

Work/Life balance: Satisfaction or Satisfaction?

Cultivating strong senses of accomplishment and fulfillment will put you at your best at your firm and at home.

BY PAUL BURTON

“Work/life balance” became a career moniker in the legal profession several years ago. The phrase, however, implies two false assumptions: that work is separate from life and that a meaningful way to measure it exists. Don’t misunderstand me: A well-rounded, satisfying life is a worthy objective. We just need a methodology likely to achieve it.

DISSECTING WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Work is an integral part of life. Intellectually segregating the two creates an unnatural construct useful only to perform the work/life measurement. I choose to redefine the analysis using the terms “personal” versus “professional” life. This clarifies the intent and eliminates the obvious non sequitur. However, it doesn’t resolve the other inherent flaws in the paradigm.





If you are enjoying your work, and your loved ones share in that experience, you are providing them quality and quantity time. In addition, the more you enjoy your professional life, the better you perform.

Immediate challenges arise when we turn to the measurement system. To balance two things, the elements being measured must be juxtaposed. If your personal life is always considered “good” in this balance, then your professional life must necessarily be its opposite – “bad.” The results: Your perception of your professional life is always negative, and the best you can hope to achieve is a balance between the good and bad in your life. This last consequence is a zero-sum game. Pretty grim.

Another flaw is that personal and professional demands on your time ebb and flow. Achieving and maintaining a balance is virtually impossible in this environment. Thus, focusing on an unrealistic goal produces only disappointment. A better approach must be found.

Recently, some have begun to quietly rebel against the balance paradigm. Their collective heads popping out of the sand, they have begun to examine this notion more closely. Consider this my contribution to dispelling the balance myth and, hopefully, to pointing us all in more rewarding directions.

BEST LAID PLANS

Engaging in an exhaustive anthropological analysis of human happiness is beyond the scope of this article, so we’ll start with the much-maligned Baby Boomer generation, member of which are often derided for their endless and seemingly addictive commitment to work and ascending the career ladder. Yet, on closer examination, we find their efforts are well intended, as they want their families to have more and better opportunities than they had. To accomplish this goal, they committed themselves to creating those opportunities. One consequence of their commitment was an absence from home life. Back in the day, the catchphrase was “quality time, not quantity time.”

Fast forward 20 years, as the Boomers’ children (the Millennials) enter the professional ranks. Up pops the work/life balance standard. Millennials want to spend time with their families and/or not be slaves to

work. It seems the catchphrase could easily be “quality *and* quantity time.”

The fascinating thing is the two generations share the same value – family life. They just express it differently. We know from experience that endless hours at the office do not produce a satisfactory result. But can increased quantity and quality time away from the office make economic and social sense for all involved?

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Professionals operate in the nebula of human interaction. We do not control a large portion of what affects us. We cannot simply shut down the manufacturing line at 5 p.m., grab our lunch boxes, and head home. Human interaction occurs every hour of every day, and our clients (and others) rely on our expertise and counsel during and outside of business hours.

On the personal side, the new century finds greater sharing of parental responsibilities. Both parents generally work. Children are more engaged outside the home before, during, and after school. Commute times are longer. The increased flow of personal information via advanced technology impacts all of us.

Simply stated, the number and influence of factors affecting our professional and personal lives have made the balancing act far too precarious.

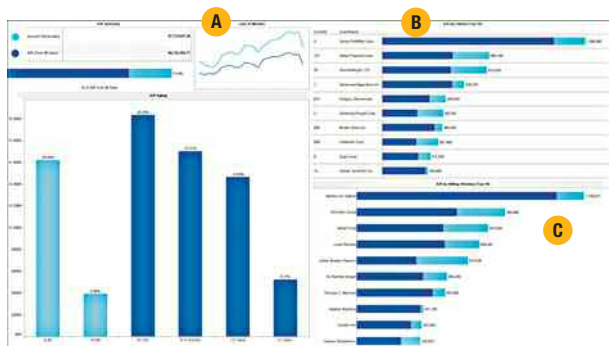
REDEFINING THE TARGET

Instead of constantly trying to regulate life in a futile attempt to achieve personal/professional balance, embrace the inherent value *and* irregularity of your personal and professional lives. I advise my clients to readily accept the stream of events encompassing them. Learning to work *with* the currents of your professional and personal demands allows you to exert subtle pressure on the flow and align yourself with your personal values – family, integrity, accomplishment, etc.



Do the spreadsheets you present to your partners initiate action to improve collections and increase profits?

Now more than ever it's crucial to frequently evaluate financials and initiate corrective action to ensure receivables don't get out of hand. With the right Financial and Practice Management solution, your firm can boost efficiency, manage cash flow, improve collections, and streamline workflow - all ultimately increase profits.



A) 24-month WIP & A/R trends
 B) Clients with the most outstanding A/R
 C) Attorneys with the greatest A/R

Real-time actionable financial information is only a few clicks away with Omega Legal's Visual Xpress™ tool!

For over 33 years, Omega has been providing mid-to-large size law firms fully integrated and completely customizable Financial and Practice Management systems.

- Time & Billing
- Collections
- Imaging
- e-billing
- Financial Reporting
- Calendar/Docket
- Accounting
- Case Management
- Conflict of Interest



Call Omega today at **1-800-356-1339** to learn how to get the revolutionary tools you need to enhance firm productivity and profitability. www.OmegaLegal.com

Here are some specific suggestions to apply to your professional *and* personal lives:

- **Blend your life.** Seek ways to blend your personal and professional lives to maximize your exposure of both. Include your family in your work and your work with your family. Children especially like to be a part of their parents' lives, so find ways to encourage and fulfill their interest. Work is not bad; at least it shouldn't be. If you are enjoying your work, and your loved ones share in that experience, you are providing them quality *and* quantity time. In addition, the more you enjoy your professional life, the better you perform. The rewards of blending multiply on themselves, instead of offsetting each other – as we saw in the balance paradigm.
- **Pursue your passion.** Chase those things that most interest you, while recognizing that not everything will be perfect all the time. You are most satisfied when you are achieving that which is important to you. This is also the best time to be around the ones you love – when you feel good about yourself and what you are contributing. What better role model could you offer?
- **Manage yourself.** Impose disciplines on yourself to ensure things are well-managed. One of the quickest ways to run asunder is to waste your time – both at work and at home. Maintaining a *reasonable* set of personal and professional disciplines increases your chances of achieving satisfaction. Be present with your clients and colleagues while working and with your family while at home. Put your BlackBerry away at the dinner table. Simple, self-imposed rules are easy to follow and deliver tremendous value to your life and the lives of those around you.

THE ULTIMATE REWARD

Moving beyond artificial constraints placed on you by broken paradigms allows you to achieve more of what matters to you personally. Waking each day to the sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and fulfillment puts you at your best in the office *and* at home. ✱

about the author

Paul Burton consults exclusively with lawyers and law firms on practice management issues. Contact him at paul@visionmechanix.com.