

Message from the Chair
By John C. Macaulay, CMA



What Are Your Priorities?

Many accountants are finding it incredibly difficult to establish a work/life balance these days, particularly as technology makes it seem as though we should be available 24/7 for anyone who wants to contact us.

Where should I look for my first job? What besides a career do I want out of life? Should I take that out-of-state transfer? Should I accept that job offer with another company? Am I working too many hours or too few? When should I retire? These and other questions seem to confront us throughout our professional lives.

This topic usually is referred to as “work/life balance,” but I prefer the more accurate “setting work/life priorities.” I recently started thinking about this again after hearing a talk by a young woman who graduated from college last May. She had just begun her career at a public accounting firm, and her discussion (during an accounting academic honor society meeting) was about the rigorous demands being placed on her time. She was working 60 to 80 hours a week, with little time left over to connect with family and friends, maintain an exercise regimen, or even run errands. Finding the appropriate balance was proving a tough challenge, and she wanted

accounting majors to know that they would likely face a similar struggle and how to address it.

One reason why this woman’s story was poignant was because I knew it so well. Many times in my career I’ve had to negotiate the demands of a high-profile, responsible job with the other things that are important in life. For me, some of those “other things” are family, my spiritual life, exercise, and volunteer activities like IMA®. For other folks, these priorities may include friends, an avocation, or a hobby.

I wish I could offer a reassuring formula for deciding how to manage these various priorities. It would be easy to prescribe, say, spending 70% of your time on work, 20% on family and friends, and 10% on everything else—your hobbies, errands, or your spiritual life (which usually affects all the rest). Unfortunately, life doesn’t work that way. It’s particularly difficult now that technology creates 24/7 work “opportunities” and that so many people feel they have to respond immediately to any message.

The trick, I’ve found, is to remain flexible and know what’s most important to you so you can determine what needs to be done at the time and make the necessary

adjustments. There will be times in our professional careers as accountants when our jobs must become the overwhelming priority to the exclusion, for however long it may be, of most other things.

Often I was required to make that tough choice. One example is the many international trips that I needed to take in my job, which left my wife with two very active young boys. Though she made the real sacrifice, it was difficult emotionally for me. When I served as controller of a company that was making an acquisition is another example. I recall that I worked for 40 long, consecutive days in the office, and it was no surprise that everything else in my life suffered.

I was fortunate that these periods lasted only a short duration; sometimes they can take years. Part of making this decision requires knowing what you are—or are not—willing to compromise on, and often that requires courage. I’m reminded of the inspiring example of Scottish athlete and missionary Eric Liddell, whose story is portrayed in *Chariots of Fire*, which won the 1981 Academy Award for best picture. In the film, Liddell, who has trained to compete in the 100 meters during the

continued on page 12

Perspectives

continued from page 6

1924 Olympics, learns that he must run the qualifying heat on a Sunday. Because of his religious convictions, Liddell refuses to compete, to the chagrin of political and athletic authorities, but for which he earns the eventual support and admiration of many. In a remarkable act of generosity, a teammate gives Liddell his slot in the 400-meter race (not run on a Sunday), for which Liddell goes on to win the gold medal.

It's a remarkable story of remaining true to your priorities in the face of external pressure and the need to please. Knowing what we are willing or not willing to do is a life lesson for us all.

I invite you to share your thoughts with me on this or any other subject at jmacaulay@imanet.org. **SF**