

Balancing Work and Play

by Diana Hanson

Tired eyes open as the sun comes up over the office window ledge. What happened? You just meant to finish up a couple of things after everyone went to bed. A door opens down the hall. Uh oh ... in trouble, again. Your first-grader pads in to give you a morning hug. "Love you, too, sweetheart." Your spouse greets you with "I didn't get married to live alone" and heads off to the shower. Man, that sun is really bright.

If this even remotely describes one

of your mornings, you may want to consider making some changes. You can always find reasons to work longer and harder, but the reality is that after a certain number of hours, your mind and body lose efficiency. You are no longer working smart: Tasks take longer, and you will likely make mistakes. Fatigue has a terrible effect on safety, as well. No matter how you slice it, there is a point of diminishing returns.

You need balance — it's important.

Making time for other-than-work activities keeps you sane. It keeps families together. It refreshes you.

"But if I don't do it, it won't get done or won't get done right." This false notion is enough to turn even the best-intentioned business owner into a workaholic. Too much work isn't a new problem, but it's likely more intense today because of personal computers and cell phones. These things create the illusion that we must always be on call, always

How Do I Know If I'm a Workaholic?

Think you might have an addiction to work? There's an organization out there to help you: Workaholics Anonymous (workaholics-anonymous.org). WA says if you answer "yes" to three or more of the following 20 questions, you may be a workaholic:

1. Do you get more excited about your work than about family or anything else?
2. Are there times when you can charge through your work and other times when you can't?
3. Do you take work with you to bed? On weekends? On vacation?
4. Is work the activity you like to do best and talk about most?
5. Do you work more than 40 hours a week?
6. Do you turn your hobbies into money-making ventures?
7. Do you take complete responsibility for the outcome of your work efforts?
8. Have your family members or friends given up expecting you on time?
9. Do you take on extra work because you are concerned that it won't otherwise get done?
10. Do you underestimate how long a project will take and then rush to complete it?
11. Do you believe that it is okay to work long hours if you love what you are doing?
12. Do you get impatient with people who have other priorities besides work?
13. Are you afraid that if you don't work hard, you will lose your job or be a failure?
14. Is the future a constant worry for you even when things are going very well?
15. Do you do things energetically and competitively, including play?
16. Do you get irritated when people ask you to stop doing your work in order to do something else?
17. Have your long hours hurt your family or other relationships?
18. Do you think about your work while driving, when falling asleep, or when others are talking?
19. Do you work or read during meals?
20. Do you believe that more money will solve the other problems in your life?

prepared with an answer, always, always, always.

We feel guilty for spending “downtime.” That term comes from industry: When equipment is down, it’s not making money. Don’t think downtime; think playtime, time to recharge, and time to be with the people you work so hard for in the first place.

Take Recreation Seriously

Consider the word *recreation*. It may bring up an image of goofing off, but goofing off is serious stuff. You could spell the word as *re-creation*. That’s the effect — goofing off and having fun re-creates your abilities.

And you have to take recreation seriously. At one time, I hit a point where I had been working so much for so long that I no longer knew how to really rest and play. To benefit from your playtime, you have to turn off work. If you are playing, but your mind is on work, then you’re faking it.

Let me give you a couple of examples of faking it — that I’ve done and you might recognize: On a trip to the movies with your family, you sneak in a phone call during a restroom break; for your weekend getaway, you choose your hotel based on the availability of free wireless Internet; you go skiing but pack your laptop along with your skis ... just in case.

You must go cold-turkey — leave

your laptop at home, turn your phone off (really off, not on vibrate). It takes discipline, but setting those boundaries — and sticking to them — is better for you and your relationships, as well as your business. Following are some techniques that helped me to get more balance in my own life:

- **Make a date.** Schedule tee times to golf with your buddies or get on a sports team — softball, bowling, tennis, whatever. The idea is that you will have a bunch of people ticked off at you if you don’t show up for some fun. I schedule regular appointments at the gym. I’d like to say that I am dedicated to being physically fit, but the real reason I go is because someone is waiting for me.

- **Make a habit.** You already have a habit: work. You need to make a new habit: play. See a movie every Thursday, take a walk with your spouse after dinner, or sit out on your deck in the evening. It takes a fairly short time to make a real behavior change. Some psychology experts say that it takes about 21 days to make something into a habit.

I took up bass guitar a couple of years ago, and now I’m in the habit of practicing several times a week. Playing relaxes me and clears my head. I can’t think about work and play bass at the same time.

- **Pay in advance for a vacation.** Plan a

vacation for the off season, but schedule and pay for it in the busy season. You’re not the type to waste good money, so when the time comes, you will take the break. Cruises and vacation packages can be bargains when purchased in advance. Wow — you get to go on a vacation *and* save money.

Last year for my daughter’s spring break, I used American Express points to get the two of us a three-day ski trip. I booked and paid for it all several months in advance. Mother and daughter had a blast (and I left the laptop at home). We’re doing it again for spring break 2009.

Take the Plunge

So what’s your first step? Perhaps start by taking the weekend off. It will leave you with a full Monday, but so what if that job takes another day to complete? You will have the benefit of being rested, of having had some fun with your family or friends. If you have employees, they will probably see a more even-tempered boss.

We work hard building decks for people so they can spend playtime with their families and their friends — we need a little relaxation too. ♦

Diana Hanson is a principal in Woodpile Construction and a paralegal specializing in intellectual property. She’s active in the North American Deck and Railing Association.