You have the power!



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Jo Maughan provides advice on how to get a better work-life balance

Key Points

What is the issue?

Stop waiting for others or your organisation to give you the work-life balance you want. Instead, decide to create it yourself.

What does it mean to me?

This article is for you if want to shift your perspective on what work-life balance is, and want more of it in your career and life.

What can I take away?

Inspiration, plus three steps you can implement to create a better work-life balance for yourself.

Do you find yourself thinking: ‘I’m too busy. I’ve got too much to do. I get no time for myself’? Asking yourself the same old question: ‘How can I get a better work-life balance?’

What if I told you, you can. And what if I told you, the solution lies with you.

Let me explain with two anecdotes.

‘Perhaps you’re over-thinking it,’ said my best friend Sarah, glass of Malbec in hand. ‘Why don’t you just ask him?’ Her comment jolted me. In that moment, I realised no one was going to do it for me. I needed to act. So I did. I asked my boss if I could work four days a week.

Dipti Thakrar, a Freelance Head of Tax and a CPD Tax Tutor remembers: ‘People in London questioned me. When I said, I’m meant to be the main carer [of my children], they asked why? When I said, I have to take a lower paid job, they asked, why? Something inside of me woke up.’

The common thread? Both of us had people to challenge us. ‘Catalysts’, as Dipti calls them. What they said jolted us. Most importantly, we noticed the jolt, questioned our assumptions and woke up.

In my case, it was 2004. I was a senior international tax manager in a FTSE 50 company. Married, no kids. The company didn’t have a flexible working policy. My boss asked just one question: ‘What will happen if you have an urgent deadline and it’s your non-working day the next day?’ ‘I’ll organise my work so I can meet the deadline, or I’ll work my non-working day and take the day in lieu,’ I said. ‘I don’t expect you or anyone else to pick it up.’ This is what he wanted. He said he’d talk to HR; that he thought it’d be okay. Within nine days, I had my first day off. I spent it making a checked, fabric box.

Dipti got herself an in-house Head of Global Taxes role in Finance, in London for two days per week. She'd leave home for London Monday evening after bath time, and would be back by tea on Wednesday. She says she remembers thinking: 'This is it! This is work-life balance.'

Work-life balance – let's examine that phrase for a moment. I don't like it. It implies that an activity is either work or non-work; that we have binary choices; and that there's an ideal balance to be strived for. Rather, what matters to us professionals, in my experience, is having enough time to spend on what we enjoy, and feeling happy and healthy. I prefer the phrase 'work-life blend'. Now, what new perspectives does that open up?

And it's not just me and Dipti who have the 'work-life' blend we want. Mark, an Associate at a well-known law firm, works three and a half days per week so he can train for iron man competitions. Louise, a Big 4 Senior Manager, recently moved to her first in-house role. She negotiated four days per week even though the role was advertised as full-time. Martin, a freelance tax contractor takes three to six months off to travel when each contract finishes. Chris Mattos, the former editor of this magazine, has a portfolio career: he has his own growing tax practice, he's the FD for two of his clients, a charity trustee, home schools his children and is the Director of Stroud Fringe.

What do we all have in common? We took responsibility. We seized our power. We updated our mindsets – the lenses, filters and assumptions through which we were seeing the world. We decided to believe that we could have what we wanted. Then we acted. We put in the effort to create it. To quote George Bernard Shaw: 'The only people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look around for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, they make them.'

At this point you may be thinking: 'Okay, I get it. But what now?' I recommend three steps: build your self-awareness; promise yourself; and move forward inch by inch.

1: Build your self-awareness

Self-awareness is defined as being the conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, motives and desires. Become more self-aware to understand what you really, really want and what's stopping you. You can do this by:

- *Looking for 'catalysts'*: people who will ask you direct and awkward questions: Their role, although they don't know it, is to help you notice your own filters, lenses, assumptions and limiting beliefs. If you don't have people like this in your life, get yourself a mentor or coach.
- *Looking out for 'jolts'*: Jolts are the micro-moments when you feel negative emotions of any kind. Notice your thoughts in these moments because they'll illuminate what's stopping you. For example, here's one of my micro-moments: 'Why don't you just say "no",' he suggested. I felt anxious. I thought: 'I can't do that. She won't like it. She'll be cross.' I discovered I believed I had to put others' needs and wants before my own. A limiting belief. I realised it wasn't true. I also realised that I'd need to let go of this belief if I was to create a better work-life blend.
- *Deciding on your definition of success*: What is it you really, really want? What would your ideal life look like? What does your heart yearn for? Write it down uncensored. Picture it in your mind's eye.
- *Journalling and reflection*: Get yourself an A5 notebook and carry it around in your bag. Spend five to 15 minutes each day to consciously reflect and journal to yourself along the following lines:
    - Record the 'jolts' you notice each day. When you have ten to 20 jolts, stand back and spot the themes. It's very likely there is one, e.g. a pattern of behaving, a regular assumption or belief. Ask yourself, how is this serving me?
    - Reflect on the extent to which you've kept your promises to yourself about work-life blend (see below). For example, did you leave on time on Friday (N.B. not early but on time) like you promised yourself you would? If yes, acknowledge yourself. If no, what got in your way? How can you get over that obstacle next time? What do you need to change in yourself to honour your promise to yourself?

2: Promise yourself

I realised I wasn't allowing myself a better work-life blend because I was telling myself I had to work hard to prove I was good at my job. My underlying limiting belief was that I wasn't good enough. Once I realised this, I was able to promise myself that I wouldn't believe it any longer; that I'd allow myself to do an '80% good enough job', which freed up time to do other things, including rest and relax. My big promise was to leave tax and start my own coaching business. To get there, I made

small promises to myself, such as ‘doing nothing’ (relaxing) for at least 30 minutes each day. What promise will you make to yourself?

But before you do, do this: *Take responsibility*. Really ‘get’ that it’s only you who can create what you want for yourself. Stop making excuses. Stop thinking, ‘if only they would…’. It’s down to you.

3: Move forward step by step

You won’t create the work-life blend you want in one go. It’s a process. You’ll need to stay focused on your promise to yourself, then move forward step-by-step. These tips will help you:

- *Develop a ‘go-to’ phrase to guide you*: Mine is: ‘It’s my life. I can do what I want.’ Dipti references back to what’s most important to her – her children. She says: ‘If I’m giving up time with my kids, then it’s got to be amazing. Otherwise, I won’t do it.’
- *Learn to say ‘no’ and stop doing what you don’t want to do*: There are many online resources and short courses that teach you how to say ‘no’. In my experience though, if you find saying ‘no’ difficult, it’s probably because you have an unnoticed limiting belief in the way. When you unearth it and uproot it, everything will change: you will be able to say ‘no’. If you suspect this is you and you’re ready to change, engage a coach.
- *Schedule your priorities*: ‘The key is not to prioritise your schedule but to schedule your priorities’, Stephen Covey. For example, book a 30 minute meeting with yourself each lunchtime to go for that walk so you exercise and spend time in nature. Set a reminder on your phone to read in bed at 10pm.
- *Use ‘dead time’*: Next time you’re waiting for the train, don’t automatically check your emails AGAIN. Use the time to do something related to your promise. For me this was: read some of my coaching book, connect with coaches on LinkedIn, just ‘do nothing’. For you, it may be to learn Spanish, prepare your case for flexible working, or balance on one leg to improve your core stability.
- *Be 100% present to the moment you’re in*: You’ll enjoy your work and non-work time more when your thoughts aren’t wandering off to what just happened or what will happen tomorrow. Practice mindfulness to help you stay ‘in the moment’.