



Learning at Your Fingertips

Work-Life Balance 2.0



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Overview

Work/life balance is at best an elusive ideal and at worst a complete myth, today's senior executives will tell you. But by making deliberate choices about which opportunities they'll pursue and which they'll decline, rather than simply reacting to emergencies, leaders can and do engage meaningfully with work, family, and community.



Overview

They've discovered through hard experience that prospering in the senior ranks is a matter of carefully combining work and home so as not to lose themselves, their loved ones, or their foothold on success.



Overview

Those who do this most effectively involve their families in work decisions and activities. They also vigilantly manage their own human capital, endeavoring to give both work and home their due—over a period of years, not weeks or days



Manage Your Work/ Manage Your Life

That's how the 21st-century business leaders in our research said they reconcile their professional and personal lives. In this article we draw on five years' worth of interviews with almost 4,000 executives worldwide, conducted by students at Harvard Business School, and a survey of 82 executives in an HBS leadership course.



Manage Your Work/ Manage Your Life

Deliberate choices don't guarantee complete control. Life sometimes takes over, whether it's a parent's dementia or a teenager's car accident. But many of the executives we've studied—men and women alike—have sustained their momentum during such challenges while staying connected to their families.



Manage Your Work/ Manage Your Life

Their stories and advice reflect five main themes: defining success for yourself, managing technology, building support networks at work and at home, traveling or relocating selectively, and collaborating with your partner.



Defining Success For Yourself

When you are leading a major project, you determine early on what a win should look like. The same principle applies to leading a deliberate life: You have to define what success means to you—understanding, of course, that your definition will evolve over time.



Defining Success For Yourself

Executives' definitions of professional and personal success run a gamut from the tactical to the conceptual



Defining Success For Yourself

PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS MEANS...



Defining Success For Yourself

PERSONAL SUCCESS MEANS...



Defining Success For Yourself

For one leader, it means being home at least four nights a week. For another, it means understanding what's going on in the lives of family members. For a third, it's about having emotional energy at both work and home.



Defining Success For Yourself

Some intriguing gender differences emerged in our survey data: In defining professional success, women place more value than men do on individual achievement, having passion for their work, receiving respect, and making a difference, but less value on organizational achievement and ongoing learning and development.



Defining Success For Yourself

A lower percentage of women than of men list financial achievement as an aspect of personal or professional success. Rewarding relationships are by far the most common element of personal success for both sexes, but men list merely having a family as an indicator of success, whereas women describe what a good family life looks like to them.



Defining Success For Yourself

Women are also more likely to mention the importance of friends and community as well as family.



Defining Success For Yourself

The survey responses consisted of short phrases and lists, but in the interviews executives often defined personal success by telling a story or describing an ideal self or moment in time. Such narratives and self-concepts serve as motivational goalposts, helping people prioritize activities and make sense of conflicts and inconsistencies.



Defining Success For Yourself

When work and family responsibilities collide, for example, men may lay claim to the cultural narrative of the good provider. Several male executives who admitted to spending inadequate time with their families consider absence an acceptable price for providing their children with opportunities they themselves never had.



Defining Success For Yourself

One of these men, poor during his childhood, said that his financial success both protects his children and validates his parents' struggles.



Defining Success For Yourself

Another even put a positive spin on the breakup of his family: “Looking back, I would have still made a similar decision to focus on work, as I was able to provide for my family and become a leader in my area, and these things were important to me. Now I focus on my kids’ education...and spend a lot more time with them over weekends.”



Defining Success For Yourself

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Defining Success For Yourself

Even the men who pride themselves on having achieved some degree of balance between work and other realms of their lives measure themselves against a traditional male ideal.



Defining Success For Yourself

“The 10 minutes I give my kids at night is one million times greater than spending that 10 minutes at work,” one interviewee said. It’s difficult to imagine a woman congratulating herself for spending 10 minutes a day with her children, but a man may consider the same behavior exemplary.



Defining Success For Yourself

Indeed, women rarely view themselves as working *for* their families the way men do. Men still think of their family responsibilities in terms of breadwinning, whereas women often see theirs as role modeling for their children.



Defining Success For Yourself

Women emphasize (far more than men do) how important it is for their kids—particularly their daughters—to see them as competent professionals. One said, “I think that work is such a big part of who I am. I want my kids to understand what I do. I am a whole being.”



Defining Success For Yourself

Many women said that the most difficult aspect of managing work and family is contending with cultural expectations about mothering. One admitted that she stopped working at home after her daughter referred to the Bloomberg network as “Mommy’s channel.”



Defining Success For Yourself

Another commented, “When you are paid well, you can get all the [practical] help you need. What is the most difficult thing, though—what I see my women friends leave their careers for—is the real emotional guilt of not spending enough time with their children. The guilt of *missing out.*”



Defining Success For Yourself

Both men and women expressed versions of this guilt and associated personal success with not having regrets. They often cope by assigning special significance to a particular metric, such as never missing a Little League game or checking in once a day no matter what. “I just prioritize dinner with my family as if it was a 6 PM meeting with my most important client,” said one interviewee.



Defining Success For Yourself

Another offered this suggestion: “Design your house right—have a table in the kitchen where your kids can do homework while your husband cooks and you drink a glass of red wine.” Though expressed as advice, this is clearly her very personal, concrete image of what success at home looks like.



Managing Technology

It is critical to corral e-mails, text messages, voice mails, and other communications. Deciding when, where, and how to be accessible for work is an ongoing challenge, particularly for executives with families. Many of them cautioned against using communications technology to be in two places at once, insisting on the value of undivided attention.



Managing Technology

“When I’m at home, I really am at home,” said one. “I force myself to not check my e-mail, take calls, et cetera. I want to give my kids 100% of my attention. But this also works the other way around, because when I’m at work I really want to focus on work. I believe that mixing these spheres too much leads to confusion and mistakes.”



Managing Technology

That last point is a common concern: Always being plugged in can erode performance. One leader observed that “certain cognitive processes happen when you step away from the frenetic responding to e-mails.”



Managing Technology

Another executive pointed out that 24-hour availability can actually hamper initiative in an organization: “If you have weak people who must ask your advice all the time, you feel important. But there is a difference between being truly important and just not letting anyone around you do anything without you.”



Managing Technology

Strikingly, some people at the top are starting to use communications technology less often while they're working. Several invoked the saying "You can't raise a kid by phone" —and pointed out that it's not the best way to manage a team, either. Often, if it's logistically possible, you're better off communicating in person. How do you know when that's the case?



Managing Technology

One interviewee made an important distinction between broadcasting information and exchanging and analyzing ideas: “Speaking [on the phone] is easy, but careful, thoughtful listening becomes very challenging. For the most important conversations, I see a real trend moving back to face-to-face. When you’re evaluating multibillion-dollar deals...you have to build a bridge to the people.”



Managing Technology

When it comes to technology in the home, more than a third of the surveyed executives view it as an invader, and about a quarter see it as a liberator. (The rest are neutral or have mixed feelings.) Some of them resent the smartphone's infringement on family time: "When your phone buzzes," one ruefully noted, it's difficult to "keep your eyes on that soccer field."



Managing Technology

Others appreciate the flexibility that technology affords them: “I will probably leave here around 4 PM to wrangle my kids,” said one participant, “but I will be back and locked into my network and e-mails by 8 PM.”



Managing Technology

Another participant reported, “Sometimes my kids give me a hard time about being on my phone at the dinner table, but I tell them that my phone is what enables me to be home with them.”



Managing Technology

Both camps—those who hate being plugged in and those who love it—acknowledged that executives must learn to manage communications technology wisely. Overall, they view it as a good servant but a bad master.



Summary

Make yourself available but not *too* available to your team; be honest with yourself about how much you can multitask; build relationships and trust through face time; and keep your inbox under control.

