

## Tips for Reaching a Better Work/Life Balance

IT professionals are beginning to give voice to their desire to have some time for personal pursuits - in other words a better work/life balance.

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As president of Encompass, a 16,000-member user group for business customers of Hewlett-Packard,

Buik comes in contact with a wide variety of technology professionals who all seem to log a lot more than the traditional 40-hour workweek. "I rarely talk to anyone putting less than 60 hours a week into their jobs," says Buik, who is also senior vice president of MindIQ Corp., a Norcross, Ga., designer of technology-based training materials.

Buik herself has managed to forge a different path. She has let her staff know that once she's done for the day, that's it. They shouldn't contact her for routine issues and should text-message her only for true emergencies.

"If our Web site goes down, I need to be contacted, because our entire organization functions from our Web site," Buik explains. "If there's a simple power failure, we have backup for that, so I don't need to know immediately."

As companies increasingly look to technology to help them do more while spending less, technologists like Buik, and the IT workers she manages, are clearly feeling the squeeze.

It's pressure that hits at all levels. Some IT positions, such as help desk jobs, still tend to follow a traditional eight-hour shift, but such employees are often scheduled for evening and weekend work as well as the usual 9 to 5. Meanwhile, higher-level managers are racking up the hours at work as they try to meet tight deadlines and respond to those they serve.

Now, at all levels, IT professionals are beginning to give voice to their desire to have some time for personal pursuits. In other words, they want at least some semblance of what's known as work/life balance.

### **Pie in the sky?**

Given the nature of IT work and the economic realities of the marketplace, achieving that kind of balance can be a tall order.

"IT workers do seem to work longer hours. Fifty hours is an average," says Lily Mok, who analyzes work/life balance in IT for Gartner Inc.

"IT work often requires [employees] to work different shifts and to be on call 24/7. And especially in recent years, as IT organizations became leaner after downsizing and outsourcing, people are required to do more work and take on more responsibilities."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average full-time worker in the U.S. puts in 9.3 hours a day. IT staffers work considerably more than that, other statistics show.

One study, for instance, found that the average workweek for software programmers, engineers and technicians ranges from 43 to 62 hours.

While those numbers might seem dire, recent developments at the corporate level have improved IT professionals' lives as companies add work/life benefits in order to attract top talent. Flexible schedules, job sharing, condensed workweeks and telecommuting are some of the options now available to technologists, says Mok.

IT people have a better work/life balance today than they did when Leo Collins started in the field about 20 years ago. Collins, CIO at Lions Gate Entertainment Corp., points out, for instance, that employees don't always have to physically be in the office to do their work nowadays.

In fact, in a study released in July by Robert Half Technology, a Menlo Park, Calif.-based IT staffing company, 44 percent of CIOs surveyed said their company's IT workforce is telecommuting at a rate that's the same as or higher than it was five years ago. They cited improved retention, better morale and increased productivity as the greatest benefits of telecommuting.

While that's a step in the right direction, the industry still has a long way to go. Reluctant managers and a domineering corporate culture can influence how effectively work/life benefits are implemented in an organization and how willing employees are to seek them out, Mok points out.

And Collins acknowledges that for all the progress, IT workers at his company still tend to log some serious overtime. "The norm is a lot closer to 50 to 60 hours," he admits, "but you don't always physically need to be there." Either way, "we try not to have a crisis attitude," he says. "So if you need to take care of [personal] things, we can adjust priorities and move tasks around."

How can you find ways to better balance your professional and personal time -- even if you're at a company that's less progressive on the issue? Work/life coaches, IT executives and experienced tech professionals share their strategies for finding the right balance, with these 10 tips:

### **1. Establish and enforce your own priorities.**

Many people who want to make a change in their lives fail to first reflect on exactly what it is they want to do differently, says Kathie Lingle, director of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Step 1 should always be to set your priorities, she says. "Get those straight in your mind, and [then] act on them," Lingle suggests.

Whether your goal is to be active in your community or nurture personal relationships, it's likely you'll need to make time for those priorities by limiting your hours at work -- even if that means saying no to overtime or extra projects, or to a promotion.

Brian Schultz, information assurance practice lead at the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio, undertook this exercise when working as a manager with the computer risk management practice at the former Arthur Anderson LLP. He didn't want to follow the same track as the executives he knew who sacrificed fulfilling personal lives to work 60-hour weeks.

"Early on, I established a priority list: God, family, country, community and company," Schultz explains. "The company is last. If you take that strictly, of course, you'd be living on the street, so there's a definite balance between those commitments. But to be fulfilled, you need that balance."

It wasn't an empty exercise. Schultz left Arthur Anderson in 2000 because he wasn't willing to put in the 14-hour days and weekend time needed to reach the next level. Instead, he found a position with another company that offered challenging work yet still respected the work/life balance he sought.

Now at Battelle, where he works an average of 45 hours a week, Schultz says he doesn't have to sacrifice career aspirations for personal time. Unless there's a looming deadline or an after-hours client meeting, Schultz doesn't work on Sundays, and weekdays he's usually home for dinner with his family.

## **2. Communicate.**

You've set your priorities. Now let your co-workers know about them.

"Boundaries are often invisible. No one knows they're there but you. If you don't articulate [your boundaries], then how will other people know they're crossing them?" asks Lisa Martin, founder and president of coaching and training company Briefcase Moms in Vancouver, British Columbia.

It's crucial to be clear about what you want, what you can do and what you can't do, she says. It's equally crucial, of course, to take a business approach to this step, Martin emphasizes. Find opportune times to discuss such matters, and use a neutral voice to address missteps.

If, for instance, you've negotiated the ability to leave nightly by a certain time but your boss still keeps you late, state the problem neutrally ("This is the seventh time in two months I've worked late on a Friday") and remind her of your initial boundary ("We'd agreed to a firm leaving time.")

For some employees, this step might not come naturally, especially when speaking to a supervisor, but "you've got to take your 'boundaries vitamins,'" Martin maintains. "You have to keep fortifying [your position]. "It gets easier with practice," she promises.

Lingle suggests sharing not only your established priorities but also select details of your personal life with your co-workers.

It's an approach that Bob Keefe, senior vice president and CIO of Mueller Co.'s Mueller Water Products division and president-elect of the Society for Information Management, has seen put to good use firsthand.

While working at another company, his team encountered a serious error during an electronic data interchange. The team had to contact a colleague for information, although they knew he was out because his wife was heading into surgery.

"He was the kind of person who, if we made that phone call, he'd be back in the office, so we told him the program just 'ab ended,'" knowing that an abnormal end to a program wasn't serious enough to make him feel he needed to return to work, Keefe explains. Because they knew about his personal situation beforehand, the team took the trouble to glean the necessary information from their colleague without calling him back into the office.

## **3. Build a business case for your better life.**

Savvy professionals are increasingly willing to asking for flexible schedules as part of their compensation packages when offered new jobs, Mok says.

"People with hot skills have more leverage in getting this kind of special treatment," she says, but that doesn't preclude others from negotiating additional vacation time, limited overtime hours or flexible start and end times before signing on with a new company. You can use the same strategy to negotiate benefits from your existing

employer, too, Mok suggests.

Just approach the situation as you would any other business proposal: by building a business case for what you need. "You need to demonstrate, based on your previous performance, that you will be able to deliver the same results," Mok explains.

If you want to telecommute, for example, you should explain how you already successfully work without direct supervision -- making sure to include specific examples -- and how you can accomplish more without frequent office interruptions. Moreover, you should point out that a home setup is in line with your company's disaster recovery plans because it allows you to work even if the main office is empty due to, say, bad weather.

#### **4. Take advantage of corporate policies and programs.**

A survey conducted last year by OfficeTeam, a Menlo Park, Calif., staffing service, found that 53 percent of workers and 45 percent of executives said their employers were "very supportive" of efforts to achieve work/life balance. Another 37 percent of workers and 50 percent of executives said their employers were "somewhat supportive."

But work/life benefits, whether they're on-site child care, flextime or job sharing, can't help you if you don't take advantage of them. Learn what programs your company offers and consider when and how they can benefit you, Mok says.

Look at Schultz's case. His round-trip commute takes at least two hours, so he takes advantage of Battelle company policy and telecommutes when he has a daytime appointment close to home. "It's a huge relief of pressure, and it saves a great deal of time," he says.

#### **5. Seek out a mentor.**

"Look to people who you feel who have a good work/life balance and ask them, 'How did you accomplish this?'" advises Katherine Spencer Lee, executive director of Robert Half Technology.

Brian Abeyta, vice president of IT at insurance provider Aflac Inc. in Columbus, Ga., remembers admiring a supervisor who was gifted at managing both her executive-level job and her life as a mom.

"It forced me to appreciate very disciplined time management," he says, noting that his superior was very good about dedicating her time and focus to the task at hand. "She set a schedule and committed to that. Wherever she was, she was at that place and wasn't thinking about where she had to be next," he observes.

That kind of focus and discipline, both from the Aflac executive and from professionals Abeyta had known at previous companies, helped him and his co-workers learn how to honor their own personal priorities while still fulfilling their job requirements. "It showed that we could respect for each other's time, and that we need to respect each other's lives," Abeyta says.

#### **6. Work more efficiently.**

Seasoned tech workers know when they need to rush back to the office and when they can dial in and troubleshoot remotely, says Natalie Gahrman, a work/life expert at N-R-G Coaching Associates in Hillsborough, N.J.

She points to her husband, an IT director, and his own work habits as an example: He recently drove to his company's New Jersey backup site rather than to his Manhattan office to handle an off-hours problem, saving precious personal time in the process.

Another way to work more efficiently: Tap the expertise of a professional group, Buik suggests. "You become more efficient with your time at work when you can share issues with others," she says. "That's less time dealing with certain problems, which means all of a sudden you have more time at home."

One of Buik's colleagues, for example, recently researched details on HP C-Class blade servers through the Encompass user group and was able to make a purchasing decision based on that interaction, which saved him from conducting hours of research on his own.

## **7. Share your knowledge.**

It's often fulfilling to be an expert on a specialized program, but Keefe warns against being the only one in the know.

"In the cases when you're a de facto expert, you want to pull teammates in and train them," even if you have to take the initiative to make that training happen, he explains. "You want to share that knowledge, because if you have an on-call structure, then you won't have to always be the only one on call."

## **8. Use your gadgets.**

There's no doubt that Keefe is a fan of gadgets because he, like many others, can use mobile devices to get work done whenever, wherever.

Moreover, he says, mobile devices can be tied into the office network, allowing employees to not only receive automated messages about potential problems but also to troubleshoot from wherever they are.

"IT professionals have invented everything that lets people work from wherever, [so] no one in IT should be enslaved to a particular place," Lingle adds.

## **9. Use your gadgets wisely.**

Consider this statement: "Devices like BlackBerry chain you to work more than they liberate you." In the Digital Life America survey released in February 2007 by Solutions Research Group, one-third of respondents agreed with that statement -- and they were themselves all users of BlackBerries, Palm Treos and other smart phones.

It doesn't have to be that way -- if you're willing to put your foot down about how much of your attention such devices can demand.

When Steve Davidek, a systems administrator for the city of Sparks, Nev., got a BlackBerry about a year ago, he quickly found himself dealing with e-mails at all sorts of times and places. He reassessed his situation and decided to stop checking e-mails during off-hours. Instead, colleagues know to reach him via phone to relay news of problems that truly needed his immediate attention. "I need a cell phone; I don't need a leash," he explains.

## **10. Maintain perspective.**

It's easy to feel your life is out of whack when a looming deadline or major systems failure has everyone in overdrive. Before you panic or throw in the towel and quit, take a deep breath, the experts advise.

"You're going to have blips; that's just life," Briefcase Moms' Martin says.

Martin suggests that instead of focusing on how tough you have it at any particular moment -- or, worse yet, making decisions based on short-term problems -- you should take a long-term perspective and consider how you're working to achieve your work and life goals.

She remembers coaching one working mother who had worked hard to develop highly specialized skills that were in high demand and yet "felt like she was chasing her tail all the time and felt her only solution was to find a different job."

When Martin asked her client to consider what she liked about her career and what she wanted from her job and personal life, the woman realized she liked her work; she just didn't like the hours. In the end, rather than walking away from a job she liked, the woman negotiated a four-day workweek that allowed her the extra time at home that she wanted.

"Sometimes this is difficult," Martin says, "but work/life balance is about being clear about what your boundaries are and then communicating them."