



Keeping the Right Balance

If your days seem to be slipping by way too quickly and you feel stressed from being pulled in several directions, it's time to take a deep breath and prioritize your time.

The subject of work-life balance seems to come up quite often as I meet with our members. Recently, it's taken the form of questions like, "John, how are you able to do everything you're doing right now? You must be worn out being Edens & Avant's operations controller and Chair of the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA®), too." Or, "Are you finding some time for yourself even with all your responsibilities as IMA Chair this year?"

Although I understand why I'm being asked these questions, I know I'm not the only IMA member hearing them. I would venture that very few of us working in finance and accounting haven't wanted to achieve a better work-life balance, but I would also venture that most of us never come close to succeeding. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, even went so far as to say earlier this year that, "There's no such thing as work-life balance. There are work-life choices, and you make them and they have consequences." He seemed to be making

the point that you've got to choose between work and the rest of your life and that every minute away from work would be held against you when it mattered most. His assertion makes it seem as if the time we have is a zero-sum game and there's nothing we can do about it.

Time is indeed precious. We only get so much of it, and we need to be careful how we spend it. Fortunately, we work in a profession that has been relatively recession proof and remains in high demand around the world. But it's during difficult times that we should be even more focused on what's important in our lives, which means considering questions such as: Why did we become financial and accounting professionals in the first place? What's the most important thing in our lives? Are our professional lives an end in themselves or merely the means to some other end? Is how we spend our time really a zero-sum game where each incremental minute spent on one activity must detract from other options we have?

I'll let you answer most of those questions, but I *will* suggest an answer to the last one because I think it's a fallacy to believe that

there's nothing we can do with our professional and personal lives to carve out additional time to improve our work-life balance. Instead, what most of us need are ways to better manage ourselves so that we can spend more time in the areas of our lives that matter to us.

With that in mind, I'd like to make several suggestions:

1. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to plan each day and prioritize ruthlessly. Learning to prioritize means understanding what is truly important and what truly isn't. If you are treating every activity as a top priority, then you can be assured that none of your activities is a top priority. Learning to hone your sense of what matters will help you achieve much more in the time available.

2. Learn to say "no" and to set a realistic time frame for completing what you've said "yes" to. Very few people can do everything that comes their way and do it all well. Concentrating your time and energy on what matters most to you will make you more effective and efficient. So consider the activities competing for your time. Are you giving your best to each of them? If not, consider narrowing what you're doing.

continued on page 63

3. Evaluate how you spend your time by keeping a detailed record for a few days. When you see where your time *really* goes vs. where you *think* it's going, you'll be amazed at what you'll learn and what you can cut or change to give yourself more time. Your goal, remember, is to change your activities, not alter time.

4. Use technology wisely. Many of us are slaves to technology, but technology by itself doesn't help us manage time more effectively. In fact, rather than helping us become more efficient, technology can quickly become a distraction that reduces our focus on what's important. Use the tools that technology gives us to become more efficient, but also learn to master technology, not be mastered by it.

Looking at the ways that I spend my time, I consider myself fortunate: I get to spend this year working with two organizations to which I am deeply committed. At both IMA and Edens & Avant, I work with people I enjoy and in roles that I love. I plan to accomplish much at both organizations, but neither role defines me. For me, it's what I do outside these professional roles as both a father and husband that define my essence as a person. To paraphrase Jack Welch, although I'm very, very busy, I've made work-life choices, and I trust that the consequences will be profitable to me and to the organizations I serve.

As always, I welcome your comments at jbrausch@imanet.org. **SF**