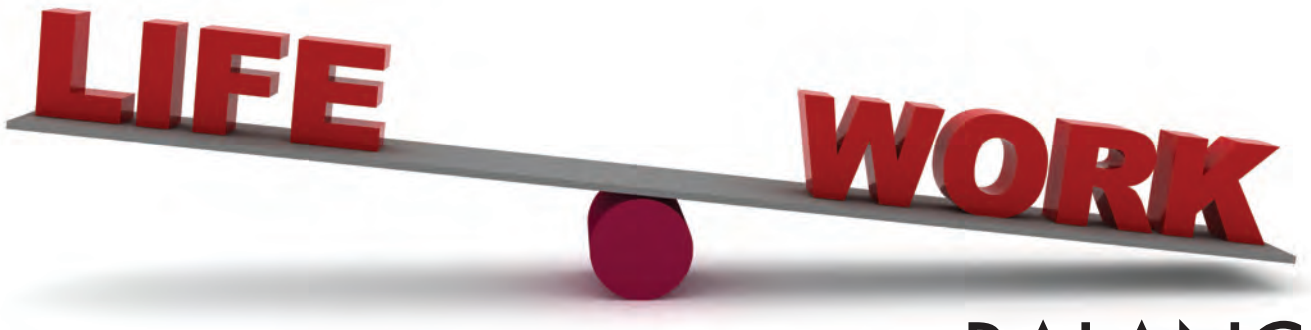
# A NEW SPIN ON BALANCE




Like synergy, blending layers of work and life can total a sum that's greater than its parts.

**BY JENNIFER DULSKI**

For most of us, the pressure to balance life and work is ever present. But to suggest there is some way to find a perfect balance—where one tries to focus equal time and attention on work and home—is impossible in my mind. Or to put it more bluntly, the whole concept of work-life balance is bull.

I'm still a parent when I walk into work, and I still lead a company when I come home. So if my daughter's school calls with a question in the middle of a meeting, I'm going to take the call. And if a viral petition breaks out in the middle of dinner, I'll probably take that call, too. And that's okay—at least for me and my family. I have accepted that work and life are layers on top of each other, with rotating levels of emphasis, and I have benefited from celebrating that overlap rather than trying to force it apart. I refer to this as the work-life mashup.

## The Mashup Concept

In tech-speak, a mashup is a webpage or app that is created by combining data and/or functionality from multiple sources. The term became popular in the early 2000s, when technology interfaces started allowing people to easily layer services on top of each other, much like photographs of apartment rental listings on top of Google maps.

There is a similar concept in music, where a mashup combines two or more tracks into one. One of the key concepts of a mashup is that the resulting product provides value in a way that neither originally did on its own; each layer adds value to the other.

Now, I'm not suggesting this is a guilt-free approach to life. People—and especially women—who try to do a lot often feel like they do none of it well, and I certainly suffer from that myself. But I have learned over time that how I feel about this is up to me. How much or how little guilt I experience at work or at home is in my control. I also realize that the concept of a mashup is a lot easier (and perhaps only possible) for people with jobs where creating flexibility is possible. With these caveats in mind, there are some things to think about to create a work/life mashup early in your career: add value and don't ask permission.

## Go Beyond What's Expected

Everything is easier when you start by being great at your job. If colleagues and managers know they can trust you to deliver high-quality results beyond what was asked for you, at the right company they'll be less concerned with when and where you get that work done. Then, when

Work-family balance isn't just a women's issue — it's a family one.

you need to leave work to do something for your personal/family life, even during work hours (like seeing a child's class play, taking an elderly parent to the doctor), just do it. Let your manager know what you are doing and why, and make sure you deliver results above their expectations. That will set the right precedent to give you the flexibility you need.

## Model for Your Team

Once you're in a leadership position, it's important to recognize your responsibility to give your teams the opportunity to thrive in a mashup world. It's essential for leaders to outline clear expectations and objectives, reward results and model the mashup. By outlining an inspiring vision and setting clear objectives for their teams, leaders can make it clear how individual work is connected to larger goals, and how to measure success in helping achieve those goals. Beyond that, as leaders we need to encourage our teams to stand up for what they need for their own mashed-up lives, and create environments where that is welcomed.

Leaders can effectively model the mashup for their teams. When I was a marketing exec at Yahoo, my manager, who was then chief marketing officer, left work at 5:30 pm every day so she could get home in time for dinner with her family. Not only was she consistent about leaving at that time, she also made it visible to the full team that she was doing it, thereby effectively giving permission to others on the team to do the same. By modeling that something other than an "always on" work schedule was acceptable, my manager showed her team that she understood and valued the importance of both work and life outside of work.

## Find a Creative Blend

The times when the mashup has worked best for me are when I find ways to creatively blend work and family together. This is what I like to call the extreme mashup. As it turns out, my family and my colleagues each have something to gain from the other.

When I was leading a new product launch team, we stayed late every Wednesday for a few months working toward the big launch. Since I couldn't get home to see my family on those nights, my husband (who also worked full-time, but not startup hours) would bring my daughters to the office after dinner with cookies for everyone in the office. Those days became known as "Workalicious Wednesdays." My daughters were able to get a sense of what the startup environment was like from those visits, and the team looked forward to the weekly cookie drop-off. This setup also helped me show the team that a family-friendly work environment was encouraged, and for the next few years, various members of the staff would periodically invite members of their family to stop by the office.

More recently at Change.org, I was able to combine a work trip with a family vacation while the kids were on break from school. We took a week of vacation and then I brought the family along while I worked at two of our international offices. It was a great chance for my children to learn about the world, and for my staff to see that we are building the kind of company that encourages people to love their work and their families. In fact, men are increasingly looking for ways to balance work and family, and it's important that leaders embrace the fact that this is not simply a women's issue.

## Strive for Meaning...Not Perfection

Above all, I try to remember that life is about meaning – the meaning that comes from authentic relationships with those we love and from worthwhile work that we believe in. People rarely lie on their deathbeds wishing they had accumulated more stuff or done more work. Rather, they think about the time they spent with the people that matter to them and the legacy they left in the world.

It's time to stop worrying about the perfect balance, and instead focus on being with people we love, and doing work that matters. Since there will never be enough time, a mashup might just be the solution, and leaders in every company have the power to make it a reality. ✪

*A version of this article originally appeared on Fortune.com.*

*A social entrepreneur, Jennifer left Google in 2013 to become President and COO of Change.org, a company that gives people a way to create and conduct online petitions.*