

Chapter 1

Defining Work/Life Balance

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The failure to achieve real work/life balance means that your personal life can suffer, affecting your physical, emotional, and mental health. The huge increases in illnesses such as chronic backache, clinical depression, heart disease, blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and obesity indicate that the current work/life balance is way out of whack.

This chapter shows you just why work/life balance – or the lack of it – is so vital for the future wellbeing of you and your loved ones. The statistics don't paint a pretty picture when it comes to managing the work/life balance. Yet the signs are increasing that both employees and employers are realising how a better work/life balance can benefit everyone. Working smarter, not harder (read longer), is the way to go for individual and organisational benefit, and that starts with knowing the balance points.

So Just How Hard Are Brits Working?

If you stop someone in the streets of this green, pleasant, and rather rainy land in which we live and ask them if work/life balance is an issue for them, it's a safe bet they'll say a resounding yes. We'd also bet that if you had to guess who in the world is putting in the longest hours at work, you'd say that the UK is way up there. And to a degree, you'd be right. We are a pretty hardworking nation, and that's only likely to increase in our 24/7 society where customers are ever more demanding and shareholders seemingly even more so.

Still, you may be surprised to discover that working hours in the UK have actually fallen in the last century. One hundred years ago the average working week was more than 50 hours. During the '70s this fell to around 35 hours as higher productivity and more part-time options came into play. But the downward trend started to reverse in the 1980s as people got caught up in the 'make it rich' frenzy of that decade. In addition, those in managerial and professional roles stepped up a gear with longer hours becoming a strong part of the unofficial culture of many organisations.

According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2006, full-time workers in the UK average 39.5 hours a week and part-time workers come in at 18.4 hours. Which sounds OK, doesn't it? However, just over a fifth of people in employment work more than 45 hours a week, a high figure compared to other countries in Europe. Additionally, UK workers have less paid leave than their EU counterparts. On the positive side, this is a lot better than countries like Japan, the United States, and Australia.

So it's not a totally bleak picture. Legislation in the UK (mostly following EU directives) has made a big positive difference in opening up more flexible options, especially for working parents, and increasing numbers are taking advantage of that. And work is part of life, right? Many of us enjoy the financial rewards, the challenge, and the sense of achievement we get from 'going the extra mile'.



All of this would be fine, if it weren't for the hidden costs. The Work Foundation's 2006 survey *About time for change* found that, although average working hours may not be as long as they used to be, the sheer intensity of today's demanding work place means that everyone's trying to cram much more into their working day. And a recent report by the London School of Economics found that over a quarter of men and 29 per cent of women said that their jobs left them feeling exhausted most of the time.

Finding a Balance between Work and Your Personal Life

Work/life balance is the phrase of the moment. You've no doubt come across the phrase everywhere – in magazines, on TV health shows, in advertisements, and on the lips of anyone who cares about achieving the right work/life balance for themselves, in their personal relationships, and with work colleagues. If you're like me, you may even picture a set of old-fashioned brass scales with 'work' on one dish and 'life' on the other. The official definition we use in this book for *work/life balance* is the need of all individuals to achieve and maintain a balance between their paid work and their life outside of work. The word *balance* doesn't necessarily imply an even divide between work and life; instead, balance means successfully managing all the responsibilities you have in both areas of your life.

How well do you balance your life?

For the last couple of decades, there's been a strong focus on work/life balance issues. The Government, academic researchers, professional bodies, and family organisations all have something to say about it. Here are some findings from recent reports:

- ✔ **The Centre for Business Performance:** A 2004 report on flexible working and work-life integration in the accountancy profession recognised the strong business case for flexible working to ease work stress and to attract young chartered accountants into the profession. Yet it highlighted serious conflicts between the willingness to adopt formal policies and the strong belief in the necessity of long hours in order to advance careers.
- ✔ **The Department of Trade and Industry:** The DTI's Second Work Life Balance Survey of employers shows strong support for work/life balance and notes that more organisations are adopting policies of flexible working, with positive benefits on labour turnover, motivation, and employee commitment. It also points out that there's still a way to go to increase awareness and adoption of best practice, and highlights that the best solutions are those that match business needs.
- ✔ **The Work Life Balance Centre:** A 2008 survey of a representative cross section of people working in a range of businesses in the UK highlighted that the reasons people choose to work above their contracted hours were the sheer volume of work, and the increasing pressure of deadlines. Even so, more than four in ten people said that they actively chose to work longer hours.
- ✔ **The Work Foundation:** *About time for change (2006)* shows that many people find it very difficult to balance their whole life responsibilities and that this isn't confined just to parents.



Work/life balance is not restricted to people with children or partners. Life outside work can range from child care and looking after older family members, to housework, doing sport, leisure and self-development activities, such as study or exercise programmes – and to virtually anything else.

The aims of work/life balance

Achieving work/life balance is about being given the opportunity to have some control over when, where, and how you work so that you can perform at your best and also have time to recuperate and enjoy pursuing your own interests outside of work.

Although the debate continues over whether 'balance' is the right term, the general consensus is that you achieve work/life balance when you achieve your right to a fulfilled life inside and outside of work, and this achievement is respected by your employer.

Many people believe that work/life balance means a quieter life, working fewer hours, and achieving a much clearer separation between work and your personal life. Academics now suggest that this view of work/life balance isn't, in fact, what most people want. Instead, most employees and self-employed workers, although willing to work hard and long hours in a job they love, want to have some control over where and when they work. It's about figuring out the right balance for you and creating the best working arrangement possible so that everyone benefits. Chapter 2 gets you started by setting the context for work/life balance and helps you to begin identifying which flexible options are right for you.

So work/life balance means more than just being given the flexibility to leave work early to pick up the kids or having a medical appointment and being able to replace the lost hours by working later or on other occasions. What's just as important is the control you have over your working life. Currently only a tenth of the UK workforce decide their own working time according to their individual priorities. And getting more control shouldn't have to mean that you sacrifice interesting work or your career aspirations. We're hoping you're nodding in agreement.

Time is the enemy

The Work Foundation's 2006 survey identified that many people in the UK feel desperately 'time poor'.

- ✔ Two-thirds of respondents want to spend more time with family and friends, regardless of whether or not they have children. Those feeling the squeeze most were, not surprisingly, people in full-time work, even where they were not working excessively long hours.
- ✔ Over a third of all respondents agreed that in the evenings they were so tired they just fell asleep on the sofa and lacked time for social and leisure activities. At an even more basic level, a high proportion of folk

reported that they didn't feel they had time to eat properly, relying instead on takeaway and convenience foods.

- ✔ Although two-thirds of UK couples with dependent children are now both out working and earning, that doesn't seem to have made a big difference to who takes on the main burden of housework. The survey indicated that domestic tasks haven't been redistributed equally and most women in this situation effectively do a 'double shift' – or if they can afford it, they hire domestic support. Because women now make up 45 per cent of the labour force that's a lot of extra hidden effort, which doesn't help the balance picture.

The reality of work/life balance

At work, you may think that if you ‘prove’ – to yourself, your boss, and your colleagues – how hard you work and how productive you are, then rewards and recognition are going to fall automatically into your lap. When the rewards don’t arrive, you work harder and longer in an effort to be noticed. You keep telling yourself that as soon as everyone realises how great a worker you are, then you’ll have your chance to ask for a salary increase and ask to leave earlier one day a week to take your child to swimming classes, or focus on your out-of-work passions. You probably feel a tad nervous about asking for the time off but you reckon by this stage your boss appreciates you so much that asking for an early mark won’t be a problem.

Can you spot the fundamental flaw in this? Working harder/longer won’t necessarily make you more productive and often just sets up expectations that you have to work even harder to get results. Chapter 6 looks at the key basics that you can control to help you work smarter (not harder) – like tackling time effectiveness and beating procrastination – and Chapter 7 offers tips for making the most of work breaks like your lunch hour to enable you to find more daily balance.

The home/life balance



The ‘life’ in work/life balance doesn’t automatically mean time spent at home. For some people, home can, in fact, mean more work. Many people perceive home as the site of their unofficial second job: caring for children, supervising homework, cooking dinner, walking the dog, hanging out washing, loading the dishwasher, organising bath and story times, and sitting at the laptop to catch up on work emails long after the children have gone to sleep.

The pressure of stress

Understanding what happens when you’re forced to cope with additional workloads and changes in your work place – such as downsizing or being offered contract or casual work over permanent employment – is important. Stress can build whenever you have no say or control in where, when, and how you do your job. In these situations, you can expect a downturn in your standard of health. Stress makes your heart pump faster and speeds up your breathing. Your body pumps out adrenaline and cortisol to keep you on high alert. If stress continues, your hormone levels stay elevated and can start to cause illness. Chronic stress is linked to heart disease, lowered immunity, higher blood pressure, and even cancer – and chronic stress is now showing up in workers’ compensation claims.

Long hours – are they productive or not?

The 247 Work Life Balance Survey 2008 (by the Work Life Balance Centre) showed that the pressures of work intensity and of long hours created stress that led to errors on the job. Of those people surveyed who said that they'd made a serious error, 61.9 per cent said that they were stressed all, or almost all, of the time due to intensity or pressure of work.

Examples of these 'serious errors' ranged from direct costs to the business – one respondent

admitted a £60k cost due to a funding error when stressed and overworked – to tales of driving into the back of another car at traffic lights after having put in a 12-hour day at a weekend following a full working week.

According to the survey, when you feel extremely stressed at work, it doubles the risk of you making a serious error that impacts on business or your own wellbeing.

The cost of work-related stress is on the increase in the UK. In the decade up to 2003 it increased by 45 per cent and now sits at around £12 billion per annum. The time spent off work is much longer for stress claims than for physical injury claims (with some sufferers never returning to paid employment). Stress claimants also have significantly higher expenses for medical, psychiatric, and legal services. All estimates consider that these claims are likely to continue increasing in cost and in time lost at work. In addition, these workers' compensation claims create additional staff-training and replacement expenses for employers. (Take a look at Chapter 3 for the low-down on stress and how you can avoid it leading to anxiety and depression. You could also flick through Chapter 4 for lots of tips on looking after your health in your balanced life.)

Whittling work/life balance away

Many people today believe that they need more money and more possessions in order to feel happier. Even in the richest 20 per cent of households, almost half of the people agreed that 'You cannot afford to buy everything you really need'. This statement is rather startling when you consider that people in the UK today have incomes that are three times higher in purchasing-power terms than incomes in the 1950s.

The awful affliction of affluenza

The excessive consumer culture that afflicts the Western world has been tagged 'affluenza'. The US website (www.affluenza.org) defines *affluenza* as 'The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses . . . An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by a dogged pursuit of the American dream and an unsustainable addiction to economic growth.' You don't have to buy into the concept of the American dream to recognise that the same thing has very definitely reached our shores in its own British way too!



A nation of holidaymakers? Not likely

The two-week summer holiday may be traditional, but alarmingly large numbers of people in the UK don't take all their annual entitlement. The 247 survey found that 26 per cent rarely managed to squeeze it all in and almost 1 in 5 had cancelled holidays or cut them short due to the demands of work.

And when we do get away, it takes quite a while for us to wind down, so much does work prey on our minds even when we're not there. The survey found that 87.5 per cent of respondents didn't look forward to getting back to work because of the thought of the extra workload waiting for them!

Affluenza may contribute to medically recognised depression. Consider the fact that the World Health Organization predicts major clinical depression to become the second largest disease burden in the Western world by 2020. This scary prediction makes the adage 'Money doesn't buy happiness' sound very true.

Chapter 5 discusses the money and consumption-driven lifestyle further and shows you how to look beyond what you may think you need for what you really value.

Recognising the Importance of Family Life

Family means more than just children. Family includes your spouse or partner, parents, brothers and sisters, and other relatives who don't have immediate family to care for them. Your family responsibilities can involve caring for children, partners, and other family members, including the elderly or relatives with disabilities or illnesses, or those who need special care and attention, whether they live with you or not.



Balancing work and family is important not only for people with young children. Family responsibilities continue to affect your work/life balance throughout your entire working life. Even if you don't have family responsibilities, you still need family-friendly work practices on occasion, such as flexibility to study, travel, participate in sport, or to undertake volunteering or community activities. Everyone must have opportunities to rest and rejuvenate themselves.

The number of women in paid employment is almost certain to increase in the future because of property prices that necessitate two incomes to meet the mortgage payments. And the trend to favour private schooling over the state system means more costs for many families. Labour shortages and opportunities for women to access study and new skills are other factors encouraging women into paid employment.

Men, too, feel increased pressure to be better parents and to take part in their children's lives, as well as being the major breadwinner when their partners are on maternity leave.

The work/life pressures don't end there. Our ageing population means that many workers face responsibility for caring for their elderly relatives, as well as raising children. (Chapter 10 helps you plan family activities and time together so you really can feel that you have a life outside of work.)

Why part-time work is not always a solution

The most common way to try to claw back some 'life' time is to reduce work hours to part-time. But reducing work hours doesn't guarantee that work/life balance can be achieved. In fact, working part-time can have the opposite effect. Women who work part-time are more likely to have worse work/life balance than men who work full-time or part-time – or even women who work full-time. In fact, part-time working women appear to be the 'personal shock absorbers of work/life interference'. These women have to put up with less free time as a result of their part-time work and their domestic loads.

Fathers doing the 'walk of shame'

Overwhelmingly in the UK it's men who report working the longest hours. In fact, fathers in Britain work the longest hours in Europe, with two-thirds working into the evening and six out of ten at the weekend.

Some fathers clearly need assurance from their employers that taking up more flexible working arrangements isn't a backward step career-wise. Fathers need to be able to use leave, or to reduce their work hours, when their children

are sick and need their care or when they have to go to school events.

Tim, a father of two and a former IT professional, said, 'When I left work at 5 p.m., I felt as though I was doing the "walk of shame" because I was the only one who showed any signs of leaving at finishing time.'

Younger generations of fathers also believe that when men and women both work, they need to share domestic and child-care responsibilities.

In addition, women working part-time receive less help from their partners and report having to deal with increased expectations from schools and community groups who see them as available volunteers because they don't work full-time.

Other studies show evidence that many women who choose part-time work to fit in with the family often have to work in industries that specialise in unskilled part-time jobs such as hospitality, retail, and in factories, which offer traditionally low pay. Taking these part-time jobs sometimes means that mothers move away from the careers they pursued before having children. The results are:

- ✓ Loss of previous qualifications due to lack of continual training in their former career.
- ✓ Reduction of future opportunities to return to their earlier career.

How working affects the family

The difficulties in achieving the goal of work/life balance for working parents negatively affect their relationships with their children. Balancing work and the hours and attention you pay your children is possibly the hardest part of achieving a successful work/life balance.

Whereas work responsibilities can be fairly consistent – regular hours, schedules, meetings, and so on – the needs of children can vary erratically depending on their health (a cold can keep you away from work), school functions (schools give fairly short notice of day-time outings, concerts, and so on) and behaviour (all children at some stage require spontaneous parent/teacher discussions during school hours).

Focusing on Work-place Flexibility

Achieving work/life balance must involve reducing stress levels, increasing job satisfaction and personal fulfilment for the employee, and improving business outcomes for the employer. What's now becoming widely accepted is that both employers and employees can achieve significant gains from recognising and accommodating family responsibilities with flexible working arrangements. These family-friendly initiatives involve flexible work policies and practices that can cover types of employment, hours of work, paid and unpaid leave, work-place facilities, and supportive management practices. All these options give employees a bigger say in how they work in order to balance the demands of their employment and family responsibilities.

Studies show that workers want the following conditions from their employers:

- ✔ Flexible working arrangements that see workers get the same opportunities for new and challenging work, training, and promotion as full-time workers. Flexible working doesn't always mean less hours – at the extreme ends of the age spectrum people tend to want more, or at least full-time, hours, whereas those in mid career, if they have particular responsibilities or goals, may at various times want reduced or flexible patterns. The point is, employees want different arrangements to be treated no less fairly than traditional ones.
- ✔ Some control over how their working hours are determined, whether that be straightforward starting and finishing times, or a more complex arrangement designed around their life circumstances.
- ✔ Specific leave available to all workers to care for a sick child, partner, or parent without time deducted from their own sick leave or recreation/holiday leave, or without being forced to take leave without pay.
- ✔ The ability to take career breaks from time to time that can be treated as 'career lay-bys' rather than 'career cul-de-sacs'. If you've built up expertise and skill in a job, you want that to be recognised so that following any kind of break, you can come back at the same level as before your break.

At many stages of the work/life cycle – such as study, birth of a baby, child-rearing, leave without pay, and caring for elderly relatives – enlightened work-place conditions are the best ways for employers to keep skilled workers and at the same time increase morale and productivity in their workforce. Smart employers realise that beneficial conditions can provide relatively cheap ways to attract the best workers, reduce absenteeism, and retain productive staff for longer periods.

That's all very nice, you may be thinking, but what type of flexibility can employers with sales targets and shareholders to satisfy actually offer their employees? A broad range of family-friendly work practices for employees is available to employers to offer. These work practices include the provision of:

- ✔ Flexible employment arrangements (part-time, full-time, job sharing, working from home).
- ✔ Flexible hours arrangements (starting earlier or later to incorporate school runs or after-school commitments, holding family-friendly meeting times during core hours, compressed hours).
- ✔ Flexible leave arrangements (purchased additional leave, carer's leave, or time off in lieu)
- ✔ Other work and family initiatives (sabbaticals, training opportunities, or volunteering days)

In Chapter 2, we explain more about what types of flexible working arrangements are available and in Chapter 8 you can discover how to prepare your *business case* – the argument you use to convince your manager to adopt improved work/life balance policies.

Having these types of policies in place is useless when senior managers and supervisors don't actively support their use. The solution seems simple but employers don't always see the advantages. Put simply, a business's productivity and profitability depend on the quality and commitment of staff. When workers have difficulties with the demands of their jobs and life outside work, their productivity and motivation can suffer.



Experts say working long hours is not sustainable. The result is that people resign from their jobs when they aren't able to balance work and family responsibilities. In addition, flexible working arrangements don't work when employers cut staff numbers and expect the remaining employees to produce the same work and productivity as the larger staff produced.

If employers don't notice the long hours their staff members work, they may soon sit up and take notice when they see the effect on their profit margins if staff leave. This is because high staff turnover leads to the loss of skilled employees. And a loss of staff members dramatically increases advertising, recruitment, replacement, and training costs.

Making Work/Life Balance a Win–Win for Everyone

Work and family initiatives do have positive results. Increasing agreement across the board says that family-friendly policies can improve organisational performance when employers:

- ✓ Are recognised as an 'employer of choice'
- ✓ Improve employee morale and commitment
- ✓ Reduce staff turnover
- ✓ Reduce absenteeism
- ✓ Increase the ability to attract and recruit staff
- ✓ Recognise and improve occupational health and safety outcomes
- ✓ Reduce stress and improve productivity

Organisations and employers that have introduced work and family arrangements have found that the benefits far outweigh the cost and effort of making changes, particularly in attracting and retaining skilled and productive employees.

Employees can find benefits that include:

- ✔ Flexible working arrangements resulting in reduced stress.
- ✔ Increased focus, motivation, and job satisfaction knowing that their personal and work commitments are being met.
- ✔ Increased job security and commitment after employers show they value and support workers with family and other non-work responsibilities.

Chapter 9 gives you ideas to help you maintain flexible arrangements through assertive communication and spreading the word within your organisation. If your current employer isn't supporting you in this important area, though, you might feel the need to make a career move, either within the same professional field or to something completely different. Chapters 11 and 13 give you some important steers in these directions.

And don't forget the importance of building your skill in order to put yourself in the best possible position for securing the most beneficial arrangements for you. Chapter 12 shows how committing to lifelong learning can really help you to achieve balance and personal satisfaction.

When all is said and done, your balance strategy will be unique to you. Hopefully, this book will inspire you to look at the big picture of what you really want in your life, whether that is radical simplifying, downsizing, or moving out of the city to a calmer way of life, and to find the best win/win for you. Chapters 14 and 15 can help you plan for that exciting adventure.

Flexible working hours are catching on

The DTI's Second Work Life Balance Survey shows real progress amongst employers. Nine out of ten employers believed that people work best when they can strike a balance between work and the rest of their lives, and that represents a significant increase in perception from the first survey taken in the early years of this century.

Two-thirds of employers felt they were responsible for helping people to achieve this balance by offering appropriate policies and options,

although almost all respondents admitted it was not always easy to do this.

A resounding 74 per cent believed that flexible working should not affect promotion prospects adversely.

The best news is that these perceptions were borne out by practice – those employers who were most positive about work/life balance were the ones who tended to provide the widest range of practices.