

# Work-life balance

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Executive Search

**How much time should we spend at the office so that we work efficiently and not burn out? How much time off is the right amount to recharge your batteries and be fresh and ready for new work challenges? Read on to find more clues in the quest for the magic balance.**

A friend's decision inspired me to write this article. She left her prestigious, well-paid managerial position at a bank for a lower-ranking position in the same bank. She gladly accepted a lower salary in exchange for an option to work part-time. She explained to me that, quite frankly, her work/life balance had recently been, well, rather unbalanced. She explained that she had felt under constant stress to the point where serious health problems appeared. Then she said to herself: 'I simply cannot go on like this'. Being in her late 30s, she naturally knew that her professional career shouldn't end soon and that she needed to preserve her resources for further life/work challenges.

I have to admit I haven't seen this happen very often and, therefore, I think it is worth exploring it a bit further. Some people may say these types of rather drastic changes are not advisable in today's world and that one should focus on unemployment and related issues. I fully support the idea, especially knowing the current high unemployment rate in Slovakia (15% at end of August). However, as an executive search company, we work mainly with people in managerial positions and I dare say that the beginning of this article is more applicable to this group and describes more accurately their situation.

According to Wikipedia, the expression 'work-life balance'

was first used in the late 1970s to describe the balance between an individual's work and personal life. Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a substantial increase in work which is felt to be due, in part, to information technology and to an intense, competitive work environment. Long-term loyalty and a 'sense of corporate community' have been eroded by a performance culture that expects more and more from their employees yet offers little security in return.

## Do you secretly envy your colleagues who dare to leave work at 5pm and go to enjoy their hobbies or families?

What can be said about our Slovak society regarding this phenomenon? My experience is that prevalingly young employees, who were the preferred hires of foreign employers in the late 90s and were promoted in the following years, weren't bothered by this at all. People were happy to stay at work long hours and to go to pubs afterwards. At any rate, their work life and private life was very often one, no distinction there. There were no kids to worry about, no grass in front of the house to cut...

This situation has changed dramatically, however. Young experts became middle/top managers; they have kids; the kids go to school and have after school activities. Since the late 90s, top expat managers are either in Asia or Kazakhstan. Here, however, local management took over and now expectations from HQs are enormous. Globalization is visible in each part of daily business; the recent finance crisis resulted in headcount and budget cuts. We know that work-life balance is needed; however, it isn't easy to leave work early when colleagues are still there and there is always something more to finish to please superiors or to get ahead of the others. Or are you the boss? Do you secretly envy your colleagues who dare to leave work at 5pm and go to enjoy their hobbies or families? One can identify a number of scenarios and name many other reasons that prevent people from valuing their lives better. Work-life balance is the magic formula.

Additional information from Wikipedia indicates that, "Many Americans are experiencing burnout from overwork and increased stress. This condition is seen in nearly all occupations from blue-collar workers to upper management. Over the past decade, a rise in workplace violence, an increase in levels of absenteeism, as well as rising workers' compensation claims, are all evidence of an unhealthy work-life balance."

What could be done to avoid this syndrome? Some Slovak managers have adopted a habit quite popular in Western Europe: taking a sabbatical -- taking some time off (six or even 12 months) to travel around the world or finish a degree or just catch up on many things in life. Recharge batteries. Find new inspiration. Another option is to find a part-time job. This last option, unfortunately, is rather rare in Slovakia. The Slovak market is extremely immature in this sense. The lack of part-time jobs is a bigger issue and applies not only to stressed-out employees but also women who long to continue in their careers, but at the same time wish to enjoy their kids.

Companies have begun to realize how important the work-life balance is to the productivity and creativity of their employees. According to a 2007 study done by the Kenexa Research Institute, "Employees who were more favourable toward their organization's efforts to support work-life balance also indicated a much lower intent to leave the organization, greater pride in their organization, a willingness to recommend it as a place to work and higher overall job satisfaction. Employers can offer a range of different programs and initiatives, such as flexible working arrangements in the form of part-time, casual and telecommuting work. More proactive employers can provide compulsory leave, strict maximum hours and foster an environment that encourages employees not to continue working after hours."



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