

**Work/ Life ~~Balance~~ Quality.....**  
**How to build Quality back into your Work and your Life**

By Suzi Skinner  
M. Appl.Sci (Coaching Psychology)  
Executive Coach

Ask any of your peers and co-workers today how they are managing their “life commitments” (work/ family/ health/ friends and so on) and they will invariably mention the huge challenge of balancing these demands and priorities. The common adage “there is never enough time” and “it is a struggle to fit it all in” is a part of many hectic exchanges. As an Executive Coach, I have worked with literally hundreds of workers who struggle with the concept of time and the ideal of attaining the “right balance”. Add to this what you have read (countless times) in the media and it is fair to say we are all familiar with this constant struggle. Work life balance is a hot issue.

**So what is work life balance?**

Work life balance is a concept that was introduced to us all way back in the 80s – when the idea of balancing your work with the rest of your life was given as an ideal scenario. Like balancing on a beam in the playground, the popular notion was to be able to balance your work commitments on the one side, with your family/ relationship/ life commitments on the other. By balancing between the two and devoting planned time to each area, the idea was that you would achieve happiness and true satisfaction.

Yet if you think back to that balancing act in the playground, you will probably recall how difficult it was to retain the balance for any extended period. Do you remember experimenting with different weights (perhaps other people) or moving positions on the beam, only to find that you would hit the dust in a heartbeat?

Today, the fallout from this concept is still widely seen in organisations as workers strive for this ideal of “balance” and at the same time, give *themselves* a hard time when the balance is not sustained. Some give up altogether and continue to focus on work to the detriment of all else. Others go the other way and find all sorts of ways not to engage in work fully. In each case either they’re not winning as an individual or their business is losing out. Hardly a palatable solution.

This concept of balance between work and life also resulted in the idea that they were two completely separate self identities. It was ok to be one person at work (perhaps your assertive, competitive self) and a whole different person (perhaps your loving, warm self) at home. Over the years I have continued to work with clients who are not comfortable bringing their true selves to work – the separation of self (life) and work has meant that they are not only different people outside of work, but that they are under incredible stress at work because they behave so differently to who they naturally are.

**So does work/life balance exist?**

Ask yourself, is your life – including your work, able to be “balanced”? Can those areas actually *be* balanced? If you are working fulltime, you may spend up to 10 waking hours at work each day (for some this is excluding travel time), up to 8 asleep (for some this is the nirvana) and the remaining 6 hours doing whatever you can fit in

– relationships/interests/exercise, not to mention all those good things that go with maintaining a family/ a home/ a life / a sense of purpose and even having some fun!

So let's do the “balance” equation together. We all know a typical working week is 40 hours (the old 9 – 5). That means you have 40 hours out of a potential 80 to spend working. (As a Coach I have to assume that you are getting your 8 hours sleep a night and generally not working weekends, unless this is part of your roster. Nothing will impact your mood or your productivity more than getting good sound sleep). That's only 50% of your working week spent working. Sounds comfortable right?

Now let's reality check that assumption. Firstly let's consider how many people you know that actually only work 9 – 5. Not many? So let's make it more realistic – say 8.30 – 6 (and I know this is still conservative for many workers). Let's add in the commute time of at least 1 1/2 hours per day (getting there and back) and the overtime which may stretch to another 4 hours per week. Let's also add in the reading and industry updates that you do to stay up to date, as well as any training – call it another 2 hours per week. That's now 60 hours or 75%. And I haven't even mentioned your client commitments, drinks with colleagues or any evening engagements/ product launches etc.

Inherently our lives are not structured to be “balanced”. From a purely time perspective we are out of whack before we even start. 75% of our available time during the week is spent at work or on work related activities. It is not 50% or 40% or even 30%, for the average full time worker it is 75%. Ouch.

With work structured this way, we also feel the effects. Stress/ anxiety/ lack of this/ lack of that, is very common. I have spent many hours in my Executive Coaching business working on exactly this issue. The majority of clients have wanted to improve their “balance” and therefore reduce their stress levels and improve their life. A majority of them were very good at giving themselves a hard time when their balance expectations were not met. Many of them were also very adept at ignoring their personal health needs for the sake of other things. And finally the vast majority of them were so caught up in meeting the needs of their everyday lives, that the bigger picture, their real needs and important goals were lost in a haze of phone, emails, travel and appointments.

This story is not new. And unfortunately for all of us, it is not going away. You will not wake up tomorrow morning and have balance. You will however, trot off to work and balance the needs of others to get your job done. And so the world turns.

Data from recent studies tells us what we already know and feel – the majority of workers now rate the concept of work/life balance higher than any other employee benefit. Indeed in a study done in the UK, up to 1/3 of respondents said they would consider changing jobs if their work/life situation would improve.

So what is all this hype about work life balance? Why do we strive to achieve something that in my personal experience no-one ever really achieves? Why are we so sold on a notion that is not only unrealistic but also unachievable?

As an executive coach one of the first things you must always do with your clients is set realistic goals and expectations. And now is the time for us to get real.

## Getting real - Work/Life Integration

Rather than punishing yourself for not achieving the ideal balance, it is far more useful to think of your needs in terms of *integrating* your work and your life. Work life integration is about living your life as a whole for the good of yourself and the people around you. Your work and your life exist as a unit – they are actually inseparable. Yes you move across these different domains but the common denominator of them is you. Your personality, your skills, your talent and your unique characteristics.

So for the purpose of clarity and moving forward, consider replacing the term “balance” with “integration”. Work life integration – existing together and in harmony. Existing together so that you are motivated and inspired.

The definition of Integration commonly means *putting together; mixing; incorporating; adding; joining; combining; assimilating*. Ask yourself:

- *What can you do that incorporates who you are at home, with who you are at work?*  
Suggestions may include engaging in more personal conversations at work, sharing more of your personal interest and goals or making time in your working day to mentor someone.
- *What do you enjoy doing at home that you could trial at work?*  
This may involve creating a team project where your team skills are put to good use, or introducing your favourite sport into a work based competition.
- *What are you great at, at work, that you can start introducing at home?*  
This may involve putting your excellent organisational skills to use in your home study or planning your family outings with as much time and precision as you plan events for work.

The opportunities are endless.

The real goal here is to spend time becoming more aware of your needs and applying them to your work and your life. Combining aspects of yourself in each domain allows you to feel more energised and nourished by what you do.

One client I worked with decided that she was far too serious and assertive at work – her staff rarely saw her enjoying a good laugh and this was impacting on her workplace relationships. Yet outside of work her friends knew her as warm, caring and fun. So she decided to give herself permission to have fun at work – this involved simple things like taking her team out for “walking meetings”; introducing Picnic Friday and using the phone instead of email to connect with people. And it was these small changes that had the lasting impact. All of a sudden she was able to see the fun side of her role and began living it.

Another client was very popular with his peers and was often seen as the “go to” person whenever there was a crisis in the office. His dilemma of-course was dealing with all of the unplanned interruptions that this would cause. Coaching revealed that he was the father of 4 daughters and was very good at listening to their woes, therefore he was quite used to playing exactly this role with his peers. The only problem was that it was getting in the way of his productivity. The solution? Rather than just being “the ear” of the work team, he began to introduce more of himself to

the group – he was kind but firm with his peers and began to set clear expectations. He was happy to listen but only if the conversation resulted in an action from the peer to resolve the issue – not unlike managing the trials of his daughters.

### **Quality is what it's about!**

A modern concept of managing work and life today is to be able to devote the right amount of energy to the various areas of your life so that you will feel energised and rejuvenated. In addition to integrating your work with your life, it is about enhancing your Quality of Life and Quality of Work.

To illustrate this, I am reminded of a client who was at the point of despair with his work. He was ready for a change yet from the organisations perspective, his loss would have had major repercussions for the business. He was torn between his loyalty for the business and his need for something more. His solution was not to resign and move on, it was to integrate his way of working and living. Coaching identified that his love of challenge and adrenalin was missing from his life. So in his spare time he picked up his love of racing cars (extreme I know, but it worked for him). This hobby fulfilled his personal needs and actually resulted in him feeling more focused and satisfied at work. Whenever a work presentation arose, he would use his racing experiences to highlight his message and his passion was evident for all to see. The quality of his work increased as did the quality of his life.

### **5 Tips to build your Quality of Work and Life**

The following is a simple checklist to help guide you on your journey for integration and work life quality. Consider each of the questions below:

1. Ask yourself, what are you core values? Are you aligning your actions to these?
2. What goals have you designed for yourself? (Often where you spend the majority of your time is where your goals have been clearly identified – for many these are work related). Consider what goals you can set for yourself in other areas – health/ relationships/ education etc
3. Review the life areas below. Are you happy with the focus and energy that you are putting into each area? And what areas are you potentially neglecting all together? What small changes can you make to energise yourself in these areas?
  - Self-care & Health
  - Relationship
  - Family
  - Spirit
  - Friendships
  - Work
  - Play
  - Finance
  - Education
4. Prioritise your actions. Now take a step back and review yourself strategically – does all of this take you to where you want to be in a few years time?
5. Choose wisely – remember to stay conscious of your choices and act from a place of knowledge and integration. Your family, your friends will thank you for it.