

# Balancing work and life

11/16/2000 — By **David Thompson**, work/life strategy manager for Microsoft Diversity, Human Resources



Work hard all day. Think about complex issues. Solve tough problems. Leave work. Pick up kids at daycare. Buy groceries. Go home. Start dinner. Put in a load of laundry. Eat dinner. Do dishes. Get kids to bed. Pay bills. Too exhausted to read. Go to sleep. Start all over again the next day ...

Sound familiar? Balancing a challenging career at Microsoft with a “real” life can be hard. If you find yourself constantly running ragged, maybe it’s time to take a step back and look at your work/life balance. Times have changed and juggling work and life is more complicated than ever before. For the benefit of all, companies and employees need to share the responsibility for maintaining a good work/life balance.

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## What is work/life balance?

The “work” part seems pretty self-explanatory. By “life,” I mean everything that is not work—all the details and activities that make up your personal life: interacting with your immediate family, extended family, and community; attending to your home; enjoying your hobbies; seeing to your own well-being ...

Now, the problem lies in how to interpret the word “balance.” What does that mean, and how do I get there? Many people view balance as a noun—a place to get to, sort of like nirvana or heaven. Think of balance not as a noun, but as a verb. Think of it as an action, a process, and a journey. Those who scoff at work/life balance may say, “You can’t have everything,” and they are right because they think of balance as a noun. But the reality is that you can have everything, just not all at the same time.

## Is work/life balance a new thing?

Although not a new thing, the concept of work/life balance has evolved over time. In earlier days, work and life were integrated. In hunting-gathering societies and later in farming societies, life revolved

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around work. "Life" details like community involvement, child care, and elder care happened right there alongside work.

The industrial revolution really brought about the separation of work and life. Since then, people have been working on balancing their professional and personal lives in many different ways. But certainly in our day, it has become more of a challenge. The workplace has changed dramatically in the last fifty years and as a result, balancing work and life has become a whole new ball game.

Perhaps the biggest change is that most families no longer have an adult who doesn't work outside the home. In the good ol' days, most families had two parents, one who earned the money and one who stayed home to take care of the "life" issues like raising the kids, buying groceries, cooking dinner, and getting the car fixed. As the following statistics show, this is no longer the norm:

The proportion of families with at least two wage earners passed the 50% mark in 1978.

Traditional families, with one wage earner and one stay-at-home parent, have plummeted from more than 60% of the workforce in 1940 to approximately 20% of the workforce in the 1990s.

More than 71% of mothers in two-parent families with school-aged children are employed.

Since 1940, single-parent homes have gone from just 2% of the workforce to greater than 15% of the workforce.

Without someone in the household attending to "life" issues full time, workers now have to find time to take care of these tasks in addition to their professional workload. Two areas on the "life" side of work/life balance that are of particular interest are:

**Child care** In the past, child care fell to the parent who stayed at home. Now, working parents need to make arrangements for child care. How can you work all day and still make it to your daughter's afternoon soccer game? Who stays home with your son when he's sick? Balancing work with parenting can be a double-edged sword: You feel guilty that attending to your children interrupted your work, and you feel guilty that your work takes you away from your children.

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**Elder care** People are living longer these days. It is estimated that more than 12% of workers have elder care responsibilities. This number is expected to increase dramatically within the next few years as baby boomers begin to assume responsibility for their aging parents.

## The company's role in work/life balance

A recent survey of CEOs found that more than 70% thought that they could not remain competitive if they did not help employees balance work and home life. The competitive landscape has changed in the last fifty years. The source of this change has been a shift in the nature of commitment in the workplace.

Employees no longer work for one or two companies and retire after a very long tenure. Now they have to worry about downsizing, "right-sizing," reorganization, re-engineering, and corporate buyouts. As a result of the downsizing of the 1980s and early 1990s, employees realized that they were expendable and consequently became much less committed to their employers and much more likely to leave for greener pastures. Because employers will not guarantee life-long employment, employees want more flexibility in their jobs, and they are not willing to give up their life for the company.

So to be competitive, companies must provide more than a good salary and a medical plan to keep their most talented employees. Companies now offer flexible work options, child care, wellness programs, financial planning, and even concierge services. These services are often bundled under the term work/life, and the purpose is to help you be productive and committed to that company.

Companies offer innovative work/life programs because they:

- Make the organizations more competitive in recruiting.
- Free employees' time so they can be more productive.
- Reduce costs by decreasing absenteeism and health care costs.
- Help with retention.

## Types of work/life programs

**Work/life encompasses policies and programs to help employees balance the competing demands between their work and personal lives.**

When people think of work/life programs offered by companies, they often think of child care. While child care represents an important part of the balancing act, a company's work/life program entails much more. It encompasses policies and programs to help employees balance the competing demands between their work and personal lives. A Towers Perrin survey identified more than 100 different varieties of work/life programs. The average work/life program includes 33 different initiatives, which can be categorized into six areas:

**Time** Time policies include flexible work arrangements such as flextime, telecommuting, job-sharing, and part-time work.

**Leave** Leave policies include paid and unpaid leaves for childbirth, for the care of young or sick children, or for other personal or family matters.

**Benefits** Benefits include cafeteria-style plans, flexible spending accounts (salaries are reduced to pay for child care or other family needs with pre-tax dollars), or insurance to pay for the long-term care of oneself, elderly parents, or a spouse.

**Dependent care** Dependent care policies include resource and referral services to help employees find child care or elder care, child care programs that are on-site or nearby, and employee discounts or vouchers to help pay for the cost of care.

**Counseling and wellness** Counseling or wellness services include employee assistance programs (EAP), wellness programs, financial counseling, relocation counseling, educational seminars at the workplace on balancing work and family life, peer support groups, and training for supervisors to help them be more attuned to the work/family problems of employees.

**Personal convenience** Personal convenience services include concierge services, lactation rooms, nap rooms, and even food shopping and dinner preparation services.

## Work/life programs at Microsoft

As a component of diversity at Microsoft, the goal of work/life is to aid in [attracting, developing, and keeping](#) the best and brightest diverse work force.

Microsoft employees will be surprised to learn how

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many services are available to them, ranging from back-up child care to financial planning. The [Work/Life](#) Web site and the [Benefits](#) pages of the HR Web site are the best places to start.

What's on the horizon? Workplace flexibility is the next frontier for work/life programs at Microsoft. Employees continue to express their need for flexible time, so Microsoft is working on ways to leverage teleworking, flextime, and even part-time work and job-sharing as options to balance work/life needs and enhance productivity.

## Managing the workload

The most important variable in work/life balance is the nature of the job itself. Jobs with autonomy, flexibility, learning opportunities, meaning, manager support, and a chance for advancement lead most directly to enhanced job satisfaction, commitment, performance, and retention. At the same time, even the best job and most supportive workplace cannot prevent the negative effects of too much work. Here are a couple of tips for managers and individual contributors to help manage workloads:

**Keep a realistic workload** Managers can make sure their team has a challenging, but realistic workload. This involves scheduling time accurately, managing resources wisely, prioritizing tasks, and at times saying "no" to projects that would overload the team.

**Remove interruptions** One MIT study at a company looked at how work and personal lives were affected by a pattern of constant interruptions. These interruptions prolonged the workday and were symptomatic of a crisis-centered, reactive approach to work. The simple process of setting aside specific periods in the week without interruptions resulted in an on-time product launch for the first time ever; plus there was less stress and pressure on workers.

## The employee's role in work/life balance

Just as a company examines both what it expects from employees and what it can offer them to help with their balance of work and personal life, employees must examine what they need. Caring for yourself is key to good health. Another part of being

**Imagine yourself  
in a room with**

healthy is putting your health to good use—by helping others and engaging in meaningful work.

So there you have it—the healthy balance dilemma. On one hand, well-being requires self-care—taking the best possible care of your body, mind, and spirit. On the other hand, you can't be truly healthy without reaching out in service to meet the needs of others—nurturing your family, bearing another's burdens, protecting your environment—or without engaging in challenging and exciting work. When one aspect of your life is pursued and worshiped as if it were the whole, the balance is upset and well-being will eventually be forfeited.

This balance may look easy on paper, but because there are no clear rules for determining when to do what, it's never easy to practice. The healthy balance is excruciatingly difficult to put into practice because at every moment you must be asking yourself, "Is now the time for me to work, to take care of myself, or to care for someone else?"

## **Unhealthy balance patterns**

As you struggle to find the healthy balance pattern for yourself, pay attention to the underlying values, beliefs, and internal messages that guide your balancing choices. You may recognize one of these three unhealthy patterns that most frequently keep people off balance:

### **Self-absorption**

It is possible to get so caught up in your own self-care that you become self-centered, preoccupied, and rigid in your adherence to the "perfect" lifestyle that makes you feel good. The trouble with this excessive attention to self-care is that it may end up taking so much focus and energy that there's not much left for building relationships, showing compassion, or investing yourself in meaningful work.

### **Other-absorption**

Caregivers are admirable people. However, those too absorbed in caregiving are particularly vulnerable to stress exhaustion. When helpers spend months or even years caring for a parade of "others" without also caring for themselves, they may burn out and end up feeling empty and bitter.

**four doors. Outside each door is a commitment you have made. How many doors can you go through at once?**

## **Overwork**

Work is important. Accomplishments and successes breed confidence and allow you to contribute in a positive manner to your world. Those who work hard and take their responsibilities seriously are usually rewarded for their efforts with both praise and promotions. For some, personal worth becomes dependent upon how much they get done and how successful they become. Fearing failure, they soon become driven to succeed. They feel compelled to move from one success to the next, faster and faster.

People who adopt this harried pace create a life full of distress for themselves. They accelerate their tempo, trying to do more and more in less time. They push themselves to accumulate possessions and status; they continually compete with others and with themselves.

## **Balancing your worlds**

Depending on which area you are trying to affect, there are three specific skills you can use to rebalance your competing demands.

## **Recognize your limits**

Only you can decide how to spend your time and energy. Imagine yourself in a room with four doors. Outside each door is a commitment you have made. How many doors can you go through at once? As much as you try to split your time between commitments, you still can't make more time and you can't save it. We can only spend time, and how you spend it is your choice.

## **Set boundaries**

As our work and life become more integrated, making these choices becomes more difficult. Having boundaries on personal time and work time can be very liberating and productive. If you work at home, have clear times and a place set. This will help you and those around you know when you are working and when you are free.

## **Clarify your values**

The only way the first two skills can work is if you have clarified your goals and the purposes for which

you live. You need to clarify which values and commitments are so central to your life that you could not really be you without them.

## Learn more

In addition to the [Work/Life](#) Web site and the [Benefits](#) pages of the HR Web site mentioned earlier, here are some resources to help you with your challenge to balance work with your personal life:

[Work & Family column](#) In her column, Sue Shellenbarger discusses issues that help readers manage the relationship between work and their family and personal lives.

[MSN articles on work and family](#) Here you will find a collection of articles about subjects such as alternative work schedules, work-at-home careers, and returning to work after maternity leave.

[\*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community\*](#) In a groundbreaking book based on vast new data, Robert D. Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures, and explains how we can reconnect. [Check it out from the Microsoft Library](#).

[Families and Work Institute](#) Resources on this Web site address the changing nature of work and family life. It includes the [National Study of the Changing Workforce](#) survey—you can download a free copy of the executive summary by clicking **Read More about the National Study**. It also provides information on The Fatherhood Project and a listing of publications available for purchase.

[The Work and Family Connection](#) You'll find lots of great information for subscribers and non-subscribers alike, including [a list of Web sites](#) on issues such as child care, elder care, convenience services, and flexible work options.

[Affluenza](#) A one-hour television special explores the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption. Here you can learn more about the show, get an Affluenza diagnosis, and check out resources for treatment.

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