

A Balancing Act: Balancing Work and Family in a 24/7 World

By Jana Long, Ph.D.

Since women joined the work force, society has been contemplating how women can and should balance work and family. We've talked about how women's labor force participation might affect their children, how women can better plan for multiple roles, how their multiple roles conflict, and how the stress resulting from this conflict affects women's health. We have even talked about how women tend to plan for more hours in the day than they actually have. We've moved from expecting women to remain in the home, to expecting that they can have it all, to now recognizing a balancing act requires compromises and sacrifices. However, little has been said about how men balance work and family. It is as if we just assumed that men wouldn't have conflict between their many roles in the home, community, and work. Yet, increasingly women have entered the labor force, and men have become involved in dual-earner or dual-career couples. A recent study by the [Families and Work Institute](#) revealed that men have become more involved in household and childcare duties and are reporting work-life conflict in greater degrees than they have in years past.

It seems that we are now in an era where men and women are both juggling their many roles to succeed at work and at home. But, I wondered why men were just now reporting more work-life conflict and not in years past. It could be due to men increasing their household and childcare duties, but it also may be due to the 24/7 world that we live in. As I was reading Friedman's "The World Is Flat" and enjoying his perspectives on globalization, I was also struck by what globalization and the resulting 24/7 work days mean for men and women who are trying to work and raise families, or at least have a personal life of their own. Friedman writes, "I call it 'the Age of Interruption,' because it really is an age of constant interruptions—unless you totally unplug. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption." (p. 518, 2005)

In this age of Blackberries, multinational enterprises, and globalization one is always *on*, dealing with work issues at work, at home, at the gym, and the soccer fields. While the benefits of a Blackberry, 24/7 world may have given men an opportunity to spend more time with their children and at home, it also may have created significant pressure for men and women as well. How do you turn off the flow of information, one's connection to the world or at least one's office to actually enjoy a personal life?

I can't begin to count all the times I have been at dinner with my husband when I catch him checking his iPhone to grab his e-mail, respond to a text message, or check to see what calls he has missed; or how many times he has pulled all-nighters due to conference calls with companies around the world. I began to feel like the interruption in his world.

Yet, the same technology that interrupts our personal lives is the technology that allows him to work from home so that he can be the chauffeur and entertainer to our children when I have work duties.

The technology that allows us instant connection to the world also gives us constant interruption in our personal lives. So, how can we balance our work and personal lives, using technology to its fullest potential without letting it interrupt our personal relationships and lives?

Tune out so you can tune in

There are significant moments in our lives when it is important to focus on the person sitting across the table from you, rather than your Blackberry or iPhone. Look for those rare moments of personal connection, and leave your mobile device at home (or at least in the car). While driving, set aside the time you're together with friends and family to discuss what you've been reading or thinking about, for example. Don't take your personal electronics to the gym, yoga session, or workout room with you. You really can catch up later. Someone once told me, "A crisis, it's too late to get there; an emergency, it's probably over before the news gets to you; everything else can wait."

Act, don't just react

Just because you received a message doesn't mean you have to respond to it immediately. Schedule time to reply to e-mails and voice messages so that your day at the office and your evenings at home aren't constantly interrupted, and your actions aren't just a series of reactions to others' messages to you. Instead of replying immediately, make a list of emails you get and ideas for replies, and then do them all at once.

Unplug

When one is connected to the world at all times, it becomes difficult to find time to focus on just being, relaxing, exercising, gardening, or whatever fulfills a person. Waiting for the world (or at least your office) to turn off before engaging in your favorite activity will result in very few moments of personal time. A better strategy involves scheduling that time and prioritizing it so conference calls and text messages don't interfere. In other words, schedule time to unplug. A friend of mine unplugs every day at 6pm. She and her husband silence their telephones so they won't be interrupted. While it took awhile for friends and colleagues to realize that telephone calls and emails after 6pm would have to wait until the next day, eventually everyone took it in stride, and my friends have quality, uninterrupted time together.

Be a model

In this 24/7 world with job instability, employees often feel like they can't turn off; they have to stay tuned in to work. As a manager or leader in your company, you can model good work-life balance. As you demonstrate how to use technology to its fullest potential without allowing it to constantly interrupt your life, your employees will do the same, leading to more productive, satisfied, and loyal employees. For instance, don't let technological communications interrupt your meetings with employees, and don't allow people to look at their PDAs in meetings. Pay attention to what people say and take notes with paper and pen when you want to remember it.

In our world of nonstop information flow, we have a fantastic opportunity to use the technology to increase our flexibility and mobility, so that we can balance work and personal life the best way possible. However, we are also at risk for experiencing even greater work-life conflict due to the constant intrusions that come along with it. In the end, it all depends on how we use the technology in our lives.

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Before going on assignment with her husband and family to Mexico City, Dr. Jana Reddin Long provided counseling services to individuals and groups. Her work includes leading multidisciplinary teams, mediating high conflict situations. She gained teaching experience at Austin College where she developed and taught psychology courses on personality, health psychology, qualitative research methods, vocational psychology, gender, and counseling theories. Jana has just relocated back to the Dallas area where she intends to leverage her expatriate experience by collaborating in the corporate arena. Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC is privileged to be able to count on her expertise.