

Down the Up Escalator

Finding work-life balance

By Yasmin Morais

Scenario One: You have a reference desk shift starting at 9 a.m. and you're about to dash through the door when the plaintive voice of your five-year-old announces, "Mommy, I don't feel too well." Scenario Two: Your sibling calls one day before an important meeting begging you to take Mom to her appointment with the cardiologist. These two scenarios may sound familiar if you are among the millions of working adults striving to maintain a balance between your equally important professional and personal commitments.

A career in librarianship often involves working outside of the typical hours that other careers may have. Librarians also tend to go that extra mile to ensure that patrons obtain the information or resource they seek. Your hours of work also depend on the size and type of your library, or whether you are in public or technical services. You may be a new and anxious librarian in your first job, trying to get a sense of the lay of the land and also hoping to make a good impression.

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is challenging, but not unattainable. When there is an imbalance, the results are frequently frustration, anger, resentment, and increased stress. We are often left to feel like we are riding on a never-ending rollercoaster. Sometimes productivity plummets or our professional and personal relationships can become strained. Whether you are a working parent caring for young children or a member of the so-called sandwich generation juggling the responsibilities of parenting while assisting with the care of an elderly parent or parents, work-life balance is important to your wellbeing. As one librarian recently reflected, "I'd have to say that being part of the 'sandwich generation' can be very exhausting because, as you know, caring for children is a full-time job, so when you mix that with working (even part-time) and caring for an elderly parent from afar, there is very little time left to pursue my personal interests. That is why I love librarianship, because if I were doing a job I didn't love, I'd have a hard time coming to work."

Our fast-paced lifestyles and pressure-cooker world are full of critical issues such as job security, professional

success, and looming retirement, among others. Dealing with all of these concerns may lead to feelings of inadequacy or of being overwhelmed. Some important factors in striving for balance are to first carefully examine your own personal and professional circumstances and then realistically adopt approaches that best work for you. Even though people we interact with on a day-to-day basis provide well-intentioned suggestions and advice, we really should act in the light of our own realities.

Issues such as our job, our family structure, where we live, and our social and community services all play important roles in the kinds of demands we face and the resources upon which we are able to draw. A single father, for example, faces many of the same challenges and stresses of parenting that a single mother faces, and yet the literature and media often focus little attention on this demographic group. Or you may be an only child with no siblings to lean on, trying to balance the demands of your career while attending to the needs of your ailing elderly parents.

There are, however, some practical measures we can pursue in our quests for balance that can alleviate those periods of intense and competing demands. The tips suggested in this article are not exhaustive, and, again, your own personal situation, commitments, and resources will determine their applicability.

Communicate

One of the important keys in striving for balance is communication. Often we feel that expressing anxieties or concerns is a sign of weakness when, in fact, the opposite is true. Communication plays an important role in letting others know some of the main issues we are confronting at a given point in time. Sometimes silently bearing it all may leave us feeling alone and bewildered, even though we are trying to portray a calm and controlled exterior.

In the professional arena, while we do not have to divulge personal and highly private concerns, we can alert our supervisors to some of the personal commitments we may have ahead of time. Discussing options and requesting special leave arrangements for periods when we are too overwhelmed to focus on our work may alleviate added stress and will result in more informed decisions regarding scheduling of reference shifts, important meetings, or special projects. If you know, for example, that you have an appointment scheduled for your toddler in two months, you could



communicate this early on to your supervisor so that you are free of professional commitments at that time.

Communicating with family members and caregivers is equally important. We tend to take the ones closest to us for granted when they

should be key players in our quest for work-life balance. Be respectful of their time and commitments as well, and give them sufficient notice regarding issues with which you need their help. We often overlook the generosity or goodwill of family members and friends in our quest “go it alone.” Accepting help is not a sign of weakness. If possible, do not refuse genuine offers of assistance as long as you are comfortable with issues such as parenting styles and the value systems of the individuals concerned.

Take Charge of Your Calendar

Advanced scheduling can lessen some of the anxieties we often face in dealing with the multitude of appointments we must make in any given year. We may not realize how these all add up over time: dental visits, doctor appointments, parent-teacher conferences, performance appraisals, job interviews, car maintenance, house hunting, volunteering, and the list goes on. If you have two or more children, or you are caring for more than one parent, ponder for a moment how some of these appointments multiply.

Try to utilize many of the features of Outlook or any other calendaring system you use. Make the most use of your unavailability calendar, and plan ahead by pre-booking medical or dental appointments.

Recurring appointments save you the trouble of having to call each time to schedule. Also, try to monitor appointments, as some providers will charge for missed visits. Carefully note your children’s school calendars for critical appointments you will have to keep. There are often limited time slots for conferences because of the many parents who must be fit in. Also, plan well ahead for travels related to conferences, workshops, staff retreats, or family vacations.

If afternoon shifts on the reference desk are more convenient for you, be sure to inform your supervisor(s) ahead of time of your preference. You can also be flexible and try to find creative ways to balance work and personal commitments. You may, for example, be able to negotiate working through your lunch hour so that you can leave earlier to attend to personal issues.

Widen Your Childcare Options

One of the major stressors for many working parents is safe, reliable, and affordable childcare. Depending on our commute, some of us can spend nine or so hours away from our children. While at work, we can only be productive and have peace of mind if we feel that our children are in safe and stimulating environments.

If you are moving to a new job in a new city, one of your top priorities will be to seek out and inspect daycare facilities before you settle. This will help you avoid later problems like having to change daycares a number of times because of dissatisfaction with the service. Are you more comfortable with a larger childcare center, or do you prefer a smaller, familial home daycare? Also, decide whether it is important for you to have the daycare located near home or work. The hours of operation also deserve consideration. Are the opening and closing hours convenient to you? Are the centers open on some school closing days? Do they offer a discount for additional siblings? Taking all these factors into consideration before committing to a daycare will help to decrease your stress and anxiety regarding your children’s care.

Another important tip in relation to childcare is to try to create as wide a network of caregivers as you can. Relying on just one caregiver or center may mean the unavailability of service if that center is closed on particular days or if your home daycare provider becomes ill or unavailable. If you choose home daycare, find out who the back-up provider is. It may surprise you to know that some home daycare providers do not have this issue worked out at all. Having a number of childcare options may make a difference when you have that important presentation to make or meeting to attend and your sitter is down with the flu.

Reserve Time for Yourself

Resist the temptation to try to be supermom or dad all the time. One common habit that many of us are guilty of is limping in to the office when we are feeling sick ourselves. We seem to convince ourselves that we can’t be away from the office for a day or else everything will just fall apart or we may appear irresponsible. Often what we ultimately end up achieving is making ourselves sicker and sometimes even making others sick. It is far better for everyone if you take that extra day or two to rest and take care of yourself so you can return to work energized.

Carving out solo time is also vital to our health and wellbeing. As parents, we occasionally feel guilty if we spend time away from our children, but we do in fact need those downtimes in order to be better parents. We can’t be in “give-give

mode” all the time, otherwise burnout and stress will be the result. Moments of solitude and introspection allow us to gain fresh perspectives on life. Schedule a one-hour massage or a whole spa day if you can. Go away for a weekend and leave the kids with family members or a trusted friend or caregiver.

This advice is not just for those of us who are parents. Even if you are single without many family commitments, you do need mini vacations away from the office. Rest and relaxation are critical to maintaining work-life balance. How about taking up a new hobby or interest? Is there something that you have always wanted to try, but can never find the time? Make the time and watch new horizons unfold. What about visiting new places? It does not have to be far away or even outside of the country. A relaxing weekend drive to a nearby city you have never visited could bring that welcome change of scenery. Go for a run or a walk. How about training for a half or a full marathon? Release those endorphins and watch your stress levels drop.

Say “No” (Sometimes)

Most of us have a very hard time saying no, which can be another contributor to burnout and stress. Taking on more than we can manage often leaves us feeling drained and frustrated. Whether it is at work or in our personal lives, we have to be realistic about how much we can do and when we can do it. I have found it useful to keep a monthly log of all the tasks or projects I am involved with. This is useful in helping me to monitor my workload, but it also serves as a reminder when I have to complete my performance appraisal.

As long as we are putting in our fair share of time for committee involvement and other professional activities at work, or being involved in our children’s school activities, we should not feel guilty in saying no sometimes to extra demands that will place additional pressures on us. If you want to be involved at your children’s school, for example, you could look at volunteering for activities where your time commitment may not be too extensive. Setting up for the annual book fair or helping out for an hour or so at the library may be more manageable than chaperoning on a field trip or baking for a cake sale. Frequently, willing people become the “yes” group that will always be tapped again and again. Know your limitations and set realistic goals.

Find Your Center

Whatever our individual spiritual philosophies may be, tapping into a force beyond us can alleviate some of life’s stresses. Embrace whatever keeps you personally grounded and centered. Many

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experts suggest meditation or yoga as a means of calming body and mind. If you have never tried any of these methods, perhaps you could explore them and see if they benefit you.

You could also take time out to read the works of philosophers across times and cultures. It may surprise and benefit you to learn about other people's take on life.

Hang on to Humor

Experts maintain that laughter and a sense of humor help our overall

wellbeing. Laughter keeps us focused on the light side of life; somehow, when we are laughing, the negative issues just automatically fade in the background. Find some time to watch your favorite comedies. I know there have been times when I have slipped into uncontrollable laughter after episodes of my favorite shows.

Don't be afraid to laugh at yourself sometimes and share with family and close friends some of your weirdest gaffes. Sometimes focusing on funny things helps to remind us of our

humanity instead of the super-human roles we try to take on. There have been quite a few occasions when I have looked at my five-year-old after dropping her off at daycare and quietly chuckled to myself thinking how on earth I managed to come up with that color combination for her clothes that morning. ■

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