

The Tightrope Walkers

What will work-life balance look like after the pandemic? Though, for some, working remotely signified a new way to find balance, for others, the conditions led to burnout.



A couple of weeks ago, a Zoom meeting between a large trucking company and a group of agencies interested in bidding for the account was interrupted with the marketing manager's daughter entered the room asking for a hug. Unfazed, the manager requested a moment, muted the conversation, and hugged his daughter.

Those taking part in the meeting waited patiently and even commented among themselves about how moving the scene was. Far from embarrassing, the image of that man taking the time to show affection was warmly received. We all remember the BBC interview in which the daughter of Professor Robert Kelly waltzed into the room (followed by a toddler in a

baby walker and finally a woman desperately trying to hide them). At the time, footage of family life breaching a formal situation went viral. Today, it is commonplace.

Inevitably, work is infringing on our private lives. The COVID-19 crisis has placed work and home life under the same roof for many families, and the struggle to manage it has no regard for seniority: screens enter our homes without permission, from colleagues and bosses. Just as our private lives infiltrate the professional sphere, the opposite is also true. The technology that allows us to work remotely is also an enabler of constant availability. And that's where the trouble starts.

Domestic life during the pandemic also resulted in an infinite number of demands: with no schools, no domestic help, no childcare, our responsibilities increased exponentially. Work cannot continue as normal simply because remote work is possible. Like everything else in this pandemic, we have to rethink how to achieve a new balance.

We can no longer approach working from home like we did when it was a long-awaited benefit. The terms were different, and the new guidelines must consider a range of situations. There are those who are alone and need more interaction; those who have children with schedules that conflict with traditional working hours; those who have older children and need to be present for certain school functions, etc. Each case is as unique as each person.

A growing malaise

In our world of laptops, mobile phones, and teleconferences, the intellectual and analytical tasks of "knowledge workers" could easily continue from home. And while



many managed it for a couple of months given the extraordinary situation, as the new pandemic rules persist, companies are increasingly seeing negative effects on their employees, including isolation, exhaustion, and anxiety.

With endless videocalls (Zoom Fatigue), we have less time to pause and rest than in a traditional office structure. And the work-life balance becomes conflicted. According to Bloomberg, the calendar software company, Clockwise, “processes” 500,000 calendars, which CEO Matt Martin says show employees spending an average of 12% more time in meetings each week since the pandemic began. The sense of time acceleration merges with monotony. Every day is the same. Equally taxing.

According to the Harvard Business Review, during the pandemic employers have found that workers cannot function effectively without making room for their family responsibilities. Will that lesson endure after the crisis? As the hype and novelty wear off, more options are needed to determine how jobs and families fit together.

Initially, many found it hard to admit that the experience of working from home was better than expected: more free time, fewer commutes, the comfort of working in slippers from the armchair, and schedule management that—though not flexible—felt freer; it suited us. The pace of life slowed; responsibilities and commitments of all kinds were put on hold. However, as the weeks went by, the rose-coloured glasses came off. For some, being at home decelerated certain things and accelerated others, throwing the work-life balance off-kilter. Adapting to the new format also entailed greater demands for

organisations: new systems, new connections, new processes.

Added to this was the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic: in addition to the risk of not performing or being less productive was the risk of losing one’s job. According to Bloomberg reporter, Breanna Bradham, whether they cannot take a holiday or fear losing their job, many employees simply won’t stop working when stress and burnout reach fever pitch.

According to a survey conducted by global employment site, Monster.com, more than two-thirds (69%) of workers experience symptoms of burnout while working from home. The World Health Organisation defines burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”. It is characterised by three symptoms: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy.

Ideal workers?

Bobbi Thomason, assistant professor of behavioural science at Pepperdine Graziadio Business School, and Heather Williams, a senior public policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, shared their personal experience in the Harvard Business Review: “For the two of us, our daughters’ virtual morning preschool meeting is one more item to be juggled as we attempt to work full-time from home without childcare. Our own conference calls are scheduled for naptime and occasionally interrupted by a request for potty. We attempt to wedge the rest of the workday into the early mornings and post-bedtime”.



The authors postulate that there is an implicit model of the “ideal worker”: one who is wholly devoted to their job and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, every year of their career. This was always an unrealistic archetype, one that presumed a full-time caretaker in the background. Yet today, over two-thirds of American families are headed by single parents or two working parents”.

With schools and daycares closed, work cannot continue as normal and there is a (albeit unspoken) stigma attached to those who are not willing to be (or appear to be) that ideal worker, amenable to anything. “Flexible-work arrangements come



with severe penalties; many who leave the workforce for a period or shift to part-time never recover their professional standing or compensation. When individuals push back—asking for less travel or requesting part-time or flexible hours—their performance reviews suffer and they are less likely to be promoted, studies find. Simply asking for workplace flexibility engenders professional stigma”.

For women, the struggle between work and home life is even more pronounced: “For heterosexual couples, resolving this conflict is decidedly gendered, with women continuing to perform significantly more housework and childcare, leaving men more time to focus

on work”, explains Shelley Correll, professor of sociology and women’s leadership, and director of Stanford University’s VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Lab. After all, the notion of work-life balance picked up steam in the 1980s, fuelled in no small part by the growing number of women entering the paid workforce, who also shouldered the bulk of home and family work. Fortunately, those who run companies are starting to take note.

Moving forward

COVID-19 has drastically changed personal and professional dynamic and we must put aside the notion that working hours should remain the same. Companies are looking

for answers to new problems. Flexible hours and support for working parents are popular solutions, according to research published in the MIT Sloan Management Review in June. Expanding time-off policies and helping employees better manage their workloads are less common approaches. Some companies are even contemplating a permanent shift away from full-time office work.

Stewart Friedman, professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and founding director of Wharton’s Work / Life Integration Project in 1991, talks about integration more than balance: “Integration is not about trade-offs but synergies, gaining more by combining aspects of life often deliberately quarantined from each other”.

Looking to the future, Correll makes three interesting points. The first thing employers need to do is adjust their expectations of what productivity looks like at the moment. It is not possible to assess performance against goals set prior to the pandemic. Second, employers need to focus on employees at a time when they are undergoing many changes. Third, employers must train managers to support their employees. A wealth of research shows that having a supportive manager can lead to higher job satisfaction, engagement, performance, and lower turnover.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that “face time” is not absolutely necessary for team or individual performance and innovation. Perhaps ideal workers are no longer those who are always available, but those who know how to best define boundaries and formulate a balance that will lead to success for themselves and their employees. ▸