Work-life balance: The times they are a-changin’

Look up “work-life balance” on Dictionary.com, and you’ll get this definition: a situation in which one divides or balances one’s time between work and activities outside of work. Sounds rather straightforward and feasible, right?

Anyone who has tried to create harmony between professional and personal obligations knows it is rarely that simple.

The term first gained popularity in the United States back in the 1980s, but how to obtain it is an ongoing discussion that experts and real-life workers alike continue to contemplate. As we start a new decade, here are some of the most pertinent issues surrounding the topic.

The need for a new term

When it comes to the idea of evenness, people often feel they come up short. The scale often seems to tip too much to one side or another, leaving anxiety or guilt.

“There is no perfect ‘balance,’” says Jennifer Folsom, author of Ringmaster: Work, Life, and Keeping It All Together and vice president of client delivery at RIVA Solutions, Inc. “Work and family or home needs change all the time—sometimes hourly—and you can’t come up with the perfect work schedule or role or care plan and expect it to work in all situations.”

Because there are no hard lines between what happens at work and what happens at home, Folsom prefers the notion of a work-life blender. “You will need to call the orthodontist to schedule a broken-bracket appointment for your son during the workday because they are only open 8-4. And you will probably need to take a call from your boss who has a question at 6 p.m., when you’re walking in the door from soccer carpool drop off and trying to get dinner going. I like to think that I’m in charge of what goes into that blender, what ingredients from my life and work, because there’s no real reason to separate the two.”

Other replacement suggestions also lean toward the idea of mixing the two spheres or varying their intensity, but not expecting equilibrium. Some terms gaining support include work-life rhythm, work-life integration, and work-life choice.

Blurring lines and new considerations

Nothing this century has changed the work-life landscape as greatly as technology opening up the door for many jobs to be performed at any time from any place. Approximately 4.7 million people work from home (an increase of 159% since 2005), and two-thirds of all companies currently have remote workers.

Telework provides a range of possibilities to blend the personal and the professional, from being home when the
kids return from school to traveling the world as a digital nomad. Simply skipping a daily commute—which currently stands around 26 minutes each way—adds precious “free” time.

But when your job literally is right around the living room corner, the temptation to do “just one more thing” can prolong the workday or keep you from mentally changing gears during down time. Similarly, distractions such as a sink full of dishes can make it harder to focus on work-related tasks. Thus, figuring out ways to keep workplace and home both merged and distinct becomes a modern-day challenge.

How managers can help

People able to obtain a satisfactory work-life balance experience less of the burnout that plagues so many workers. A few ways for companies to promote this integration include:

- Encourage time off to recharge. U.S. workers let 768 million vacation days go to waste in 2018.
- Avoid creating the feeling of employees always being on-call. Limit after-hour/weekend communication. Hold in draft mode the emails you produce at off hours until a “normal” time so that team members don’t feel compelled to read and respond immediately.
- Make your remote staff aware that being based from home doesn’t solve all work-life challenges. Encourage them to think about stressors and seek solutions, perhaps soliciting suggestions from fellow telecommuters.

Finally, remember that management sets the tone. Your actions speak volumes.

“Be a good role model!” Folsom says. “Don’t slink out of the office at 4:30, hoping no one will notice. Proudly walk out and announce that you’re hoping to make it to baseball practice today, but you’ll finish the McClellan Brief after bedtime. Your employees will feel empowered—and not ashamed—to do the same.”