

Fitting It All In: Balancing Life and Work

Overview

A short guide to finding more time for doing what you value.

- Deciding what matters most
- Tracking where your time goes
- Changing some habits to make more time
- Learning to delegate
- Paying for some time-saving services
- Staying in balance

We live in a fast-forward world. For most people there aren't enough hours in the day to do everything they need to do, let alone the things that they want to do. Although it takes practice, you can train yourself to manage your responsibilities and create time to do what makes you feel alive and refreshed, whether it's a hobby, exercise, or maintaining relationships.

Meeting the demands of work and still making more time for the things you love will require you to consider new options and investigate fresh possibilities. You can make your own personal formula for balance by focusing on your goals, streamlining your activities, becoming more efficient, and delegating effectively.

Deciding what matters most

In order to fit all the things you need to do into your busy schedule, start by identifying the things that are most important to you. It could be a project at work that you want to complete, a cause you believe in, time with people you love, your faith, education, finances, or the time you spend teaching or mentoring others. Once you've identified your priorities, the key to fitting them all in is to arrange your time so that the most important things get done first.

Deciding what matters most is an ongoing process. Take time every few months to reassess where you are, what conditions in your life have changed, where you want to go, and what actions will take you there.

You're more than your job

Many of us have been trained to think of work as "important," and personal aspirations as something to be fit in when -- and if -- work is finished. Forge a new set of standards for yourself, one in which your spiritual, social, and physical needs count for as much as the need to advance yourself in your career. Start by knowing what you want. It's the first step in turning your wishes into realistic goals.

- *Set goals.* What would you do on a perfect day, if you had no obligations except to yourself? Answering this question will help you stop thinking of achievement solely in terms of work. Perhaps your secret goal is to learn a new language, coach a Little League team, earn a degree, write a novel, compete in a triathlon, or become an expert potter. Just be sure each of your goals is specific,

measurable, realistic, attainable through action, limited in time, and something you feel passionate about. If anything on your list is not all these things, re-work it or eliminate it.

- *Don't worry if a goal seems modest.* Small goals like finding time to exercise or writing in a journal every day are worthwhile. Setting a goal and following through will help you lay the groundwork for realizing larger goals.
- *Map out your goals.* Write at least three action steps you'll need to take to attain each goal, and set a realistic deadline for each step. Planning each phase will move you toward your goal one task at a time. A planning book can help you keep track of the steps you've accomplished, your daily lists, and your appointments. Once you see that your daily efforts are simply part of a process, you may feel relieved that you've demystified the lofty-sounding idea of "attaining a goal."
- *Consider the nuts and bolts.* What supplies or equipment will you need? Where is the course you want to take offered? And how much time and money will you need to invest to succeed at your goal? Estimate how many hours a week your action steps will take. Use your planning book to block out time for working toward your goal.
- *Reward yourself for each step you complete,* or with a big reward when you've accomplished a goal. A reward can be anything that is special to you: a walk in the woods, theater tickets, or a relaxing bubble bath.

Tracking where your time goes

Keep a record of how much time you spend on each of your activities. Write down how many hours a day go into work, commuting, personal care (dressing and bathing), exercise, errands, housework, leisure, and relationships (including child care). Look for time wasters (the minutes spent searching for lost keys, watching unenjoyable TV shows, or sorting junk mail), and be scrupulous about writing down this unproductive time, too.

Try using the chart on the following page as a model for your personal time-keeping record. You may want to add categories or rename the ones shown here.

At the end of the week, add up the totals (each day should add up to 24 hours). Then take a look at where all the time is going. People are often surprised at how many hours they're putting into errands and housework -- and how little time they spend on important relationships with friends, family, or others they love.

Estimate of time spent during one week

Activity	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Total
Working								
Personal care								
Errands								
Housework								
Eating								
Cooking								
Relationships								
Watching TV								
Sleeping								
Commuting								
Paying bills								
Exercising								
Reading								
E-mail/ Internet								
Total	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	24 hrs.	168 hrs.

Changing some habits; making more time

After you’ve taken a careful look at where you are spending your time, decide which activities you could drop altogether, which you could hire someone to do, and which you could make easier through organization.

Many busy working people double up on their chores to increase their efficiency. For example, they pay their bills while waiting at a doctor’s office, make a shopping list while they’re riding on a bus, or look at a trade magazine while riding the train to work. Be careful not to do chores on your scheduled down time; however, it is okay to combine two things that you find enjoyable and relaxing, such as taking a walk with your partner, which may meet both your exercise and stress reduction goals as well as your relationship goals.

At home

Creating more free time starts at home. After you get a handle on how you're spending your time, look at the household tasks that need to be done and see if there are adjustments you could make. Here are some ideas that may help you carve extra time out of your laundry, cleaning, and maintenance routines at home.

- *Ask the whole family to pitch in.* Enlist help with household chores from other family members -- including children and older relatives. Be specific about how and when each job should be done. A kitchen calendar and assignment sheet can help all family members plan ahead, understand their responsibilities, and make more time for fun.
- *Create a place for everything.* A lot of wasted time goes into searching for misplaced objects like gloves or car keys. Put things in the same place every time, even if it means labeling shelves. Key hooks and extra shelves can help. If you spend a lot of time looking for missing clothing, you might invest in a closet organizer or if you are constantly looking for your glasses you might buy a nice glasses case and use it each time you take off your glasses.
- *Minimize mail.* Don't spend time opening junk mail. Put unwanted fliers and solicitations right into the recycling bin. Don't fill out questionnaires or enter contests. Request that magazines, catalogs, and other mail services not sell your name to additional lists. Block junk mail from your e-mail service.
- *Consolidate tasks.* Save time by grouping your errands by time and location. For example, choose a grocery store that has a pharmacy in it or nearby. Consolidate household tasks, too. If you're chopping vegetables for a stir-fry, chop twice as many (it's only a little more work), and freeze the extras for another meal.
- *Don't hold the phone.* Buy a speaker phone, headset, or shoulder rest (and a long cord) so you can get ironing, dishes, or laundry done while you're talking. To avoid long conversations, start out by saying that you can talk only for a limited time.
- *Buy built-in convenience.* When you buy appliances, consider getting models with time-saving features, such as easy-clean stovetops and one-cycle washers. Buy easy-care clothing to limit hand washing or trips to the dry cleaner. When you are renting or buying a house, look for no-wax floors and tilt-out windows.
- *Purchase services.* If your budget permits it, hire someone to do all or part of the housecleaning, yard work, or minor repairs. A little help each week or every other week can save you hours of valuable time. You will need to be specific about how and when a job should be done. Whenever you bring someone into your home to work, be sure to select someone who is bonded and who comes with good references.

At work

Before you begin a day of work, give yourself the benefit of previewing what you expect to happen and how you're going to approach each assignment, phone call, or appointment. These guidelines can help you focus on the workday ahead:

- *Make a list.* When you plan each day, write the things to be done at work in order of priority, with the most important things first. Make a new list every day, evaluate the importance of each task, and stick to your priorities. If you don't accomplish everything you want to on a given day, you'll at least know you took care of the most significant things.
- *Run a quick test.* If you find it difficult to set priorities, ask yourself these questions:
 - Which items on the list mean the most to me?
 - How much time will all the things I've listed take?
 - Whom can I ask to help me with the things I can't do myself?
- *Follow through.* Critical tasks are often difficult to accomplish, so it's tempting to avoid them by doing routine duties. Be sure to stick to your prioritized list, and try not to get sidetracked by phone calls, e-mail, or visits from co-workers. Build some slack into your schedule to allow time for emergencies and for the unscheduled tasks that always come up.
- *Work at your own prime time.* Try to schedule your day to take advantage of your peak performance time. Some people are early risers and can tackle difficult tasks first thing in the morning, but others do their best work after lunch or even after business hours. Determine when your energy and ability to concentrate are keenest and plan to do your most challenging tasks then.
- *Honor your personal work style.* If some of the textbook recommendations for efficiency don't help you, ignore them. For instance, you've probably read that keeping a clear desk is a prerequisite for working well, but you may be a visual person who needs to see those stacks of paper to gauge your progress. Toss out the "rules" and do what works for you.

Learning to delegate

Delegating work is an excellent way to free up time. Here are the principles of delegating effectively on the job:

- *Accept that others can do the work.* Be a recovering perfectionist. If your very high standards are sapping your time, ask someone else to take over a task. The obsession with getting everything "just right" can keep you from reaching your most important goals.
- *Remember that others want to help.* Inheriting a task or perhaps even a whole project from you can mean recognition and advancement for the person

accepting the assignment. In addition to giving others work, you are giving them an opportunity to prove they're capable and versatile.

- *Communicate clearly.* When you are handing off a task to someone else, explain carefully what needs to be done and what the objective of the task is. It is a good idea to have the person receiving the assignment repeat what you've said to be sure you have explained fully and well.
- *Set standards before a task is done.* Pass on your own knowledge and experience to the person receiving the assignment. Explain the pitfalls you've discovered when you've done similar tasks in the past and what you've done to make this kind of task a success.
- *Inspect the results.* Review the work that you have assigned for accuracy and to make sure that it is complete, especially if the information or product is to be given to your supervisor or a customer. If there are errors, let the person to whom you delegated the task know, and, if needed, instruct him on how to correct the errors now and how to avoid the errors in the future.
- *Reward people with praise.* Be sure your co-worker knows that accepting this assignment from you has made him or her a more valuable asset to you and to the company.

Paying for some time-saving services

You can't do it all. Because so many people are pinched for time, scores of new services are available, especially to help you run your household. If you need a service that isn't offered, ask anyway. For example, a grocery store may not be aware that there's a demand for home delivery unless customers express their interest. Here's an overview of some services to look for:

- *Automatic banking.* You can arrange to have bills paid through automatic withdrawal -- a service offered by regular billers like utility and mortgage companies. Most banks allow customers to pay bills speedily by phone or personal computer.
- *Catalogs.* Use some of the hundreds of catalogs with 24-hour phone-in service to make shopping quicker and easier.
- *Catering.* Don't have time to cook for a party? A caterer can take care of gatherings of a few people or a few hundred. Party and event planners aren't only for weddings or bar mitzvahs; they can be useful for birthdays, showers, and dinner parties.
- *Car repair.* Many auto repair centers, car washes, and detailing businesses will take you to work after you've dropped off your car for servicing.
- *Delivery.* Customer-oriented grocery stores, dry cleaners, pharmacies, and laundry services often deliver -- a free or low-cost service that can save hundreds

of trips a year. Many restaurants and stores accept fax, phone, or e-mail orders for pickup or delivery.

- *Errands.* Personal service firms and concierges can arrange nearly any errand. Look into courier or messenger services, which can deliver library books, groceries, or valuables. A responsible teen or someone from a chore service can wait at your house for repair people to arrive or furniture to be delivered.
- *Gardening.* Hiring a neighborhood teen or a professional lawn service can cut the time you'd spend caring for your lawn or garden.
- *Snow removal.* Arrange for snow removal at the beginning of winter, instead of waiting until a blizzard hits. Many landscape and lawn services also plow snow.
- *Gift baskets and flowers.* Specialty shops and florists often accept orders by phone. Some shops can create customized gift baskets that contain chocolates, gourmet coffees, herbal teas, or bath products to fit the wishes of any friends, clients, or family members on your gift list.
- *Housekeeping.* Chores piling up? Hire a housekeeper or cleaning service on a weekly, monthly, or occasional basis (for spring cleaning or before a house guest arrives, for example). Laundry services will pick up and deliver on a predetermined day of the week.
- *Pet care.* Animal care professionals come to clients' houses and walk dogs or feed cats or birds when the owners are away or must work late. Some mobile services also bathe and groom pets.
- *Personal shopping.* Many large department stores offer personal shoppers. Some stores charge a fee for selecting gifts or clothing; often the service is free with a large enough purchase.
- *Shipping.* Some firms will pack up heavy or awkward items (such as a TV or a bicycle) and ship them for you. Look under "Shipping" in the Yellow Pages.
- *Transportation.* Van and car services can transport a child or older relative to activities and appointments on a regular or occasional basis. Don't overlook taxis, as well as city-sponsored transportation services.

If your budget is tight, investigate getting low-cost help from high school students or senior citizens, who can lend a hand for a reasonable fee. Also consider trading chores and services with neighbors or co-workers.

Staying in balance

Congratulations for embarking on the continuing process of finding balance. It's gratifying to see that you can master time and make more of it for the things that mean the most to you. Just remember that setting goals and choosing priorities are skills that grow; with practice you'll become more adept at knowing what you

want and finding ways to reach your goals. As you become more organized, learn to limit wasted time, and start delegating tasks, the quality of your life will change radically for the better. You'll feel in control rather than controlled by the calendar and clock.

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