How Work-Life Integration Breaks the Mold

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It could have been an awkward moment — my preschool-aged son jumping on my lap during a Zoom meeting with my CEO. Leave it to children to reveal the flimsy barriers we erect between life and work. In the traditional model of work-life balance, our two worlds are supposed to be kept separate.

Remote work has taken us into the future, but I wonder if it also brings us back to the past. Work-life integration is not really a new concept when you think about it. When I read *Little House on the Prairie* with my son, we see life and work overlap in homesteading. Work and parenting are almost indistinguishable. Should these same principles apply in the digital world? How *can* these same principles apply in the digital world?

In the old normal, my son climbing into the Zoom call might have been seen as a violation of the sanctity of a work meeting. Instead, my CEO put on the rabbit-ears filter to make himself a welcoming, non-threatening figure.

The upshot is that my colleagues are no longer strange or strangers to my son. He feels connected to me even when I'm working and sees what work really is — it helps him to visualize a future for himself beyond a once-a-year "take your child to work" day. My job has become real in his mind, instead of something that takes mom away for eight hours a day and deposits her in some mysterious vacuum.

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Tearing down the veil

Work-life balance has had a long and distinguished career. As hippies evolved into boomers, the need to reduce stress from overwork on both fronts created the idea of keeping the two domains utterly separate, one impenetrable to the other – at least in theory.

Zoom meetings during the pandemic gave us an early glimpse of the dynamics of integration. The staid ambience of the office gave way to a behind-the-scenes look at our colleagues' lives, and sometimes it could feel unexpectedly intimate. The effect was humanizing.

Professional personas gave way to a more nuanced appreciation for who we all are as people (some of us with families and many of us, as life continues its habit of spilling into work, with messy circumstances). Suddenly, the boundaries between work and life were not so rigid, and the almost moral obligation to enforce them started to collapse.

As this idea of integration begins to gain traction, the differences between the two models are obvious: one is dualistic, the other holistic; one is rigid, the other fluid. This rigidity serves some, but holds back others.

The obligation trap

The mythic ideal of sustaining a work-life balance was meant to be freeing. It was meant to alleviate the guilt of spending time away from young families, yet for many people with children or big family responsibilities, it hangs over our heads as yet another obligation to fulfill.

When the fear of failing at a balance creates stress – creates imbalance – something is obviously wrong with the model. But

what if managing balance could be less about when you can squeeze in some PTO days to “unplug” and more about when you can squeeze in a nap? You’re managing your health and your energy on a micro-level rather than a monthly level.

For managers who fear giving employees an inch in case they run a mile, allow me to be Exhibit A on greater fluidity in working hours. When I recently took three days of PTO out of state with my family, I chose judicious moments to check Slack. Colleagues were concerned: “Why are you talking to us on PTO? You should be focusing on your family.”

I agreed. Absolutely. But as I told them, I much preferred to take 10 minutes to respond to them while on PTO, rather than having them wait three days for an answer on something I could help them with immediately. Not to mention one less item on my to-do list when I return. Flexibility cuts both ways.

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Switching gears is the new multi-tasking

As a first step towards integration, take an inventory of your ability to pivot – having the ability to self-govern and the sensitivity to prioritize the most crucial needs in work or life.

Think of it as moving parts up and down a priority grid. I am on Slack with my team all day, but I also work at home with my small children and gracious homemaking husband. There comes a time (an unexpected time, usually), when “we need Mom.” Ten minutes from laptop to phone gives me space to comfort a skinned knee or receive a handmade picture. But that doesn’t mean every one of my children’s perceived needs has to be a priority – I also know how to say “no.” My coworkers and our

collective teamwork is extremely important to me. They are human beings, and there is a time for them to take priority as well. Work and motherhood can blend.

Trust and accountability

None of this works if you are not meeting deadlines or deliverables. It's the "how" that matters. Maintaining transparency with your manager about your hours, availability and commitments is crucial to making integration work.

Transparency cultivates trust. If you would like to block off your calendar to work without being online, canvass the idea with your team. It is less about seeking permission from your manager and more about exploring potential benefits for everyone.

You then have to demonstrate that putting yourself in the WiFi-free zone produces your best work. Accountability is not negotiable – you do receive a paycheck, after all. In many senses, this is an even weightier burden of proof than warming a chair for eight hours a day.

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Integration: Putting it all together

Life and work is not a zero-sum game anymore. This paradigm swing changes the relationship between employer and employee to one explicitly based on mutual trust and respect. In this new partnership, your passion for your job is matched by the responsibility the company has back to you. Integration means everyone wins.

Work-life integration is not for everybody. It's not the right model for all jobs or all personalities. But if you feel

enriched by your work, and it offers great value to your life, there is less need to contrive boundaries for the sake of an ideal.

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