

## Member's Quarterly

Winter 2020 Edition

### Feature

# Work–Life Balance is an Oxymoron

*Consider purpose instead of time*

**W**ork-life balance is a phrase we throw around a lot. Ever since the industrial revolution made possible the adaptation to work en masse, employing millions of people, our western societies have had a distorted definition of balance when it comes to work. As an example, since that same revolution, we've made it illegal to work people to their early deaths with punishing hours (10+ hour work days, 6+ day work weeks, etc.). Yet there are many in our "enlightened" society today who work punishing hours of one kind or another (often voluntarily). Are you one of them?



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## The Fairytale of Balance

The concept of balance has enormous appeal. It sounds like something we should aspire to and master, something that is in our control to effect (you just need more *balance*). Like our ancestors who ushered in the industrial revolution, we often think we can solve today's problems by breaking things down into components and re-mastering them in new and different ways. This would allow us to become far more efficient. We conveniently forget our ancestral innovation was with respect to materials and process-breaking things down into simple steps and motion so as to re-order work, yielding unseen results for the era. The happy by-product of their results was that by becoming more efficient, you could also save time, giving life to a fairytale we still believe in today. However, you cannot continually achieve greater and greater efficiencies with something finite like time. And time does not scale.

Balance in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world has become the "holy grail" of time management. We acknowledge that we control what we do and how we do it. It then makes sense that if we pursue organizational skills that allow us to plan our days mindfully, then logically we can do it all. In this process we have completely forgotten the essential definition of balance — we've skewed it to fit the 18<sup>th</sup> century fairytale.

It's time for a reset. Balance (within the context of work and life) is essentially following the common sense of *all things in moderation*. When you look at it this way, doesn't the pursuit of continually striving to do more with less time seem ridiculous? This 18<sup>th</sup> century notion we carry also assumes we are machine-like, not living beings. We forget that in addition to not being able to iteratively become more efficient (past a certain point), we also have a hard-wired need to be *effective* in what we do. In other words, we need to make a difference through our work or we lose access to hope, sacrificing well-being.

## What's Your Purpose?

You cannot make as meaningful a difference moving through life at 185 km/h as you can when you slow down and attend to what is happening in each moment. This allows the moments in life to guide your work (immersing yourself in the meaning and purpose of what you do). When we only have access to high-level "surface" meaning (proverbially checking the box), we derive no lasting joy from it. It doesn't feed our soul. Then this brings on anxiety, self-doubt, vulnerability and many other emotions we thought we'd avoided because *hey, we got the work done*. Not so. No one can avoid the impact or collateral damage to our families and communities of continually ignoring his or her deepest ambitions and potential. So, try this instead. Look at your day from the perspective of what purpose your effort serves rather than how much time it will take. You may realize with this approach that what you thought was really important... just isn't. Saving you time and supporting your well-being.

To quote Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

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