

chapter 1

why people don't lead balanced lives

BEFORE we discuss strategies you can use to rebalance your life, it's worth trying to work out why people are so quick to notice that their work/life balance is not as they would like it to be, but so slow in acting to try to change it. What holds us back? Lack of motivation? Fear? Insecurity? A sense that there is nothing that can be done?

the whinge/action discrepancy

In most areas of life, once a problem is identified, action is taken to fix it. If you open the fridge and find the ice-cream has melted, you ring the fridge fixer. At work whenever a problem is identified—'a client says their truckload of widgets didn't arrive'—steps are immediately taken to rectify it. If you had a sore tooth and the pain was diminishing your quality of

life, you would be in the dentist's waiting room reading last century's magazines as soon as you could get an appointment. Why, then, do we allow work/life balance problems, which also diminish our quality of life, to persist year after year?

There are many reasons why the idea of addressing work/life balance may not initially be attractive. You may love your job, and enjoy spending lots of time doing it. You may believe that all this talk of work/life balance is all very nice, but you damn well need the money that only working long hours can provide. You may believe that it is impossible to do your job properly unless you work long hours. You may even think that the hours you work are, all things considered, quite reasonable, given that in return you get a decent whack of money.

Let's deal firstly with some of the perceived obstacles that prevent people from examining and adjusting their work/life balance and how to overcome them. Then we'll examine the benefits of embarking on an in-depth examination of your circumstances, and discuss how making some changes to your life could actually make it better. After that, we'll go on to discuss some of the changes you can make that could improve your work/life balance.

obstacles to achieving work/life balance (and how to overcome them)

there's nothing i can do

One reason many people continue to lead unbalanced lives is that they believe that there is nothing they can do to change

their circumstances. They may feel trapped by the demands of their job, or by their employer's attitude, or by the financial demands on them to support themselves and their family.

If someone says their work hours are out of their control and they are completely unable to do anything, it allows them to take on the long-suffering air of the hard-working martyr and to feel good about them-

selves for being a noble, self-sacrificing provider. But it's very rarely the case that things have to be this way. If, for example, you are employed in a factory working fixed-term shifts set by a machine, and you need all the money you earn to support yourself and your family, and it is impossible to find another job with different conditions, then yes, the whole thing may be out of your control. But landscape gardeners, lawyers, doctors, sales executives, plumbers, real estate agents, public servants and IT professionals who say their work hours are completely out of their control are being disingenuous. If you really want to change, there is usually a way. That may sound glib, but later we will look at ways you can introduce work/life balance strategies into even workplaces that look like they have set, rigid conditions. Even if reducing your income is completely non-negotiable, there are still many things you can do to improve your work/life balance.

The idea that there is nothing you can do to change your work/life balance is rarely correct.

it's not my fault i'm important

Another objection to examining balance is the belief that if you worked fewer hours it would be impossible to do your job

properly. Some believe that, given the type of job they have, the number of hours they work is inevitable and unchangeable. They think, ‘Yes, ideally I would like to work fewer hours but because I am a doctor/mechanic/IT person/hang-gliding instructor, unfortunately it’s just not possible. The fact is that in my job, you just have to work a 45-/55-/65-hour week and that, tragically, is just the way the world is.’

Again, there are some jobs for which this is true. If your productivity is fixed by forces outside your control—for example, if you work on a production line where you can only work as fast as the machine lets you, or if your job has fixed-term shifts such as waitressing or nursing—then, yes, it may be difficult to reduce the hours you work and still do the job. All you may be able to do is to drop a shift and consequently reduce your income. Unfortunately for those in this situation the whole work/life balance equation may come down to the fact that you can only work fewer hours if you forgo some income.

However, most jobs are *not* that rigid. Most jobs give employees some control over their own productivity and enforce less than utterly rigid work hours. If you are in a job where you have some control over your productivity—that is, where if you work more efficiently and intensely you can get more done in an hour than if you slack off and take it easy—and you are not on a rigidly enforced shift system, then there are strategies you can adopt that can improve your work/life balance without affecting your income.

Many people say that their job is a demanding one with many responsibilities and that it would not be possible to do

it in less than a nine- or 10-hour day. To deny even the possibility that by becoming more efficient and productive you could get the same amount done in less time (and hence go home earlier) is foolish and usually wrong. When a company calls in management consultants, they conduct a rigorous and thorough examination of the way everything is done, analyse the results and inevitably find ways that things could be done more efficiently. If you can rigorously analyse the way you spend your own work time, it is almost inevitable that you will find ways in which you can do more in less time, and so reduce your work hours without this having any negative effect on your job or income.

There's a psychological hurdle we need to clear here.

Part of the reason we believe that we couldn't possibly spend less time at work without the whole place falling apart is that we like to feel important.

That's why people ring work when they go on holidays. The idea that we are not indispensable can be horrifying. Well, get used to it. You're not indispensable. No one is. High-up important people in multi-million-dollar companies sometimes die and when they do, does the company collapse? Almost never. The most powerful person in the world was killed in 1963. Was there chaos? Did America fall apart? No, they calmly installed the vice-president as the new president, and off they went. None of us are as important as we think we are.

There is, luckily, some consolation for this terrifying piece of news. If you do manage to reduce your work hours and

reconnect, or improve your connection, with your family and other non-work parts of your life, any feelings of irrelevance you may have felt as a result of accepting that you are not quite as important at work as you thought you were are likely to be more than compensated for in other ways.

show me the money

The next reason people may be reluctant to enthusiastically examine their work/life balance is that while they may believe that talk of work/life balance is all very well, the bottom line is brutally simple: they need the money, and only working long hours can provide it. Part-time work and reducing working hours sounds great, but who can afford it?

There are two responses to this. The first is that there is plenty you can do to improve your work/life balance that does not involve even entertaining the idea of lowering income. There are many strategies I will discuss that do not contemplate the notion of a pay cut, and which you can implement without reducing your potential to achieve future pay rises, or without being perceived by employers as being any less worthy of promotion.

The second response is to ask you to pause for a moment and think about how much money you *want*, and how much money you actually *need*. And also to think about how much *time* you want. Sacrificing some income to gain more free time is an option for some people and not for others. One of the ironies of modern life is that the time at which many people start to really want more free time is when they have children, but this is also often the time when their finances are

tightest. Kids bring a sudden increase in expenses. There are more mouths to feed and new parents have often just rented or bought a larger home to fit everyone in. Many have taken on a big mortgage. And at the time they have children most people have not been in the workforce long enough to achieve as much seniority and income as they will have later in their career. The flipside is that when the kids have moved out, 15 or 20 years later (or, increasingly frequently, 25 or 30 years later), the parents may well be earning a lot more, but actually need a lot less. How many empty-nesters going on South Pacific cruises wish that they could trade the money they now have for an extra two hours a day at home with the kids 20 years ago? Perhaps the thought never crosses their minds. Maybe it should.

what does your life cost?

Many people feel they are trapped in a life of long work hours because they require a certain income to meet their expenses. Yet when asked to do some simple trade-offs between expenses and time, they often answer quickly and definitively. Here are some questions you may want to start thinking about.

If it meant you could work fewer hours and spend more time with your kids or doing other things would you ...

- drive a cheaper car?
- go on cheaper holidays?
- spend 10 per cent less on groceries?
- use your car less?

- buy appliances that work but aren't fancy?
- spend a bit less on going out?

The instinctive answer for many is that yes, they would reduce their expenses on non-essentials if it meant they could have more free time. While many people need every cent they earn to get by, others could reduce their expenses by 10 per cent without too much pain. It's worth having a think about which category you are in, and whether your income really is completely non-negotiable.

whatever you say, guv'nor

Some are reluctant to examine their work/life balance because they think the hours they work are, all things considered, quite reasonable, given that in return they get the key that opens almost all doors, money. Employees feel a lot of guilt. We feel guilty if we go home leaving something unfinished, guilty if we go outside and walk around the block for 10 minutes to get some fresh air after two hours of solid work, guilty when there is work that needs to be done by Monday and we ignore it over the weekend and go on a picnic with our family. Get over it. Service is a noble thing and providing good service to an employer can be very satisfying. But if the cost of providing it is that you do not have enough time for yourself, your family or other things that are important to you, then your life is unbalanced.

If you are serious about adjusting your work/life balance you need to get over the serf mentality.

Serfs had virtually no bargaining power and if they didn't accept what their landlord demanded of them, they were cactus. You are not a serf. You are not beholden to one employer, your fate does not rest in their hands, and you do not need to accept whatever they demand of you. You are a valuable member of the workforce who could at any moment decide to take their labour elsewhere. Employers have always desperately needed good workers. Without them their businesses will fail. At present there is still relatively low unemployment and, in many areas, a shortage of skilled labour. Both factors improve the bargaining position of employees. You do not need to offer an employer everything you have in order to get and hold a decent job and generate an income. You simply need to efficiently complete various tasks. You do not owe them your life. And you do not need to apologise for having one.

Employees often feel a disproportionate sense of obligation to their employers.

They are so grateful that they were given a job, taught how to do it properly and then, every few years, given a promotion that they make the mistake of thinking that these things happened because their employer wanted to be nice to them. Their employer may well have wanted to be nice to them, but that is not why these things happen. The main reason that recruitment, training and promotion happen is not to benefit the employee. It is to benefit the employer. If an employer takes a punt on someone and gives them a big promotion and a lot of seniority quickly, it is because they think the person

has skills that will benefit the company and help it to make a profit.

If you want to tackle your work/life balance, you have to stop thinking about what you owe your employer, and start thinking about what you owe yourself and your family. And you have to start negotiating with your employer as an equal, not as a serf.

it's the twenty-first century, stupid

Most employees underestimate their negotiating power. At some deep level most of us believe that we are lucky to have a job, that we are easily replaceable and that we need our employers more than they need us. Accordingly, we feel that if we were to be so presumptuous as to ask for working conditions that suited us better it would be seen as ingratitude.

In the old days the choice was simple. You either worked as much as you were told to, or you got sacked and you and your family starved. Now the world has changed. Technology allows us to work at home, on the bus or even at the beach, and employers are beginning to understand that concepts like 'part-time work' and 'flexible working hours' are not inherently evil but are things they must understand and embrace if they want to maximise the benefit they get from their most precious resource, their people.

They also understand that the days of employees signing up with a company at age 20 and retiring 45 years later with a gold watch are gone. The workforce is more fluid, and people are more willing to change jobs, even careers. As a result, if an employer finds someone they want to keep, they can no longer just assume that as long as they keep paying the person,

the person will want to stay. Employers know that their most valuable resource is not their technology or the client base or their assets, but their people. It is people who run the technology, deal with the clients and utilise the assets. It is people who are responsible for doing the thing that every organisation needs more than anything else—the thinking. Employers need employees to come up with new ideas, to think of better ways of running the business, to innovate, and to use their intellect, energy, charm, intelligence and other skills to make their business work.

There are now more opportunities and more technological aids that can help us to balance our lives than there have ever been before.

No longer are the dice loaded in the favour of employers. You have something that your employer wants, and that thing is you. More and more employers are realising that they have to move away from the traditional ‘this is the job, take it or leave it’ approach to a more flexible model where, in order to find and keep employees, they need to listen to what they want and be more responsive to their needs.

I’m not saying that the corporate world has gone all touchy feely. It is still motivated by what corporations have always been motivated by: the desire to maximise profit. But often a win-win solution is possible. When business is slow, employers may be more willing to allow an employee to reduce their working hours. They may even encourage it. For example, some firms get through tough economic times without

redundancies by getting employees to work less than a 10-day fortnight. Then, when business picks up, employees may find that the demand for their skills, and therefore their bargaining power, has increased, allowing them to negotiate conditions that will help them achieve a good work/life balance. Ultimately, regardless of economic circumstance, employers need good employees.

procrastination

Some people think that, in theory, the idea of rebalancing their life is a good one, but they are not quite sure how to go about it. As a result, they may put the problem aside, or consign it to the 'do later' pile where it may languish for years or even decades, along with fixing the laundry cupboard and sorting out the superannuation. Or they may not act to rectify a work/life balance problem because they don't give it enough priority. We spend our lives prioritising. 'I'd love to sit on the couch, but it is more important to make dinner', 'I want to keep reading this book, but I need to go to sleep.' Every day, every hour, we mentally prioritise many different things. We do the task we have identified as the most important first, then work our way down the list until the point when another event intervenes and brings in new priorities. For example, on the train to work I want to look at the people, read the paper, read my book, and think about what I am going to say in a meeting this morning. I prioritise preparing for the meeting as number 1, reading the paper as 2, reading my book as 3 and looking at the people as 4. I start mentally preparing for the meeting and just as I finish and am about to turn to priority 2

the train arrives at my stop. Now there is a new priority number 1. Get off the train. The newspaper must wait.

Work/life balance is a bit like the newspaper. It's always being relegated to priority number 2 by something more urgent and seemingly more important. But the longer you put off trying to improve it, the more likely you are to regret it later on.

Many people say the most important thing in their life is spending time with their family and that they would love to be able to get home a couple of hours earlier during the working week. But if that really was their number one priority, they would put a lot more energy into trying to make it happen.

Work/life balance is not some small or peripheral issue. It's about your life and how you live it. How are you going to feel if in the afterlife, or at your exit interview, or whatever it is, the person/angel/evolved thingy says, 'Listen, I don't want to make you feel bad, what with you just having died and all, but you know all that complaining you did between the ages of 30 and 55 about working too many hours and not seeing enough of your family? Well, if you had really wanted to change it, if you had really tried, you could have.'

work is da bomb

Some people love their jobs, some people hate their jobs, and the rest are somewhere in between. Except for those who don't have jobs. Some of them want jobs, and envy those who have

one, even those who have one and hate it. Others don't have a job and don't want one. People in this final category sound like they should be the most content, yet strangely they rarely are, perhaps because much of their life involves an elaborate game of cat and mouse with various government bodies who want them to get a job so that they can stop paying them benefits.

If you love your job and enjoy spending lots of time doing it, congratulations. You are lucky. However, it's no reason to allow your life to become unbalanced.

Whatever your emotional relationship with your work is, you also have an emotional relationship with the rest of your life.

It is quite possible to have a positive healthy relationship with your work, and to couple it with a positive and healthy attitude to the other parts of your life. But it is also possible for a love of work to jealously intrude into other areas of life, and to eventually undermine and erode your relationship with them. If too much time is spent working, there are simply not enough hours left to have healthy relationships with family, friends and even self.

It's not just the number of hours one spends physically at work that is the issue. Anyone who has a job that involves thinking, challenges or responsibility will almost inevitably find that in addition to the hours they actually spend at work, they will spend additional time thinking about work. The more challenging the job, the harder it is to leave it behind

when you go home. It follows you. There's always something to think about, something to worry about. All that additional time you spend thinking about your job outside work hours is time you are emotionally absent from the rest of your life. There's not much point going on a picnic with your family if your brain is miles away, trying to work out a way to fix a problem at work.

If you think work can fulfil all your needs, you are wrong. A life full of work, even richly satisfying and vastly important work, is incomplete. If you do not allow yourself the time to explore the other riches life can offer then I believe it is inevitable that you will stagnate. You will become one-dimensional. You may well become a brilliantly skilled and successful lawyer or archaeologist or jeweller or builder, and you may continue to enjoy your job, but the rest of your life—hobbies and interests, exercise, peace of mind, and relationships with people, art, nature and self—will suffer. You will be like a body builder who only does the bench press. One part becomes incredibly well developed, but the other, ignored parts remain feeble. The overall effect is a body, or a life, that is out of proportion.

Those who rely on work for all their life's challenges are putting all their eggs in one basket. What happens when after 10 years of loving being an archaeologist, water diviner, physiotherapist, executive, mechanic or architect and allowing other parts of your life to stagnate, you gradually realise that you aren't finding your job as stimulating or exciting as you used to? This is common. When I worked as a stand-up comedian every gig that went well was immensely satisfying. It felt great. But the twentieth time it went well wasn't quite

as satisfying as the first time it went well, and the hundred and fiftieth wasn't as good as the hundredth. When I started doing stand-up comedy I knew for a fact that I had found my life's passion, and it was all I ever wanted to do. Ten years later, it was still a great job, but I wanted to do other things.

The law of diminishing marginal utility states that when you find something you like, such as hard-centred chocolates, you will enjoy the first chocolate more than you enjoy the second, the second more than you enjoy the third, and so on until at some point you want to stop eating them. Each subsequent chocolate creates less satisfaction than the preceding one. This explains why a second helping of anything is never quite as good as the first, why you enjoy going to the movies more when you only do it occasionally and why people who live at a beach paradise are blasé about it, while those on holidays at the same place wander around with mouths gaping open.

The implication of the law is that even if you have found a job you love and feel totally fine about working long hours and allowing your life to become unbalanced, at some point the amount you love your job is likely to diminish. The excitement and novelty will wear off. And when that day comes, if you have allowed other parts of your life to wither away, what then?

A related point is that anything done to excess is unhealthy. Overdoing even healthy things like exercise can be bad. Run a bit—good; run a fair bit—probably still good; but if you start to get obsessive about it then not only might you develop shin splints, blistered toes, knee sprains and mystery viruses, but the range of things you think about will narrow. Forget music,

gardening and sex, all your poor brain will care about is where you will go on your next run, which bits of your last run you ran fast and which bits you ran slow, and what sort of running shoes, knee braces and mystery virus pills you're going to buy next. You will become a bore.

The same applies for work. Our minds focus on what we do, and if what you do most is work, then that is where most of your thoughts will be. When you talk to others you will want to talk about what is uppermost in your mind—work—and you may feel disconnected from others (apart from those you work with) because there is not much conversational common ground.

'i could give up anytime'

One of the reasons people become workaholics is that they get addicted to the feelings of mastery they get from being good at their job. Most people who enjoy their jobs are reasonably good at them. It's hard to imagine loving work if you are hopeless at it. When we do something that we are good at, whether it's raking the leaves, making banana pancakes, closing a deal, selling a car or writing a report, we feel a sense of satisfaction and achievement. We feel competent and important. It's as if we matter.

A viscous cycle can then occur. A person who is working long hours in a job they like feels more of a sense of competence and mastery at work, and less of it elsewhere. Being human, they crave those feelings of importance and want to get more of them. So they spend more time working. The more they work, the more disconnected they get from their relationships

with their family and friends and from other things that they do. The more disconnected they get, the harder it is to attain those feelings of satisfaction and mastery (that are so available to them at work) from the non-work parts of their life. At work they feel important; elsewhere they feel out of place and awkward. If a person sees that their family has apparently survived quite well without them in the 12 hours they have been at work, and that when they are around things are a little stilted, before too long a part of them will want to go back into the environment where they feel competent and at ease.

Work becomes a safety zone, a world that is understood and controlled. It has challenges that make the adrenalin pump, deadlines to be met and goals to be achieved. Each extra year of experience provides more confidence that those challenges can be met. None of this is inherently bad. In fact finding a job that provides ongoing challenges, excitement, satisfaction and mastery is fantastic. It only becomes dangerous when those satisfactions tempt us to ignore other, equally or more valuable things in our lives.

Relationships are not like riding a bike. You don't just pick them up and off you go. They are more like being a concert pianist. Constant attention is needed, otherwise you get rusty.

Those with unbalanced lives are often
ill-equipped to diagnose themselves.

Over-specialisation in anything, including work, can promote a narrow view of the world. Objectively speaking, it is fairly obvious that someone who spends over half of their waking

hours doing one particular thing is not leading a balanced life. They might be leading a life that has many positives, but balance is not one of them. If someone played chess for over half their waking hours, most would agree that they should perhaps branch out and see what else life had to offer. Draughts, for example. Unless they don't sleep much, anyone who works 60 hours a week—that is, five 12-hour days—spends over half their waking hours working, getting ready for work, and travelling to and from work. Now for many it may seem financially necessary to work that much but it is still a life that lacks balance.

weird is normal

No matter how unbalanced a life objectively is, after a while the person leading it becomes habituated to it. Do anything for long enough and it becomes normal. Surely it is strange to wake up in Sydney, be over 1000 kilometres away in Brisbane by morning tea time, and then return to Sydney by lunch. Yet that is what thousands of people who work on aeroplanes do, with variations, each day. Weird! And I didn't even mention that they spend most of that time nine kilometres above sea level! But do they think their job is strange? Maybe on day 1 they do, but by day 63 it's completely normal. However weird 'normal' is, after a while the weirdness is dulled by repetition, and it simply becomes 'what we do'.

Thus, those who see their children for an hour in the morning and an hour at night—if they are lucky—sooner or later come to think of it as normal. This is the way the world is. Consciously or subconsciously they come to believe that

because that is the way things are, then that is the way that they have to be. They don't get angry about the time they are expected to spend working, it doesn't make them as sad as it could, or perhaps should, and as a result, they don't do anything about it. They accept it. And so it goes on.

Because of our inherent resistance to and fear of change, if life is set up in a way that is comfortable and, compared to the millions of others whose life is a constant struggle for survival, overall pretty good, the temptation is to count our blessings, be grateful we are not starving and accept the status quo. It sounds noble but it's not. It's stupid. While it is certainly a good thing for us to count our blessings and reflect on how lucky we are, there is no reason why that should stop us from trying to make our lives better. We all deserve the best life we can get, and if I get to the end of mine and realise that I didn't try hard enough to make it as good as it could possibly be, I'm going to feel a bit silly, and a bit sad.

If you have a reasonably comfy life where you can afford ice-cream, DVDs and scooters for the kids, congratulations. But perhaps there's a way of keeping all that stuff and also getting to see the kids ride their scooters every afternoon.