

Struggling with work-life balance? Ask what you are working for

Many Singaporeans are feeling overwhelmed by their workloads. The key to preventing this is to find meaning in what you do in life and in your job.

Paul Lim

The state of work-life balance among Singaporeans seems dismal. Seven out of 10 said they had poor work-life balance due to an overwhelming workload, according to a 2022 study by recruitment agency Randstad. And 41 per cent of employees indicated they intended to leave their jobs for better work-life balance, reported a 2023 study by the same organisation.

Along with anecdotal evidence overheard at hawker centres from people about how stressed and overworked they are, these studies suggest that work-life balance seems to be an elusive dream for most Singaporeans.

The term work-life balance refers to the idea of how work and life can flourish separately. To do this, discipline and strong boundaries determine where personal life begins, and work ends.

Yet, it seems that this has not been achieved. A 2022 study by

NTUC's U Women and Family unit found 78 per cent of respondents felt burnt out at work. One of the conclusions was that normalising hybrid work and remote teams amid the pandemic contributed to the high burnout rate.

An alternative view suggests that work and life flow through one another, erasing their own unique set of boundaries, meshing them into one entity rather than compartmentalising them into two entities. This can also be described as work-life integration, where you are free to plan your time for personal space and work responsibilities at your own pace. Philosophically, the idea is that work and life can co-exist. Rather than having hard walls dividing them, we should embrace them as one.

This echoes comments in a July CNA interview by DBS CEO Piyush Gupta when he said: "I am a big believer in the fact that work-life balance is all baloney." He clarified: "It's not because I want people to work all the time... It's just that I believe that work is a part of life."

THE GENERATIONS

Baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1964) and Gen Xers (between 1965 and 1980) might balk at such a concept. Some of us who worked in administrative jobs might remember that a work week meant Monday to Saturday lunch time. Personal time was mostly Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

Enter the millennials (between 1981 and 2000) and Gen Zs (post 2001), who are adept at multi-tasking on their digital devices and running side businesses in addition to working their full-time jobs. To these cohorts, the work-life integration idea makes sense as they feel empowered by technology to deliver the work at their own pace – as long as they get it done.

Additionally, they may not be assigned a physical desk (instead, they hot-desk), have free or subsidised food on the work premises which encourages proximity to the workplace and colleagues, and are given basketball hoops, foosball tables

and massage chairs for relaxation. All this enables them to take short breaks in between work. The whole idea of such arrangements is to seek to integrate life and work as one.

One of my former students bought into this idea and got a residential unit in the Central Business District. The promise from the property developers was that one could use it to work, live and play. She would conduct physical business meetings on the ground floor and sleep on the mezzanine level.

But work, life and play meshed into one. It was confusing for her.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE

I asked various people what work-life balance meant to them.

Among the Gen X and older cohorts, many replied that it meant quality time with family and doing the things they valued.

For the younger millennial and Gen Z cohorts, their response was being able to do the things they wanted to do. That would include

travelling overseas and spending time with friends and partners.

Then I spoke with those who are caregivers of young children and aged parents. To them, work-life balance is simple – they just want a break from the daily grind of being responsible for the people they are caring for.

One common response across all generational cohorts was: "Please do not contact me after working hours!"

True, employees who feel respected go the extra mile for their employers. However, the reality is that many respondents did not know how to push back against their supervisor's insistence on taking work calls after working hours. The act of rejecting one's supervisor might suggest they are not team players and might be sidelined or asked to leave.

In a conversation with an early Gen Xer who previously worked in the demanding area of hospitality and now works part-time in market research, she told me without hesitation what work-life balance is to her:



When workers find meaning in the things they do, they attain a certain level of peace and often become motivated to do the work, says the writer. This translates into positive impact for their employers, family and themselves. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

"Family is life. Without family, what is the use of all the money in the world if you are not able to share it with them?"

I asked her what advice she would give to those struggling with work-life balance.

"Ask yourself – what are you working for?"

I guess what she meant was whether we have discovered the meaning behind our work.

Such thinking might seem like a luxury for many, as feelings of financial insecurity can be very real. However, this can lead to an obsession with earning the most money in the shortest time, and it almost always comes at a cost.

Burning out leads to physical and mental health problems. We take stress from the workplace into our homes. Our families bear the brunt of it and, unintentionally, they get hurt.

When people find meaning in the things they do, they attain a certain level of peace and often become motivated to do the work. This translates into positive impact for their employers, family and themselves.

What does "finding meaning" look like? It could be an employee facing a difficult boss or customers and deciding that they would take this unpleasantness as challenges to overcome, rather than a threat to avoid.

It could also be that you are doing mundane and meaningless tasks, but you see it as an opportunity to learn the simple processes that will in time prepare you for greater things.

A NOTE TO EMPLOYERS

Employers have a right to earn maximum profits with the limited resources they possess. However, if some employers insist on using their employees transactionally, holding back their salaries and forcing them to work overtime with little concern for their personal lives, word gets around and it is no wonder some of these companies find it hard to attract the best talent.

Perhaps, it is time for all of us to reflect on why we are doing the things that we do.

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