

**work life
balance
is a myth:
how to
achieve
work life
integration**

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warning

to international readers

Because Neen is an Aussie, this book may contain occasional strange-sounding Aussie terms, and frequent Aussie spellings.

So, no, they're not typos, that's really how we talk and spell
Down Under...enjoy!

Work Life Balance is a Myth: How to Achieve Work Life Integration

The word balance conjures up images of scales where the two sides must be equal in order to be in balance.

There is so much talk today about achieving work/life balance.

Is it possible for people to spend an equal amount of time at work and at play?

I don't think so.

Technology has changed the pace at which we work, we are being asked to do more with less and many people feel overwhelmed. It is not about work life balance, it is about creating a life style that gives you whatever it is that you need in your professional and personal life.

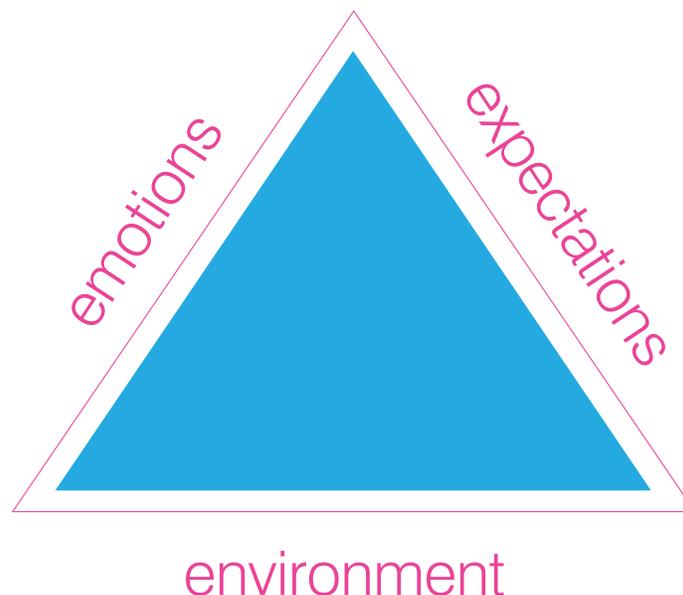
A better description of this concept is work-life integration.

Rather than trying to achieve an impossible or precarious balance, integration is about mixing, combining, assimilating, adding and amalgamating – it's about finding the right combination of work and play for you.

And what that means is that work-life integration is going to look very different for different people – it all depends on your wants, needs, goals and life circumstances, and of course, they are constantly changing, so achieving effective integration requires your ongoing focus.

Unfortunately there's no magic formula. Or prescription for achieving work-life integration - with the right guidance and tools you'll be well on the way to identifying what works best for you.

Begin by getting those images of balance out of your mind and let's start against this time with a triangle of three equal sides. The first side represents your emotions, the second represents your expectations and the third is your environment, when each of these aspects of your life is working well, you achieve work/life integration.



Are you achieving integration in your life?

It's relatively easy to tell whether we're living a well-integrated life or not, simply by the way we feel. If you feel that your life is on track, if you are happy, if your environment is satisfying, if your relationships are working well and your health is good – you have achieved integration. Life wise, if you feel that some areas of your life are not what you would like them to be, it may be time to reassess and make some changes – you can begin by asking yourself some key questions:

What is important to you?

This is not an easy question to answer. Make an appointment with yourself to sit down somewhere quiet and list the things that are really important to you. Your list might include:

- Paying off your mortgage
- Spending more quality time with your family.
- Taking that trip to Italy that you've been putting off for years.
- Paying for your child's education.
- Finally buying that Gucci bag you've always wanted.
- Spending time with your grandchildren.
- Learning to paint.
- Saving money for home remodeling.

How will you achieve it?

When you have your list, review and see if there are some items that need your attention. When you know what is important to you, you can make more effective choices about how you should be spending your time by asking 'what activities and tasks will help me to achieve the things I want?'

Keep your list of priorities handy and refer to it regularly to help keep you on track when it comes to deciding how to spend your time.

What are you prepared to give up?

Sometimes achieving integration means giving up some activities, tasks, obligations, and pleasures in order to get what you really want.

If making additional money is important to you in the short term, you may decide to spend more time at work, take on some extra shifts, work public holidays, get a second job or do whatever you need to do to make extra money.

And while it may seem that other activities are being neglected, that's okay as long as you have consciously chosen to place 'earning money' as a higher priority than other things in the short term.

Likewise, if getting healthy is important to you, you may find that you need to sacrifice certain social events, watch what you eat, spend more time at the gym, or get up earlier so that you have more time to exercise, but again, these will be conscious choices about how you spend your time that will help you to achieve the things that are most important to you.

So even though we're no longer aiming for balance, integration also requires us to make choices about what we do and don't want, about what's important and about what we're prepared to give up in order to get more of the things we really want in our lives.

What is not negotiable?

We all have obligations, activities and tasks that we can't possibly give up, but there are also many that we could let go. Make a list of what really is not negotiable in your life to help you determine what you can change or negotiate in your daily or weekly schedule. Your list might include:

- A weekly date night with your partner.
- Visiting an elderly relative every Sunday afternoon.
- Attending your Saturday morning yoga class.
- Watching your daughter's weekly karate class.

Your response to these questions begin to guide you as to how you should be spending your time in order to live the life you desire. Now, let's look at the different aspects of our work/life integration triangle a little more closely and identify some tips and strategies to help you get each the sides working well.

your emotions

Your emotions

The first side of our triangle represents our emotions. Sometimes it's not our circumstances but our emotions that can make us feel that life is out of balance, and the scenarios that we create in our own heads are often far worse and far more stressful than what's really going on in our lives.

So, we need to recognize our emotions, understand where they're coming from, and start managing them so that they don't end up managing us.

Give up guilt. Guilt is a negative emotion that is not good for either your body or your mind.

Many of us feel guilty because we spend so much time working in our jobs that our household chores don't get completed. We see the laundry piling up, the dishes in the sink, the ironing that never gets done and the yard work that is incomplete and it can make us feel inadequate about our ability to run a household, and guilty because we 'believe' our homes must be perfectly clean, tidy and well presented 100 per cent of the time. Many of us would prefer to be working than doing domestic tasks – and we feel guilty about that too!

Stop feeling guilty for not 'getting everything done' and start realizing how much you are achieving. Then, do something about it. For example, you could outsource your cleaning to a service, pay a neighbor to help you or get your family involved in sharing the household chores.

Look around you and ask yourself, what is making you feel guilty? Then, make a plan to deal with the situation (or your perception of it) and eliminate the guilt.

Choose your mood. If you are beginning to have a sense of being overwhelmed in your work or family life, choose to remain calm. It can be as simple as that: just tell your mind and your heart to remain calm. You can make a conscious effort to choose your mood each day. Don't let your circumstance or other people determine your state of mind – you choose.

Plan down time. Relaxation is crucial for all human beings – it's not negotiable. So make time (schedule it if you need to) and find ways to relax. If relaxing is something new to you, you might need to make a list of those things that you enjoy doing and find relaxing until they become more familiar to you. By including some of these activities in your daily schedule, you'll always have something to look forward to, no matter how busy your life gets. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Walk around your neighborhood
- Watch an old movie
- Take a bubble bath
- Pick fresh flowers from the market
- Get a massage
- Burn a candle
- Meditate
- Bake some cookies
- Play Frisbee in the park with a friend
- Walk on the beach

Book vacations in advance. Vacations give your body and mind an opportunity to relax and recharge – and they give you something wonderful to look forward to. Booking your vacations in advance means that you have to schedule activities around them, which is so much easier than trying to plan a break in the middle of a busy year – you'll never have the excuse of not having enough time again. Plan to take a minimum of two weeks' vacation every year.

Enjoy the moment. Take some time every day to simply stop, look around and enjoy the moment, whatever you are doing. We all have things to be immensely grateful for in our lives, so don't forget to acknowledge and enjoy them along the way.

Energize yourself. We're always being told to 'take time out for ourselves' but for many people, women in particular, it just seems too difficult, and when they do take time out, they feel guilty or selfish. It's time to get over it and learn to take time out each week to do something that energizes you – it might be a yoga class, painting in a studio, putting on headphones and getting lost in the music, whatever it is, find activities that energize you and make appointments with yourself to enjoy them each week

your expectations

Your expectations

The second side of our work-life integration triangle represents our expectations. Sometimes feelings of being out of control arise simply because we don't set clear expectations for others or ourselves. Be aware of other people's expectations of you, and help to adjust them where necessary by setting realistic timeframes, using language that doesn't include stress or urgency and explaining things calmly. Try applying some of these strategies to ensure that everyone's expectations are managed and realized.

Communicate. Ask, it can be as simple as that. Ask others what their expectations are and listen to their responses. Also, let them know what your expectations are and check that they understand them clearly. Most misunderstandings around expectations can be resolved simply by better communication – so listen, restate and repeat.

Set achievable goals. If you like setting goals and writing them down, you may find that you sometimes put unrealistic pressure on yourself by making them too difficult or not allowing enough time to achieve them – and that's added stress that you can really do without. It is important to challenge yourself and strive to achieve the things you want in your life, but not if it just stresses you out and makes you unhappy! Take a moment to review your goals and determine if they are the right ones for you at this time.

Be realistic. Stop overbooking your schedule. Allow yourself enough time for tasks rethink your deadlines and stop overcommitting yourself. Underestimating the amount of time it takes to complete a task can be the cause of much frustration. We all tend to underestimate the amount of time things will take and overestimate what we're able to achieve. Learn to allow realistic timeframes for all your activities and you'll be taking a lot of pressure off yourself.

Schedule routine. Make a note of all your regular and routine commitments in your planner so that you know you cannot give that time to anyone else – it'll help you to stop double-booking your time. Book in time for regular appointments such as haircuts, dentist appointments, family appointments and time for meals (yes you do need to eat properly every day, this is not negotiable) – whatever regular activity or routine you have in your life – schedule it. And don't forget to schedule travel time to get you to and from your appointments too.

Avoid sharing. While we're talking about scheduling, if you work in a team environment where other people have access to your calendar, block out chunks of time in which you can actually get work done, and don't allow others to make appointments in your schedule without your permission. You might need to make the same arrangements in your family life if your partner or other family members are constantly making commitments with your time – set some rules and block out time for yourself.

Watch your language. Stop using words like 'urgent' and 'ASAP' - it seems like everything is urgent and remember ASAP means as soon as possible, not right now! As soon as possible might be next week. This language of urgency only increases your stress levels and causes frustration to yourself and others when it results in rushed deadlines or over-commitment, so avoid using them.

Avoid crazy deadlines. Where possible, plan your time so that you're not doing crazy things to meet crazy deadlines. While it's sometimes necessary, it's no way to work on an ongoing basis and it'll only lead to stress, worry and potentially, illness.

Plan recovery time. If you know that you have a huge deadline or big event coming up that you'll be working hard to complete, book some time in with yourself for the day after to recover. Plan this time as if it were any other not negotiable appointment. This is especially important for high achievers who work at high levels for long periods of time and then crash after a big project or deadline, and bounce back to do it all again after they have recovered. It's not for everyone, but it's how some people operate, and for them recovery is especially important.

Accept the seasons. We are all used to having four distinct seasons each year. We don't question it and when winter comes around (whether we like it or not) - achieving work-life integration is much the same. We need to accept that there are seasons in our lives, and that some may seem more extreme than others. There may be times when we need to work harder to achieve more and to take advantage of opportunities, and other times when things are slower and we have more time to relax and enjoy our surroundings. Whatever is happening in your life, accept that it is just the 'season' and in time it will change.

your environment

Your environment

The third side of our work/life integration triangle represents our environment. Our environment can play a huge role in determining our emotions and expectations – if it is out of control we can feel overwhelmed, frustrated and angry, if it is in balance we feel more content and happy. Look around you, what affect are your surroundings having on you? Use some of these strategies to make sure that your environment is a positive one that has a good affect on you and everyone else that comes into it.

Surround yourself with positivity. Help to create your positive emotional state by having photos, pictures, motivational posters and quotes that inspire you in your work and home environment.

Use your senses. Surround yourself with items that will improve your environment. This might include scented candles, aromatherapy oils, relaxing music, even a water feature. You'll be more productive and happier in your environment if it has pleasant sounds, smells and visuals.

My own work-life integration story

Changing your environment completely is a radical step, but it can totally change the way you live and work.

My environment changed dramatically when my husband was offered the opportunity to work in the USA. We had always planned to take our Harley Davidson over for a few months and tour the US, so we thought this would be the perfect way to do it, it just came in a different form that what we had imagined.

I am a city girl, through and through, and we had been living just a few minutes from the center of Sydney, Australia. I was used to the luxury of living within walking distance to fabulous cafes, public transport of every description (taxi, bus, ferry, train) and the beach just ten minutes away, the airport only twenty minutes away, and the mountains and vineyards two hours from home – everything I wanted or needed was at my fingertips, day and night.

We had a wonderful life and I had a busy career as a speaker and consultant to Australia's top companies, which helped to fund a great lifestyle including regular international trips: I loved my work and my clients, and like many entrepreneurs spent many extra hours working on my business.

Since we've moved to the USA, many people have asked me how I did it? How I made the adjustment? How I coped? Well, let me tell you, I initially suffered a huge culture shock, moving from a big city to a small town. I missed the city skyline, the Sydney Harbor, fresh fish and chips by the beach, great Asian cuisine, taxis, the hustle and bustle of a major city, everything at my fingertips – I missed so much about Sydney, not to mention my family, girlfriends, clients and favorite stores.

When we came to the US on a quick house-hunting trip in November 2004 we purchased a home on an acre block in a quaint village of Pennsylvania called Doylestown (about an hour from Philadelphia and an hour or more to New York city). Where we live is like no other suburb I have ever seen, each block is a minimum of one acre and tress, ponds and wildlife surround us. Doylestown is a historic village known for its culture and arts. And it was a big change for me. I could no longer hail a taxi from my front door; in fact, I don't think I've even seen a taxi in Doylestown in the first year I lived there.

There were so many things in my life that changed, and I was initially a little lost as I was used to racing around, scheduling every minute of my day and living on adrenaline, but I've come to realize that this change has been for the better, and now I love it!

I love the people and enjoy the sense of community. I can't imagine my life without these people and experiences in it. I have had to completely start again and re-establish my speaking practice; regardless of everything I had achieved in Australia no one here knew my business or me. But what this did was give me the opportunity to re-establish my boundaries, to determine what my ideal clients look like to decide how many hours per week I want to work, and as a result of those changes I now have an incredibly busy social life and a better work life integration than I ever had in Sydney.

As our lives go through different seasons, this has been a good one for me. It allowed me to slowdown, take stock and enjoy my surrounding and this new adventure. Thankfully, it didn't take a crisis or major life incident to make my husband and I reassess our work life integration, we just moved countries!

Change is a great thing. I have embraced, immersed myself in it and surrounding myself with wonderful people who make each day more memorable and rewarding.

Maybe the concept of balance is a myth, but the key to making it work for you is absolutely learning to integrate your emotions, your expectations and your environments.

What can you do to achieve more work-life integration?

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