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Still Striving For Work Life Balance

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Believe it or not, the term “work-life balance” has been around for more than 55 years (1). For a concept that has been discussed for over half a century, it is surprising how intangible it may still feel. Despite numerous research studies and workplace initiatives, many of us continue to struggle with achieving it.

Research indicates that up to 82% of employees are at risk of burnout, and according to Gallup, the United States loses over \$322 billion in productivity and turnover annually due to burnout (2, 3). The impacts of stress and burnout on the healthcare system are also staggering, amounting to somewhere between \$125 billion and \$190 billion annually (4). WHAT!

Those stats lead us to wonder....

- Why is achieving work-life balance still so difficult?
- What is driving so many workers today to experience stress and burnout?
- How is it not improving, given that we have highlighted this challenge for the past five years?

Perhaps it is the nature of modern work, our ingrained cultural expectations, or something else entirely. Maybe we have not given people the space they need to determine what work-life balance personally means to them.

It is interesting that in the term ‘work-life balance,’ the word ‘work’ comes first. Perhaps that subtly reflects our priorities and the systemic challenges we face, or maybe ‘life-work balance’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it.

At its core, work-life balance is about maintaining our personal wellbeing, having time to engage with activities we enjoy, cultivating meaningful relationships, having passions or hobbies, while still achieving a productive and fulfilling career. But is true work-life balance even possible? Or are we setting these two essentials in opposition, as if they are in conflict rather than a harmonious part of life? It is crucial to acknowledge that our current system has its challenges, and to achieve a meaningful work-life balance, we need to see some shifts in that as well. Read more on [human sustainability](#) here.

What can we do as individuals?

It is essential that we pause and reflect on the concept of work-life balance and start having conversations with ourselves, colleagues, leaders, and the people in our personal lives to understand what this truly means for us as individuals.

We all define it differently.

For example, for you, work-life balance might mean working within normal business hours, avoiding weekends, refraining from checking emails while on PTO, and taking time outside of work to recharge your wellbeing.

Or perhaps you are striving for more work-life integration, where you blend your work and personal life, which is often the case for people with flexible working arrangements or those working remotely. You may prefer a more flexible schedule during the day, but you may also have no problem logging in later in the evenings or on weekends. Some say working on vacation helps them feel less stressed or mitigates the fear of falling behind.

Work-life balance does not mean working two hours a week on a forty-hour schedule. Flexibility should never excuse disengagement. If someone is consistently doing less than the bare minimum or showing no interest in being engaged, that's not a work-life balance issue; that is a performance issue or something much deeper. Conversations about the quality of someone's work or lack of accountability may need to be kept separate from discussions about balance.

Ultimately, true work-life harmony or integration means finding ways to meet both personal and professional responsibilities without compromising the standards of our work.

Understanding what works for different people is important, especially if your job allows you to define what this means to you. Having conversations with your teams and being transparent about the way you work that suits your life is important. If there is clarity around the boundaries you set at work, it will help you achieve your goals for cultivating better balance and function more effectively as a team.

But what does the research say?

“Studies show that people who work more than 55 hours per week are 1.66 times more likely to experience depression and 1.74 times more likely to suffer from anxiety” (5). Consistently working long hours also disrupts sleep and recovery cycles, likely resulting in decreased next-day performance (6).

As you define what work-life balance means for you, remember this: there is real value in turning work off and avoiding overwork. If you are constantly connected, that “seed” of work never leaves your mind. Your brain needs time to pause, recover, and focus on something beyond work.

We often talk about the importance of PTO, but are we truly using it to disconnect? If you are curious to learn more about taking time away from work, check out our article on the topic. [**PTO: Are We Getting It All Wrong?**](#)

Some considerations for leaders on cultivating work-life balance:

- Talk with your teams about what this means to them.
- Model and encourage employees to completely “unplug” after work.
- Remove cultural dynamics that promote excessive work hours.
- Set clear boundaries as an organization for what expectations are for your team.
- If there are seasons of heavy work, create flexibility on the other side of it.

Interested in learning how you can cultivate and promote meaningful work-life balance at work? Reach out to [Hayley and Katie](#).

Citations:

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