

Juggling Life's Priorities

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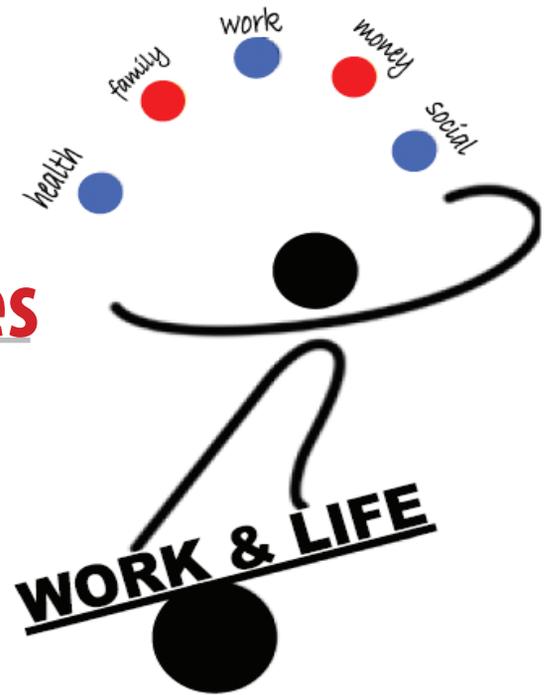
I have learned that there is only one way to achieve an important milestone: setting goals and creating a plan to meet them. Many people have their “wish list” of dreams and hopes, but few actually realize them. The difference between a wish list and a set of goals is that goals have deadlines.

Like many of you, I like to challenge myself to learn and grow. Earning a credential is a great way of validating our efforts and demonstrating to others our desire for continuous learning. For those of us who work for associations, the highest credential is the Certified Association Executive (CAE). Achieving it is much like any other credentialing program. It requires dedication, perseverance and hours and hours spent in a classroom, not to mention studying.

Earning the CAE was a goal I had set almost four years ago. When I first added it to my list of goals, it followed getting married, paying off credit card debt, purchasing a retirement home, and earning a master's degree, just to name a few. Well, I am proud to say that I not only met all my goals, but I earned my CAE four years ahead of schedule!

Was it easy? No, not really. Mainly because I am one of those people who fill my plate with competing projects. I often get so overwhelmed that it becomes difficult to focus on what's most important. Juggling priorities is like juggling plates - the ones you don't pay attention to are the ones that come crashing down. That's why the order of the list is so important. Before I could tackle the CAE credential, I wanted to accomplish the goals that came before it.

As my other goals become a list of accomplishments, it was once again time to challenge myself. The road to my CAE started in 2010, when I applied for an association scholarship program and was accepted. However, one condition of the program included taking the CAE exam. There was no turning back. So I reviewed the requirements for the CAE again. This time I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my advanced degree classes would qualify me for most of the 100 hours that were required in discipline-specific education. My relevant work experience counted toward the CAE, as well as my attendance at the association's conferences. I was only lacking the subject matter education.



Despite some setbacks, I kept focused on my goal. Thanks to online courses, I was able to continue in my pursuit of the CAE. When the 2010 virtual study session was announced, I signed up. I had no intention of taking the exam for at least another year however, after some fellow students bullied me into it, I submitted my application. I was both relieved and terrified when I received the notification that my application to sit for the exam was approved. With less than six weeks to prepare, I allocated countless hours to studying after work, weekends and even during a Thanksgiving camping trip. I holed up in my hotel room the entire day before the exam for a private cram session. The three-hour exam was grueling, and I was relieved when it was over. Six weeks later, when I received the news that I had passed, it was an emotional moment. I really had no idea what it meant to have the CAE until I had actually earned it. I was proud to be one of the 63% that passed.

But honestly, when I look back at my calendar, I see that blocks of time were allocated to studying. I see clearly marked deadlines I established for finishing each textbook and study guide. I see the piles of notes and dog-eared flashcards. Clearly, it was not magic. It was the result of planning and follow-through. And despite various obstacles and setbacks, choosing the more challenging road has added meaning to my life.

What about you? Do you feel that your goals are meaningful? Are you able to accomplish them? And when you do, do you get a sense of fulfillment? If not, it might be time to rethink your path. IRWA's career path can help you meet your professional and personal goals. Ask me how.