying, 'I've just come back on Virgin Atlantic and it's the best airline I have ever flown on'; or 'I have just been on your new cross-country train, and what a difference'; or 'I have just been into one of your new health clubs and it's transformed my life'; or 'Thank you, your helicopter ambulance in London has just saved my daughter, and we'll forever buy your music!' – or whatever.

I was brought up on general moral premises, such as love one's neighbour, try to be unselfish and so on. If I said something unpleasant about somebody my mother would straight away say, 'That just reflects on you and I don't want to hear you say that ever

again.’ It was a good, basic, moral upbringing. I have not always stood by those premises perfectly, but I go to sleep feeling that what I have done during the daytime is something I can be proud of, and never go to sleep feeling guilty. Being able to sleep well at night is quite a good way of judging whether one is leading a good life or not. One day you are going to have that last night before you go to sleep permanently, and it will quite nice to know that you have managed to tick everything off in a fairly decent manner.

Every year I take my father and all our family and friends away for his birthday, and he is now 85. When I went ballooning or boating, I would take my parents with me to Japan, to Morocco, to South Africa or wherever the balloons or boats were heading from, so I managed to spend a lot of time with them. Just before she died my grandmother wrote to me saying the last ten years of her life were the happiest of her life, and she was well into her nineties. As a family we have managed to stay close right across generations and that has been fantastically valuable. ”

Keeping Your Balance

- Spend as much time as you can, while you can, with your parents.
- Getting away alone for a few days with children is a great way of getting to know them.
- Before phoning from abroad check the time at home.