Balancing Act

By Christine Loomis

Achieving a harmony between your work life and personal life is possible

Over the past several decades the workplace has changed dramatically. With change has come unprecedented levels of stress and workers who feel that their lives are seriously out of balance.

Many jobs today are dependent on a crushing level of multitasking and time commitment. Our free time, what little there is, may not remotely coincide with the free time of our spouses, kids, or friends, making it hard for us to relax and reconnect in any of the traditional ways.

Even if our good intention is to de-stress in a yoga class or meet up with our spouse for a date night, the relentless advance of technology—both the boon and bane of modern existence—makes it easy to get sidetracked and sucked back into work.

With the proliferation of laptops and smart phones, the boundaries between work and home have disappeared. We can be reached anytime, anywhere, from anyplace in the world—and that's not always good for our health or happiness.

So what can we do? Turns out, quite a lot. Researchers from a variety of different fields have studied issues related to work-life balance, and their findings provide hope. One thing that almost everyone agrees on is that the power to create balance in our lives is primarily in our own hands. To quote an Eagles song: "So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains/And we never even know we have the key."

We can unshackle ourselves from our desks, computers, and iPhones if we choose to. In doing so, we will be healthier and

find increased pleasure and meaning in other areas of our lives.

Take Control

Bruce Katcher, Ph.D., president of Sharon, MA-based Discovery Surveys, has surveyed 60,000 workers in 80 organizations over the past 18 years. Of the respondents, 36 percent say they do not have a satisfactory balance between their work life and their personal life. Long hours, too much time in the car, increased pressure at work ("Job security is now an oxymoron," Katcher notes), and the deterioration of boundaries between work and home are among the top reasons that people give for lack of balance.

"Life and work get out of whack when a person thinks she has to serve two masters 100 percent and alone."

While much of Katcher's work has revolved around helping employers create a company culture in which work-life balance is valued, he emphasizes that employees and independent consultants must set their own boundaries to bring balance to their lives. For some, that may mean disconnecting—turning off cell phones and laptops—at specific times or for a certain amount of time each day. For others, it may mean finding more efficient ways to work. For everyone, it means taking some degree of control.

Marian Thier, a life coach and president of Expanding Thoughts in Boulder, CO, says the more control you have over your life, the more balanced you will feel. The issue, she says, is really one of restructuring. She gives an example of a client who now goes to sleep at the same time as her kids, so that she can get up at 4 a.m. to work out and be at her computer by 6 a.m.

That schedule suits her now, Thier says, noting that solutions change as lives change. Would everyone consider Thier's client as having a balanced life? Perhaps not. But balance is a personal preference, and "She's happy, so that is her balance," Thier says.

Find Solutions That Work for You

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Start by asking: What does balance mean for me? You have to put your needs in place and be clear, being certain to list what you really want your priorities to be, not what you think they should be.

Katcher says balance isn't about numbers, either. Working 80 hours a week provides some people with the balance they want, while others find that working 40 hours disrupts their personal life too much. Achieving balance doesn't come from devoting the same number of hours to both work and home. It comes from creating a life in which you feel good about the way you spend your time—however that time is divided.

Pause, Breathe

One strategy that makes a huge difference in how we feel and how productive we are is short and sweet: Simply take a few minutes a few times each day to sit back and relax. Jeff Davidson, executive director of the Breathing Space Institute in Raleigh, NC, is a noted expert on work-life balance and has written prolifically on the subject. In his article "Peace of Mind for Meeting Planners," he says, "Perhaps the biggest obstacle to having what I call 'breathing space' in your life—the ability to

---

Top 9 Strategies for Achieving Work-Life Balance

1. **Establish your priorities**
   Maybe it's more time with a spouse or a regular workout routine. Identify priorities and build your schedule accordingly.

2. **Separate home and work**
   Create an effective "bridge time" between work and home—listen to relaxing music in the car or find a stress-relieving fitness class at the gym, for example—so you're ready to be present when you arrive home.

3. **Manage/track your time**
   It's easy to fall into 10-, 12-, or even 14-hour days. There's always more to do. But ridiculously long days should be the exception, not the rule. If they are the rule, track every hour and task, then reorganize and reprioritize.

4. **Become more efficient**
   Create templates for lists and flow charts so there's no need to create new ones for similar projects. Use the same strategy at home. Identify ways to save time by grouping tasks, delegating, or sharing work.

5. **Bolster your support system**
   Identify your "go-to" people at work and home, and use them. Give up the idea that you're the only one who can do something. Let family help with kids. Share evening babysitting with another couple, so you all get adult time.

6. **Learn to say no**
   Be picky about volunteering and cut extraneous activities. If you know you're going to have a super busy week with long work hours, don't accept social invitations that weekend. Stay in and relax to recharge.

7. **Nurture yourself**
   Make the things that make you feel good and alleviate stress part of your life. If it's exersize, build it into your day. If it's a massage, put it on the schedule. If it's 30 minutes in a hot bath, plan it and follow through.

8. **Disconnect from technology part of every day**
   Turn off your laptop at a certain time every night and stop checking emails. Don't hold your BlackBerry while you're watching TV.

9. **Plan personal/family time**
   Treat personal time with the same importance as work time. You wouldn't skip a meeting at work; likewise, don't skip a rendezvous with your spouse, lunch with a friend, a day out with your kids. Put them into your calendar.

elect on occasion to simply drop back and punt—is the unwillingness to allow yourself to have it."

Many of us mistakenly believe that if we take time away from work, we're slacking off and work will suffer. However, Davidson says that the opposite is true. When workers pause for a minute or two periodically during the day, take time to get centered and balanced, and take a deep breath, they are actually more effective.

"Some of the most productive and energetic people in history learned how to pace themselves effectively by taking a few 'time-outs' each day," Davidson says, citing Thomas Edison and Buckminster Fuller as examples.

Mind Game

As Davidson makes clear, sometimes the inability to find balance is not in the steps we do or do not take but simply in our minds. He says the dreaded "G" word—guilt—often plays a part in a lack of balance. People feel guilty when they're at work because they're not at home, and guilty at home for not tackling tasks brought home from work.

Thier puts it this way: "Life and work get out of whack when a person thinks she has to serve two masters 100 percent and alone."

We can't give 100 percent to work and family at the same time, and trying to do this leaves us feeling frustrated and guilty. If, however, we separate the two, we can focus 100 percent on one at a time, and we'll be more efficient, productive, and less stressed. Multitasking sounds like a good thing, yet often it's just the opposite.

Probably no group is more attuned to this problem than working parents, for whom the emotional and physical demands of home life are often overwhelming on their own, even before work stress is added into the mix. In addition to focusing on one area at a time, the critical strategy that helps working parents take control and keep guilt at bay is to develop support networks at home and in the workplace, and give themselves permission to actually use them.

Good for Us

As we learn more about the physical and emotional toll that stress takes on us, it becomes more clear that balance is crucial for health and well-being. The Internet is overflowing with information on the importance of creating balance in life and the negative effects of letting work overwhelm us. Whether we work for others or for ourselves, one thing is certain: We have the power to create the right balance for us in our lives. All we have to do is act. ■

The 'Netflix' Model to Improve Literacy

By Jill Newell

Why is video provider Netflix such a success? I suggest that it comes down to the fulfillment of three desires of the consumer:

1. On-demand availability

2. Individualization and recommendation according to consumer preference

3. Accessibility in a variety of digital formats

Using the same consumer model, Capstone Digital, a division of Capstone Publishing, is taking a leap of faith and producing an innovative educational program called the myON Reader. Their "Netflix" approach to reading is banking on students' interest being piqued by the same individualized approach, just substitute literature for movies.

The myON Reader matches student interests and reading level with content to personalize learning and predict future reading growth.

"We actually have students take an interest inventory, similar to if you were going on to an eHarmony or a Netflix and saying, 'I'm looking for a match,'" explains Todd Brekhus, president of Capstone Digital.

The service is geared to meet student needs with literature when they want it, and how they want it, at a level that won't frustrate them to the point of giving up. This is differentiation using twenty-first century technology.

Brekhus understands the need to read, but also understands that it must captivate the students, and that is not happening on the large scale right now. "We want kids to find books because they're typically not looking for books—that's not their first choice [for entertainment]. The basic theory is that if you motivate kids to read, and you find them books that they're interested in and that are challenging but not too challenging, they will read more and they will continue to read, and that's a key goal."

Providing students with their own personalized library in their pocket or PC could be the salvation for the lost art of reading. If this catches on, perhaps students will be sending links of digital books to one another sharing their latest "great read" along with their YouTube videos of leprechauns in trees. ■

Christine Loomis is a freelance writer and the former family travel editor for Family Fun *magazine.*

Reprinted with permission from Smart Meetings *(www.smartmeetings.com).*

Jill Newell is the director of professional development at the Association of American Educators. She taught English at the secondary level in suburban Utah and inner-city Southern California. Currently, she teaches Spanish at Northern Virginia Community College to fulfill her desire to be in the classroom with students.

THE FOLLY OF TEAM PRO

Are we really accomplishing what we think we are?

I have a challenge for all of my fellow academics regarding their use of team projects in their classes—do them right or don't do them at all.

Team projects, team presentations, and team research papers have become a common portion of college course grades. Such assignments are well-intended. Many students are careerists, and because much of modern industry involves working with others, these projects will give students real-world experience without the pressure of a real-life job. In practice, however, these assignments do much more harm than good.

Students usually tell me about the inner workings of their group projects. Regardless of how much researchers suggest that teamwork creates synergy, from my experience at several schools, the theory does not always align with practice.

I have spent several semesters trying to force a square peg into a round hole with a team consulting assignment. On paper, the project appeared to be something that students could pitch to future employers —"I was part of a team that interviewed a local client, discovered an organizational problem, wrote up a proposal and solution to that problem, and presented my results to a mock client." However, only the top 5 percent of assignments ever approached something that was worth presenting outside of class.

One consistent result across all of my schools was that the top students did not necessarily earn the best grades on team assignments. It is fascinating to see "A" students put their names on papers that they would never dream of submitting for individual assignments. The most common explanation for those occurrences is that the "A" students do their portions to their standards, and then they sit back and assume that the rest of the team will do their part.

I envision that the previous sentence will lead some readers to say that such results are not a big deal—*I'm the professor; I should grade according to performance. If students submit poor work, they should receive their low grade and sleep in the bed that they made*. I agree, but there is also no

JECTS

By Jason Fertig

such thing as a perfect assignment. There are other issues in play.

Poor Peer Evaluation

If one student takes charge of a team project, that student will inevitably contribute more to the project than other students. In turn, professors navigate those waters by building in a peer evaluation system to align the final grade with student effort. However, such pedagogy is flawed on many levels.

First, these evaluations, while intended to guard against free riding, typically become a license for individuals to do their part and then sit back and penalize poor performing team members instead of properly managing the project. This turns the whole idea of "team project" into no more than a façade because students are graded individually. While covering oneself is a valuable lesson to learn, it moves further and further away from teaching the course material at hand.

Furthermore, by basing a portion of a course grade on peer evaluations, this grade may now reflect individual traits instead of behaviors. Ideally, course grades should reflect a student's learning and application of class content.

This assessing of traits in evaluations is similar to the effect of an overreliance on class participation as a portion of a course grade. Any educator who wants an active classroom despises when students sit on their hands. However, forcing class participation through grading results in rewarding extroverts—unless the educator is fully prepared to moderate a class discussion by calling on everyone to prevent a few students from dominating the discussion. Such moderation is possible, but trying to get everyone to talk creates an unnatural flow to a classroom discussion that inhibits the ability to go deeper into the subject.

Inaccurate Grading

Team projects also result in grade inflation for weaker students. (I am not just accusing; I have been guilty of this, too.) While many students submit team projects below their individual standards, the collaboration rarely results in F-level work. It takes a real effort to fail a team project because one member usually does not let that happen. Because these projects often pass, they do more to bolster the grades of weaker students than help the stronger students. I have witnessed Fs become Ds and Ds become Cs because of team project performance. Thus, I regrettably pass weaker students onto other professors solely because someone else's work helped them get through my class.

When I raise the grade inflation issue with others, they tell me that I should weight the project low enough that it cannot cause such a grade enhancement. But in doing that, the lower weighting invites poor performance, and students devote their energy to other assessments that matter more towards their course average. (I call this the insanity of weighting something 10 percent.)

Making a Change

I never claim to be the best teacher in the world, but my students always appreciate that I try to assess them fairly. With that in mind, I have decided that managing team projects effectively was more trouble that it was worth; the projects did more to damage learning than to aid it. I know when to cut my losses, so last semester I decided to drop team assignments in favor of traditional essay exams and individual papers, and the early results on student papers and evaluations suggest that I was a better educator for it.

At this point, I've probably lost those educators for whom research is the top priority. In the current climate of higher education, especially in tier-1 research institutions, the notion that a professor will shun research to take a day or two to do nothing but grade papers is career suicide, regardless of the quality of the research or the teaching ability of the individual.

But for professors who care about teaching, I urge them to reconsider the effectiveness of their team projects. Are they used for efficiency? Are students really learning? Is it time to move the cheese? If so, know that a shift towards more individual assignments does not have to result in an unmanageable grading load. There are ways to reduce the grading load such as carefully determining the ideal amount of papers per student (two good assignments with feedback beats four with minimal comments) or staggering assignment due dates so the weekly stack is manageable. I have also successfully implemented a policy, controversial among my peers, that gives requirements for "D" through "A" grades and lets students choose the grade they want to achieve. This pedagogy allows me to spend more time grading work from motivated students while ensuring that those who earn a "C" do enough work to be able to handle successive courses.

I'm not interested in abolishing all team projects, only the ineffective ones. In the end, if a professor feels that he has a project that is effective in achieving set outcomes, great. However, experience suggests that there is no "I" in team, but there should be plenty of "I" in the classroom. ∎

Jason Fertig is an assistant professor of management at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, Indiana. This article was originally posted by the National Association of Scholars at www.nas.org.

News from Washington, D.C.
Reports from AAE's Office in the Nation's Capital

U.S. Supreme Court Rules in Favor of Tax Credits

The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled that ordinary taxpayers cannot challenge government programs that use tax breaks to direct money to religious activities and schools, providing a huge victory for school choice advocates nationwide. The high court ruled 5-4 in favor of an Arizona scholarship program that has mainly benefited religious schools in offering a dollar-for-dollar reduction in the income tax bill of those who participate in the program.

For more than 13 years, Arizona has allowed residents to send up to $500 to a tuition scholarship organization that they would have otherwise paid the state in taxes on their incomes. The state has passed up nearly $350 million in income tax payments over the course of the scholarship program.

Because the program operates as a tax credit and not direct funding, "contributions result from the decisions of private taxpayers regarding their own funds," Justice Kennedy said in his majority opinion.

The Supreme Court's ruling sets a legal precedent that allows private citizens to contribute to a private, religious, and/or educational cause, empowering taxpayers to spend their money as they see fit.

House Discusses Flexibility

In April, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce held the first in a series of hearings to examine specific education reform proposals. The hearing, entitled "Education Reforms: Promoting Innovation and Flexibility," brought school superintendents and administrators to Washington, D.C. to discuss solutions needed to fix the problems in the nation's education system.

In his opening remarks, Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) noted the federal bureaucracy and its prescriptive mandates often weigh down the nation's schools and make it more difficult for reformers to make meaningful progress.

Citing the challenges presented by current federal law, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Janet Barresi said, "On the one hand, the U.S. Department of Education has issued guidelines that on the surface seem to offer states more flexibility to meet local needs. But there seems to be a disconnect between good intentions at the top level and what actually occurs in practice."

During the debate, many questions were asked about creating more flexibility within the system. Mr. Yohance C. Maqubela, chief operating officer of a public charter school in the District of Columbia, noted the unique opportunities improved flexibility affords charter schools. "Through the flexibility provided in charter school legislation, we have been able to create a truly unique educational model for our student population that takes into account and addresses the specific circumstances that have shaped their lives, without compromising our commitment to the highest levels of academic excellence."

Federal Budget Agreement

Education advocates are already bracing for the impact the newly approved federal budget will have on education spending. Over $1 billion was cut from the U.S. Department of Education's total budget.

Among the cutbacks were decreases in funding to the Educational Technology State Grants program, which provides formula grants to states to purchase technology as well as Teach for America, the National Writing Project, and the Reading is Fundamental program.

Some education programs, including Title I grants to school districts and special education grants to states, will stay at approximately prebudget funding levels. The maximum Pell Grant award, for example, will stay at $5,550.

There is also new funding for certain programs, with approximately $700 million allotted for a new round of Race to the Top grants, $150 million for another round of Investing in Innovation (i3) grants, and a $20 million increase for the Promise Neighborhoods program.

Duncan on State Reforms

Last month Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stopped by a town-hall meeting hosted by Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels and commented on the need for meaningful reforms across the country. Secretary Duncan indicated that "with a quarter of our students dropping out of high school, with less than half earning any kind of college degree, and with America slipping further behind other countries, we cannot stand still any longer," in regards to education reform.

Secretary Duncan congratulated the governor on his leadership and his tenacity to pursue broad reforms but indicated that his support ends when it comes to collective bargaining privileges.

"Where I part ways with you is over two issues: vouchers and limiting collective bargaining rights. Our position on both issues has been clear and should not come as a surprise to anyone," Duncan stressed.

Traveling to Illinois, Secretary Duncan again expressed support for reforms in the state, "Illinois has steadily and effectively built consensus for real and meaningful change among all of the key stakeholders, and set a national example of constructive collaboration for other states to follow."

Both states are currently in the midst of passing legislation that enacts significant education reforms and limits union power.

Secretary Duncan's comments have been widely discussed as both an endorsement of the education reform legislation in these states and a way to appease some of the Obama administration's biggest contributors—the teachers unions.

A Helpful Math Program

By Ronnie Flowers, Northwest Arkansas Coordinator for Arkansas State Teachers Association

I have heard so many elementary teachers say "I am an 'elementart' teacher because I hate math and don't see the point in knowing all the math I had to learn." This is a shame. I thought it was interesting that Massachussets is the only state that has mandated a rigorous grade-level math test for elementary teachers to become certified. There is a program called Math-U-See that was created by a high school algebra teacher and covers material from kindergarten through Algebra 2. It is effective in teaching math to students and to "elementart" teachers. I think it would be great if all elementary teachers could go through Math-U-See's videos for kindergarten through pre-algebra. I watched the videos for kindergarten through second grade and the algebra video, and I learned better ways of teaching math. I also learned some things about math that I never knew, and they helped me understand the concepts better and enjoy math more. Visit www.mathusee.com.

Loads of Free Online Resources

According to a recent survey by PBS, teacher reliance on technology and media to teach is increasing--rapidly. The increase is for good reasons: (1) there is quality content on the internet, (2) our students' attention spans silently demand it, (3) it helps teachers differentiate instruction, and (4) with school budgets shrinking, much of the online educational content is free.

A list of ten quality online resources for teachers was recently compiled by eSchoolNews.com:

- Academic Earth
- Nasa for Educators
- PBS Teachers
- Curriki
- Library of Congress
- Thinkfinity
- Teachers Domain
- National Science Digital Library
- teAchnology
- Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE)

See more great online resources on AAE's Professional Resources & Links Directory at www.aaeteachers.org.

World Travel for Teachers This Summer - June 1

Global Exploration for Educators Organization (GEEO) is a nonprofit organization that runs summer professional development travel programs designed for teachers.

GEEO is offering thirteen different travel programs for the summer of 2011:

- China • Vietnam • Egypt • Morocco • India/Nepal
- Ethiopia • Bolivia • Peru • Costa Rica
- Argentina/Uruguay/Brazil • Guatemala/Belize/Mexico
- Turkey/Syria/Jordan/Egypt
- South Africa/Mozambique/Zimbabwe/Botswana

Registration deadline is June 1, 2011!

Educators have the option to earn graduate school credit (three credits through Indiana University) and professional development credit while seeing the world. The trips are 8 to 23 days, and are designed and discounted to be interesting and affordable for teachers. GEEO also advises teachers on how to find funding to subsidize the cost of the trips. GEEO provides teachers with educational materials and the structure to help them bring their experiences into the classroom. The trips are open to all nationalities of K-12 and university educators and administrators, as well as retired educators. Educators are also permitted to bring along a noneducator guest.
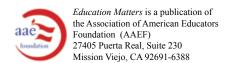
Detailed information about each trip, including itineraries, costs, and travel dates can be found at www.geeo.org. GEEO

can also be reached seven days a week, toll free at (877) 600-0105 between 9AM-9PM (EST).

To sign up for GEEO's listserv, please send an email to listserv@geeo.org with the subject line "subscribe." You can also find them on Facebook by searching for "GEEO."

If you're looking for something different in professional development—something that will improve you in and out of the classroom—something that will prove to be an unforgettable summer experience—look to GEEO's travel programs. ■

Performance Pay

An idea whose time has come?

By Alix Schroek

Performance pay continues to be one of the most hot-button education reform policies being proposed by reformers and lawmakers across the country. In March, Senate Bill 736 passed in Florida and was signed into law by Governor Scott. Among other broad reforms, the Florida bill is one of the most progressive in performance pay, also known as merit pay. It requires 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation to be based on state standardized tests or other national, local, or industry measures for those subjects not gauged at the state level, and evaluations are based on four distinct levels of teacher performance.

With performance pay legislation moving full steam ahead in states such as Florida and Idaho, teachers and legislators are struggling to come to terms with this revolutionary policy, raising many questions about the depth of the research and whether tying teacher pay to performance will really help student outcomes.

Arkansas Study

A performance pay study conducted by the University of Arkansas in 2008 examined the Achievement Challenge Pilot Project (ACPP). It was implemented in five schools in Little Rock. Under the ACPP, teachers could earn as much as an $11,000 bonus based on how much their students' test scores improved.

According to the study, after adjusting for prior achievement, socioeconomic status, race, and gender, students in the ACPP schools outperformed their peers in nonparticipating schools by 3.52 normal curve equivalent (NCE) points in math, meaning nearly seven percentile points.

In language arts, the students in ACPP schools outperformed their peers by 4.56 NCE points, or nearly nine percentile points. In reading, the ACPP students outperformed their peers by 3.29 NCE points, or six percentile points.

New York Study

According to another cutting-edge study released in March by the New York City Department of Education, in schools with fewer teachers, schoolwide performance pay led to improved student achievement. The authors estimate that the New York City-based program had a positive effect on student math achievement in these schools in both program years, although the estimated effect in the second year was not as high.

Conversely, this analysis also indicates that the program may have slightly lowered student achievement in schools with larger teaching staffs.

Supporters of performance pay argue that it encourages teachers to work harder, be more creative with their teaching, and, as a result, be more satisfied in their careers. Proponents cite reduced student outcomes despite record per-pupil spending as a catalyst to move toward a performance pay system. Could tying teacher pay to student performance be the key to giving teachers the push they need?

Florida Governor Scott likens the policy to testing students for competency in school. "All of us know that measurement works. We measure students. We know that works."

Opponents of the policy argue performance pay causes toxic competitive atmospheres among colleagues and encourages teachers to neglect low-performing students. The nuances of the policy are also up for debate, including the percentage of pay tied to performance and a complete opt-in or opt-out.

While the studies about performance pay are few and show mixed results, the data hasn't stopped many legislatures around the country from considering elements of performance pay. Faced with grim news of our place among international education rankings, many education experts advocate for performance pay as a way to close gaps.

While AAE members oppose evaluation based solely on student test scores, the perception that educators do not want to be evaluated by test scores is a sweeping generalization that leaves many caveats unaddressed. Eighty percent of teachers surveyed support a value-added assessment when student test scores are used as part of teacher evaluation. Student test scores ranked higher in evaluating teacher effectiveness, second only to administrative/faculty review. Notably, years in the system ranked last among quantifiers of evaluation. ■

Alix Schroeck is AAE's Manager of Communications and Legislative Affairs. You can read her daily blog at www.aaeteachers.org.