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Work Life Balance...Turning Myth to Reality
Concrete Steps to achieve a Harmonious Life

Avil Beckford, President

“WORK/LIFE BALANCE IS A MYTH”, says Gail Blanke (former guest of the Oprah Winfrey Show) in her interview featured in my recently published book *Tales of People Who Get It*. “Work and life are completely integrated. I have had an interesting career and worked throughout both my pregnancies... I have a very close family and I constantly ask myself what am I committed to at this particular moment? At one instant, it might be attending a hockey game and at another it’s working on a presentation. There were times when I opted out of a business trip because, in the end, my family always came first. We have to learn to be easier on ourselves. We don’t have to be everybody’s everything all the time,” she says.

About The Author

Avil Beckford is an accomplished writer, researcher, and analyst with over 15 years experience. Her strong service orientation, dedication to learning and exploring new ways of improving her own life as well as the many she touches, has underpinned her success to date.

A published author, her new book, *Tales of People Who Get It* is a culmination of her life experience. It has often been said of Avil that her life informs her work. She has also created a companion workbook *Journey to Getting It*.

Avil’s many readers look forward to Ambeck Edge, her company’s regular e-Newsletter that is a rich resource those interested in self-improvement, as well as those professionals who struggle with life balance issues.

In our current business world, experts such as Henry Mintzberg often refer to a dangerous practice in reaction to the perilous global economy. As we have seen so often, at the first sign of uncertainty rounds of layoffs occur. These result in temporary productivity gains that exact the maximum contribution from employees terrified of being part of the next layoff sweep. In this environment, it makes you wonder whether talk of individual work-life balance is just a pipe dream.

Do you find competing work and non-work life responsibilities to be major cause of stress in your life? If so, you are in good company, but it doesn’t have to be so stressful. After interviewing thirty-four accomplished individuals for my book, *Tales of People Who Get It*, I realized that they have a lot to say about how to find your own definition of balance and then how to achieve it. So, I’ve taken their wise words and put them together to create a guide suitable for everyone who wants to effectively integrate their personal and professional life.

Pressures

Considering the speed and scope of change, in any profession today, it’s easy for individuals to become so consumed with their career that they quickly lose perspective of what’s really important. When they are overwhelmed, they don’t make good decisions about priorities and that results in unbalanced lives. In addition, as we are so often told, the general population and the labour force are aging. This means an increasing number of workers with dependent care - both elder and child care - responsibilities that demand extra workplace accommodation/support, as well as access to community services and resources.

Added to the mix, the multiple roles we play in life - employee, boss, subordinate, spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, expert, rookie, teacher, student, adventurer, community member and so on - increasing demands are made on our time, energy and commitment.

So how do you cope when you're being tugged in every direction? Jim Rohn, a successful business philosopher, succinctly categorizes the following five life areas:

1. Economic/Financial
2. Social
3. Health/Wellness
4. Business/Career
5. Personal

Each life area has associated activities and responsibilities attached to it (See Table 1). Work-life conflict arises when there is an imbalance between the cumulative demands of work and non-work life activities. Participation in one role may make it difficult to participate in another role. For example, the care of an aging parent may affect attendance at work and heavy work demands may affect attendance to a child's hockey game.

Table 1: The Five Life Areas

Economic/Financial	Social	Health/Wellness	Business/Career	Personal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your net worth • State of your finances • Investments • Assets & Debts • Income & Expenses • Things you want to buy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Marriage • Family • Friends • Extended Family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical • Mental • Spiritual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocation • Business/Job Goals • Education • Certifications • Degrees • Professional Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel • Vacation • Relaxation • Hobbies/Passion • Personal Development

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Note: The information in the table is adapted from the Jim Rohn One-Year Success Program

What does balance mean? And does work-life balance mean equal balance? Dictionary.com defines balance as a state of equilibrium; equal distribution. Clearly it would be very difficult to balance all five life areas to live a harmonious life. Would you even want to? Trying to schedule an equal number of hours for each of your various work and personal responsibilities is unrealistic and in fact could be a recipe for disaster.

A better alternative would be to integrate the five areas of your life. When the five life areas, work and non work life activities, are combined into an integrated whole, your simplified life becomes harmonious.

Toronto-based life coach Robin Altman says, “Ultimately, I think that it’s a mindset and that it’s all about the fulfillment factor for the individual. If you see your work as an opportunity to interact with people on a social level, if you see work as an opportunity to learn, grow and have interesting experiences, if your work is aligned with your strengths, values, purpose and goals, then you can “work” for 16 hours a day and never burn out. That said, I’m sure you’ve seen the Wheel of Life diagram - no one’s life can be complete with only one wedge, so it’s important that the person have other areas in their life to fulfill them. In my opinion, it is less a question of “hours” than a question of fulfillment, in other words, you don’t need to split up 24 hours equally into each wedge, but you do need to feel personally satisfied, which is always unique to every individual.”

Based on Altman’s experience with her clients, she has observed that the clients who are serious about integrating their personal and professional life have found ways to do so.

In my own research for my book, I asked highly accomplished people from Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Jamaica and South Africa “How do you integrate your personal and professional life?” Their responses reflect the many different perspectives and strategies that encompass “balance.” Here are some of those responses:

- “I don’t really see much difference between my professional and personal life. For me they are closely intertwined. The same passion and persistence that leads me to excel is applied to both the personal and professional areas of my life... I live my life and work is an aspect of it.
- I really love what I do, so it doesn't feel like work. So, I live my work - however I do have a lot of balance in my life.
- They are integrated... I do not feel like I work hard because the things that I do, I love to do. I love my work.
- Early in my career because I was starting out as a journalist and wanted to be a columnist, at a newspaper, I lost sight of the really important things and lost balance. In the scheme of things the family is more important than work.
- By conventional definition I work 12, 13, 14, 15 hours each day, but to me it isn’t work. I have finally figured out a way to make money doing what I love.
- It’s difficult to keep family, friends, social and work all in balance.
- [A] factor that made integration of my personal and professional life easy was an early decision by the two of us in our marriage that we each had our own sets of skills. We divided up responsibilities and we respected that division; as a couple we got a lot of things done.
- Firstly, I do not make distinctions between the two anymore. I have one life— that’s it.
- I live what I do. I am doing who I am.

- When you love what you do, and do what you love, it becomes seamless.”

Looking closely at the interview responses to the question some patterns started to emerge.

- You have one life that has many aspects to it
- When you love what you do for a living it's easier to integrate personal and professional life areas
- As you get older, you do a better job of making your work and life more seamless. This may be a function of where you are in your career
- The better you are at time management, the easier it is to manage the five life areas
- Interviewees realize that their family is the most important priority, so they schedule time for important moments with family and friends
- *Blackout periods* are important - no cell phone, email or BlackBerry - being completely off duty for set periods of time
- People who work for themselves have an easier time integrating their personal and professional life

Key strategies that interviewees use to integrate their personal and professional life include the ability to:

- Divide responsibilities among family members based on skills set, with respect for those divisions
- Surprise family members by doing the unexpected and not just what's expected
- Have regular *check-ins* to determine what's the most important thing at that particular moment in time
- Manage time effectively
- Be present and mentally aware, especially during family time
- Carve out *me-time*, as well as *couple-time*
- Try to do only work they love
- Schedule off duty time

What does the future hold for work-life balance? “It seems we're heading into an era where more and more people will work remotely, consult or work from home,” says Robin Altman. We know from interviews that those who work for themselves find it easier to find balance, so perhaps that's a glimmer of hope on the balance front.

“The bottom line is that people need to be attuned to themselves, to their strengths, values, purpose and goals, in order to build more fulfilling lives in general, which would organically include their own form of work-life balance, according to Altman.

The first challenge in making change in your life is analyzing the way your life is going right at this moment. Is this nagging feeling that you're missing out on important

things a normal part of the struggle to find balance or are you headed toward a crisis? You need to know how you stack up when it comes to integrating your personal and professional life. And, what does balance mean to you? You decide.

The Work-Life Scorecard found on the next page makes you aware of your present work-life balance situation. After you have taken the test and rated yourself, there is a more comprehensive assessment, the Self-Discovery Worksheet, which will help you to weave all aspects of your life into an integrated whole.

There is no easy, one-stop way to find balance. But these self-assessments are tools that can move you in the right direction - for you. Before starting, it is important to keep in mind that to get maximum benefit, you do need to be as honest with yourself as you possibly can to make the exercises really work. Investing your time and energy on these exercises requires commitment. And, that's the first learning: if you want to live a harmonious, integrated life, it makes sense that you have to do *the time*.

Work-Life Balance Scorecard

To help you clearly understand your current situation, try the Work-Life Balance Scorecard. Rate your reactions to each pair of phrases. Decide where you lie on the scale from 1 to 10. Add up your total from each column.

I do not have clear life goals for my future	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I have clear life goals for my future
I do not have a clear plan to achieve my life goals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I have a clear plan to achieve my life goals
I feel stressed out most of the time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never feel stressed out
I never spend adequate time doing what's most important to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I always spend adequate time doing what's most important to me
I can't remember the last time I was able to find the time to take a day off to do something fun	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I always make the time to take a day off to do something fun
I work in an environment that's not supportive of family and personal commitments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I work in an environment that's completely supportive of family and personal commitments
I always miss family and other important non work life events because of work-related time pressures and responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never miss family and other important non work life events because of work-related time pressures and responsibilities
I am happy to work very long hours at the expense of my personal, social and other life interests	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never work very long hours at the expense of my personal, social and other life interests
I always experience a lack of time to meet all of my professional and personal responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never experience a lack of time to meet all of my professional and personal responsibilities
I never focus on family life, the pursuit of achieving a healthy lifestyle, and fulfillment of personal development needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I always focus on family life, the pursuit of achieving a healthy lifestyle, and fulfillment of personal development needs
ADD COLUMN TOTALS											YOUR SCORE _____

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If you scored 80 or above, your life is integrated and you're on track. If you scored between 50 and 80, you are getting there and need to do some work. If you scored under 50, it's time to re-evaluate your life.

The Self-Discovery Worksheet helps you to work toward living a more harmonious, integrated life. **To purchase the assessment now and take concrete action, click <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=670937>.**

For more ideas, and if you love stories, read the responses of the 34 people profiled in *Tales of People Who Get It* <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=670937>.

Be sure to check out Avil Beckford's website at <http://www.ambeck.com>

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