

Challenges with a Work-Life Balance and Project Management¹

By Rebecca J. Brady, PMP and Michael I. Borts, PMP

There was a time when working hours were more clearly defined. You went to work at the same time and you returned home at the same time. For example, dinner was at 6:03 p.m. every night. The “breadwinner” then had time to spend with the family, for hobbies and spiritual development. In this day and age, the separation between work and the rest of your life has become nebulous. It often starts with just one short email that leads to one more conference call from home. By the time you have powered down your laptop, it is well into the evening, where all of your home responsibilities are not being met and your personal needs are not being addressed. In addition, globalization makes it much more difficult to decide when your work hours begin and end. High speed internet and smart phones mean that we are always connected to the workplace. Having a work-life balance in your life has become a more challenging goal.

Corporations are requiring more of employees and striving to do more with less. At the same time businesses want to maintain and develop an effective workforce. They recognize the importance of a home and life balance, although this balance at times conflicts with business exigencies. The conundrum is how to maintain an effective workforce while remaining profitable, keeping costs low, and maintaining customer satisfaction.

Work-Life balance: What it is and what it is not

The definition of a work life balance is not straightforward. One definition is managing your work life and personal life so that you are productive, satisfied, and happy. Stephen R. Covey states “having a good work/life balance means that your actions and priorities are aligned in a way that is taking care of what is really important to you.” (Covey)

There does not have to be an equal balance of time for work and the rest of your life’s activities. Life is fluid and changing. For example, some parts of your company’s business cycle may be more time intensive than others. In the NICE IEX WFM Implementation Group, the expectation is that additional time and efforts will be required at the end of every quarter for project managers and technicians in completing implementations and in revenue recognition. Introduction of a new product has and will require extra focus and time for one of our group’s project managers this year. On the

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other hand, your personal life will take precedence for events such as the first day of school, a Boy Scout camping trip, or the birth of a baby. Priorities need to be evaluated and managed by both the business and the individual together.

There is no one size fits all Work-Life balance. Different stages of life and career have different Work-Life balances. Different business needs require different commitments and requirements. An imbalance is created when dissonance occurs between work time and personal life time. An imbalance results when you end up dealing with your urgent tasks and neglect the non-urgent, but important. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the work-life balance and methods to achieve this balance.

Why is a Work-Life balance important?

A work-life imbalance may result in the following:

- **Decreased efficiency:** According to studies, the first forty hours of work a week are more productive and effective than subsequent hours. We become less efficient with the extra hours and are more prone to mistakes. For example, in 2008, it was reported that an overworked medical staff in the US made approximately 4,000 avoidable errors. (Articlesbase, par 2).
- **Increased stress may result in health concerns** including anxiety, depression, heart conditions, excessive weight, hair loss, and even loss of libido. According to a study of the American Psychological Association:
 - 54% of Americans are concerned about their stress levels. 30% consider their stress levels as extreme.
 - 66% of American adults suffer from stress induced chronic health condition. (Nyab)
- There is even a Japanese term, Karōshi, which can be translated literally into "death from overwork".
- **Relationship degradation** – Working too much may cause you to miss family interactions as well as important events or milestones. Relationships require nurturing, time and ongoing attention. Once damage is done, it is often more difficult and time consuming to repair than if appropriate time and focus had occurred all along.

Companies have higher turnover and employee burnout when there are long term work-life imbalances. Employees are less efficient. Profitability and sustainability are core goals for companies and to achieve both recognition of the necessity of a work-life balance for employees is essential.

How to Effectively Manage Work-Life Balance

Even though Work-Life balance is an ongoing activity and not a true project, portions of your life can be managed utilizing some project management tools and techniques. Your company or department can also manage towards a work-life balance for employees.

Initiating a Work-Life Balance

Recognize that work may have taken over our lives. It is time to evaluate the work-life balance, determine if rebalancing is needed, and to take steps to achieve and/or maintain a work-life balance.

Planning a Work-Life Balance

The first task is to determine if you have a good work-life balance and what your work life balance currently is. To determine your balance, track your time. For one week, carefully log everything that you do, at work and at home, in all aspects of your life.

At the end of the week, evaluate your work-life balance. To evaluate how you have spent your time several questions should be answered:

- What is an acceptable amount of work time for you and your employer? At NICE Systems, for example, fifty hours is considered average for project managers in our division.
- Evaluate your activities at both work and home. Are the activities you are engaging in satisfying and productive? Can some of the activities that are not beneficial be eliminated or delegated? Can you assign a level of importance to your activities and prioritize them. Your focus should be on the important activities. Are you working efficiently?
- Formulate a plan to achieve a Work-Life balance. Plans are more effective if they are defined and have achievable goals. This includes such items as leaving work at a specified time every day or signing up for an exercise class.

Executing Your Work-Life Balance Plan

Execution of your plan will help you effectively manage a work-life balance. Plan and schedule your personal time just as you do your work time. Personal time is just as important as a work commitment. Your home and family are your priorities.

Ten steps to execute a work-life plan include:

- 1) Set both short and long term goals. Make a daily activities list that is realistic and achievable. Priority is given to the most important items first. This will give you a sense of accomplishment and control, resulting in lowered stress. Many of the project managers at NICE IEX Workforce Management group use MS Outlook tasks for this purpose. In addition, have a short term activities list (weekly, monthly) as well as a long-term goals list. What do you want to be doing in five years? Longer term goals are met more easily when they are delineated, stated, and in front of you.
- 2) Use lessons learned to evaluate your current activities and processes. Making yourself more efficient and eliminating needless activities will give you more time for important things in your life. In our group we use Lessons Learned meetings to continually look for the best practices and methods of implementation. This has enabled us to handle increased workloads efficiently and effectively. Lessons learned may be applied to other aspects of life too.
- 3) Only commit to what is reasonable, feasible and important. “Shed the superman/superwoman urge!” (Mental Health America). This is the most difficult step to adhere to. You have to decide what is important. You are then able to anticipate needs and requirements before they become urgent (Covey). This applies to both work and home.
- 4) Communicate about your work, issues and successes at work and home. When you have an issue, suggest a solution, rather than just complain about it. As the old adage goes, “Don’t curse the darkness, light a candle.” Use problem-solving skills.
- 5) Take care of yourself. Regular exercising is important for overall health and to decrease stress. Schedule at least 30 minutes per day, five days per week. Exercise may be as simple as walking around the block. Mealtime is important. Plan on eating breakfast daily and taking at least fifteen minutes for lunch every day. During your lunchtime take a break from working. Just relax and enjoy your meal. Eat dinner at a reasonable hour. Encourage co-workers and family to care for themselves too.
- 6) Schedule a break to make you more efficient. Small breaks, even as little as 5 minutes, help clear your mind and reduce stress. Do you have a morning and afternoon break scheduled on your calendar? If you regularly work without taking any breaks try taking one.
- 7) At work concentrate on work, at home concentrate on your home life. At home, turn off your phone, PDA, laptop etc for at least part of the evening.

Concentrating on your family will help you build and maintain your relationships. (Mental Health America.) Focusing on your relationships when they are important, but not urgent help prevent relationship degradation (Covey). Family relationships are important to foster and maintain. As an example, some of the Project Managers and Account Managers in our group have lunch with their school children on a regular basis. This builds memories and relationships.

- 8) Participate in activities outside of work. Hobbies are important in achieving a work-life balance. Schedule some time to engage in hobbies that interest you. Focusing on other areas besides work gives your mind time to relax. If you do not have a hobby, this is a good time to find something that interests you and pursue it. Hobbies are also good avenues to share time with family and friends.
- 9) Adequate sleep contributes to optimal performance in aspects of life. This is one area of life that tends to be short changed when responsibilities keep increasing. Adults usually need between seven and nine hours per night. Establish a bedtime and go to bed at the specified time. We recognize the importance of rest. For example, we have built into our proposals and SOWs that installers and integration technicians are required to take a break after eight hours of work.
- 10) Take all of your paid time off or vacation. Your paid time off is a benefit that you have earned and deserve. Do not work during the time you have planned off. Take this time for rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation. You will come back to work refreshed and more productive. Planning for your absences is important. In our group, we have defined and documented out of- office procedures. One of our out of office procedures is for a backup. The backup manages your workload so that projects continue in your absence. Your backup has documentation on the status of each project and other team members who will assist if needed. You know that your backup will ensure that your projects will make progress and give you the time off you need. Employees are encouraged to take their paid time off. They come back refreshed and rejuvenated.

Monitoring and Controlling Your Work-Life Balance

Reevaluate how you spend your time at least quarterly. It is easy for work responsibilities to creep into your private life unless you have diligence and commitment to the work-life balance.

Support of a work-life balance from your employer and/or manager is important. It is definitely important for your company to be profitable, but also it is important to have a satisfactory personal life. Our project managers manage approximately thirty projects in various stages of the life cycle. It is often challenging to maintain the work-life balance.

Part of our processes are to continually look for ways to be more efficient so that we can do more and better work, but also to have time for our personal lives. Our lessons learned activities help us in this regard. Particularly in times of increased workload and stress it is important for us to monitor and evaluate the best and most efficient processes and ways to work. Documentation of our processes also assists us in working efficiently. We recognize that a home-life balance is essential and work as a cohesive team to promote this.

Turnover in our group has been low with tenures ranging from three and a half to over eleven years and this may be partially attributed to having a work-life balance. All recognize the importance of efficient and effective work while having life outside of work. There is no easy or quick way to establish and maintain a work-life balance and have the ongoing challenge to maintain it.

Conclusion

Work-Life balance is not impossible, but it does take some consistent effort and reevaluation on an ongoing basis. The effort should be taken individually and by your team. Work can dominate your life. Recognizing what is important and necessary and striving for what is valued will make a work-life balance feasible. Utilizing management skills will enable you to have a satisfying work and home life.

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About the Authors



Rebecca Brady, PMP

Texas, USA



Rebecca Brady, Sr. Manager, Implementation, has been employed with NICE Systems IEX Workforce Management Group since 1998. She has had several roles at IEX including project manager, customer advocate, and manager of implementation. Rebecca has over fifteen years of project management experience. She has a MS in Finance and is a PMP. Rebecca can be contacted at rebeccajbrady@gmail.com.



Michael Borts, PMP

Texas, USA



Michael Borts has been employed as a project manager with NICE Systems IEX Workforce Management Group since 2000. Michael has over fifteen years of project management experience. He has a BA and is a PMP. In addition, he is a member of the Vocal Majority chorus and is a National Anthem soloist for the Dallas Mavericks and Texas Rangers. Michael can be contacted at Michael.Borts@nice.com.