

# Inc.

## COLUMNIST

### 3 Ways to Tackle Work-Life Balance

You have the opportunity to live a life where you have plenty of time to do the things you need to do in the office or at home..



BY JOELLE K. JAY

Author, *'The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership'*

Twitter: @JoelleKJay



IMAGE: Getty Images

"I don't believe in work-life balance." Speaking with business leaders about how they think about their time, I've heard that same sentence three times in the last week.

At first I was tempted to debate with them. I *do* believe in work-life balance. Regardless of how you frame it--some people prefer to call it "work-life choices" or simply "life"--I believe you have the opportunity to live a life where you have plenty of time to do the things you need to do in the office or at home.

Apparently, that's arguable. Questions I've seen in media headlines on the topic challenge the concept.

"Is work-life balance possible?"

"Does an expectation of balance put undue pressure on people?"

"Shouldn't we all just learn to integrate our lives in this 24/7 world?"

A healthy debate like this can help us see different angles on this challenge we all face. Yet, sometimes the debate over how we "should" organize our time spirals into a more negative version--the "I'm right/you're wrong" kind of confrontation that leaves everyone feeling attacked.

The real problem isn't that we have different perspectives on work-life balance. The problem arises when we try to impose our views on others.

A client of mine recently complained when his boss overloaded him with extra projects that would stretch him past capacity. When my client dared to point out the obvious--that with so much work at once, he couldn't possibly do a quality job--his boss snapped at him for "not pulling his weight." For the record, this client was one of the highest-performing leaders in the division, and not one who could fairly be seen as a slacker. The underlying problem was that his boss thought working 24/7 was acceptable at any cost. My client did not.

In another interaction I witnessed, one manager berated another for "working so hard you never see your kids." Again, this was an unfair judgment. I knew both managers to be extremely family oriented and perfectly healthy time managers. The problem arose because they simply worked differently--and judging each other only caused animosity.

Frustrated by the pattern I was witnessing, I wanted to find a way to help people out of the struggle and into a more productive point of view.

Then I met Ellen Kossek, who offered a solution.

Ellen Kossek is a Professor of Management at Purdue University's Krannert School of Management, Research Director of the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence, and author of *CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age*. She has a theory about approaches to work-life balance and, along with her colleagues, has developed a work-life assessment to help individuals understand their styles. She calls the three types of approaches separators, integrators and cyclers.

Rather than continue to wrestle with the issues of work-life balance (and whether it's even possible) you might consider which of these approaches work best for you.

**Separators.** Separators compartmentalize. During the weekdays and the workday, separators focus on their work and the task at hand. When the weekend hits, the separators put the phone down, reclaim their freedom and enjoy their down time.

An example of a separator is a client of mine who is a CEO of a start up firm. She has several children, and between her family and her job, she could easily choose to work all day, everyday. Instead, she consciously chose specific hours for work and specific hours for home, and she made an agreement with both her firm and her family to adhere to the schedule. She made sure everyone was taken care of--including herself--and from then on, she felt free. Both her clients and her family knew what to expect, and everyone became accustomed to her schedule. She knew that separating was the way she worked best.

**Integrators.** Integrators blend the different parts of their lives all together.

An example of a great integrator I know is a small business owner. Dramatically successful and with a fast rise into seven figures, she loves to work. She also loves her life. This entrepreneur chooses to work wherever she is, whenever she wants to--or not. She has her phone, laptop and car at her disposal at all times. She does what she wants to do and goes where she has to go and gets it all handled along the way. She can be found taking a business call on the treadmill or sitting with her kids in the office conference room having coloring time. She might leave work at three in the afternoon to pick up her kids, but then after everyone is situated at home she'll sit at the kitchen table with her laptop and join an evening conference call.

Integrators allow work and home life to blend together. As long as they make sure they have time for themselves and their work, and as long as everyone's needs are met, it all seems to come together and everything gets accomplished.

**Cyclers.** Cyclers follow what might be seen as a more traditional model: work hard and play hard, each in their own time.

If you're a cyclist, you go through phases that are all about the work. Your hours might be long, and you work really hard, allowing yourself to stay focused and reach important milestones and outcomes.

Then you go on vacation. You completely unplug. You sleep and swim and play. You feel restored and happy, and when the vacation's over, you put away your beach towel and head back to work.

This model seems to work well for a lot of people. Parents, especially, seem to benefit from aligning their work schedule to their kids' school calendars, which tend to operate with this "cycling" approach. They can work while the kids are in school and then take off the breaks that their children get, whether it's two weeks at the holidays, a long weekend here and there, or even those long summer vacations. Entrepreneurs, executives, and inventors I've known have all appreciated the ability to immerse themselves in their work for awhile, and then reward themselves with some good, quality time off.

Let's revisit the scenarios I posed earlier in this article. The manager who wanted my client to work 24/7 was a cyler; his style bumped up against the values of his direct report, who was a separator. The manager who scoffed another manager's workaholic-seeming style was a separator also; but she misread and misinterpreted her colleagues' integrator way of life. With Kossek's lens on work-life balance, none of these people were "wrong" in their way to managing their time. But they *were* wrong to judge other people for managing *their* time differently. Many different styles can accomplish the same goal. The real way to judge the effectiveness is to gauge whether the work gets done in a way that supports a healthy quality of life--however you define it.

As you consider these three models, ask yourself a few questions.

- What model appeals to you most?
- What model are you living with now?
- Is there any way to bring the two closer together?

Once you choose *your* way of making your life work, you can more easily accept other's choices and go about focusing on your own.

PUBLISHED ON: MAR 31, 2015

Joelle K. Jay, Ph. D., is an executive coach specializing in leadership development. She strategizes with business leaders to enhance their performance and maximize business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies such as Microsoft, Google,

and Adobe. She is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*. For a free summary, go to [www.TheInnerEdge.com](http://www.TheInnerEdge.com) or email [Info@TheInnerEdge.com](mailto:Info@TheInnerEdge.com).