

# The work-life balance imperative

## and how to view it in healthcare

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### Abstract

A raft of changes to the organisation of medical work from the European Working Time Directive to Flexible Working appear to address the need for effective work-life balance and yet more and more people are feeling stressed by their workplace. We examine this irony and offer insight into the cognitive issues surrounding true work-life balance in medicine.

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### Article

#### WHAT IS WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

Let's commence by saying that it means different things to different people and is thus difficult to define precisely. Did the old-fashioned Senior Registrar working 70+ hours per week have work life balance? The answer could be 'yes, if that person firmly viewed work as a vocation, probably had few family ties and was set on advancing through the profession at the maximum rate. Under those circumstances that person was probably safe in practise, suffered fatigue only rarely and had reserves of energy, along with a feeling that life was on track. Work-life balance is more about assessing the relative importance of different areas of your life and then applying yourself in a way that consistently delivers for all of them. Tiredness and fatigue comes not from doing too much but from getting the balance wrong, highlighted by people who work at a high rate and then go play sports (something physically demanding) at the end of the day but remain energetic. It's not the demand on your body so much as the demand on an inner sense that determines whether you are aligned with your subconscious plan for life. Every time you are out of kilter with your plan, you are producing a form of stress reaction, resulting in fatigue, demotivation and often unhappiness. There is a definite imperative to get a clear picture of your own plan.

#### WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN HEALTHCARE

The core motivation for many people entering healthcare is a drive to help people in a very meaningful way, whilst engaging in intellectually stimulating activity. This driving force stems from two fundamental human needs, contribution and growth, and links to the age-old premise that we all have a purpose. Consequently, it is not difficult to see that working as a doctor or nurse, for instance, becomes a vocation rather than work, much akin to Mother Teresa's devotion to a life of helping the poor. In our old fashioned NHS, this resulted in many people working extremely long hours with enormous personal effort to ensure delivery. If you compare this with the present, changes to job contracts, hours, structure etc have changed a vocation firmly into a job and for many people this provides less balance than the high hours they were working before.

We find ourselves dealing with more and more people who are under acute stress, despite better working conditions and greater salary. The answer here is to re-draw the plan, so deriving balance through other sources. We recognise that this is easier said than done if you have devoted the last 25 years to your vocation in life. However, not to address this can lead to a long term increase in stress, dissatisfaction and even depression, impacting every other area of your life. We will try to offer some guidance on getting a handle on the plan and how to assess whether it's working for you, along with some pointers on how to change it.

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### Successful work-life balance

Successful work-life balance is thus about meeting all fundamental needs in a way consistent with your values. Equally, achieving or being successful in all major roles is just as important. Taking a consultant as an example, we might define the areas needing to be balanced as:

- Certainty
- Variety
- Significance
- Love & Connection
- Growth
- Contribution
- Doctor
- Teacher/ Mentor
- Service Leader
- Husband/ Wife
- Parent
- Self
- Friend

Balance is where that consultant feels they are having all of their fundamental needs met through activity that also delivers success in each of their roles. When that is achieved you feel energetic, motivated and have a sense that you are progressing or delivering in life.

### Balance out of kilter

Let's say, for example, that Mr Consultant has derived his need for significance and contribution from his role as Doctor but a loss of autonomy in that role along with a focus on targets and sometimes arbitrary measures, means that it no longer delivers a satisfying result in any of these areas. A natural reaction is to work harder or fight to restore the balance. This now detracts from the quality and quantity of his experience as spouse or parent, resulting in a downwards spiral further away from balance. This is no more unusual than consistently working too many hours, knowing that you could be a better parent if you spent more time with the children but shows how many factors contribute to a feeling of balance. It also explains why human beings under stress seek to 'simplify' life as a solution.

### Strategy for restoring balance

Using our same example, the way for Mr Consultant to sort out balance is to look at each area that features as 'important' and rate them relative to the others. Having established the hierarchy of importance, he or she would then examine what is the best source of meeting those needs and excelling in those roles. That may mean a life change or radically altering your source of satisfaction. If, for example, Mr Consultant felt that work no longer delivered a feeling of contribution or significance and to get vaguely close just meant sacrificing say the more important area of parent, the sensible approach would be to scale back work in favour of spending more quality time with the children, whilst seeking a further role that delivered the now missing needs. That could mean starting a part time business, working in a leadership role for a charity, taking on a non-executive role in a Trust or like activity. The important thing to remember is that when life is so frenetic already, you can't just add in without reducing time spent elsewhere. The really great news is that as you restore balance you'll find your energy and motivation rising and your capacity to excel in all areas is increased.

### COULD YOU IMPACT OTHERS WHO ARE STRUGGLING?

If you are a leader and have influence over others, the most useful thing you can do is help them restore balance

### SEND THEM THIS ARTICLE

It costs nothing and may just provide them the answers they are looking for. Do it now!!

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