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E-TOOLS

Good Work/Life Balance Comes From Good Workflow

From Our Work/Life Balance Series

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Back in the mid-1990s, early in my public accounting career, my bosses thought it would be a good idea for the young staff to take a time management course. We all kind of rolled our eyes at the idea, but I thought it couldn't hurt. We sat through the two-day course and listened to the instructor pontificate about the methodologies of effective time management. At lunch of day one, we all wondered if the instructor was from Mars, because we were not buying what she was selling. If she wasn't from Mars, she definitely was not in public accounting — a place where chargeable hours were king and working on Saturdays was a badge of honor.

Why in the world would we want to complete our tasks faster and then have to explain why we missed our charge hour goal for the month? A young staff that answers that question with, "I guess I am more efficient with my time than my colleagues," does not find much traction in the world of a tax and accounting firm.

Fast forward to 2009, where firms are starting to understand the value of not billing by the hour and judging the effectiveness of their staff in ways other than chargeable hours. Time is still money, but now employees in firms are being rewarded for being more efficient. In my opinion, this is the single most significant element towards having a work/life balance in the public accounting world. It is time to charge by the service, not by the hour. Charging by the service requires firms and firm employees to

spend more time scoping the project or service before being engaged. It allows firms to reap the rewards for being efficient. Clients will no longer call asking why your billing rates are too high. You agree on the price up front and then send a bill.

Okay... I'll get off my soapbox and get back to work/life balance again. If we change the revenue model to project/service based from billable hours, then practitioners will have an incentive to get out of the office sooner. Below are some additional steps to achieve the allusive work/life balance.

Study Your Practice

You want to become more efficient and have a more rewarding work/life balance, but where do you start? You are probably thinking I am going to tell you to go to some class or buy something. Absolutely not! You need to study your current practice. If you are an auditor, this process will be very familiar to you. Spend some time to learn why your firm operates internally the way it does. You will be surprised when you examine your practice. Processes are often initially designed to be efficient, but as employees accept new roles and responsibilities, processes are often modified to get it done and not with an eye on efficiency. A top-down or bottom-up review of your practice will reveal many areas of inefficiencies. Removing these inefficiencies might increase and improve the balance in your life.

Understand Your Current Technology

Now that you have identified all of the inefficient processes in your practice, it is time to learn about the current technologies your firm has purchased. Most of us purchase technology and start using it immediately. We don't like to sit through a training class because either we are too busy or we think that we can learn the hardware/software on our own time. We are smart tax and accounting professionals after all. We can learn anything, right?

A prime example of this is Microsoft Office. Almost everyone has it, but how many of us have taken the time to learn more about the individual products? I'm just as guilty as most. I took a word processing class in the 1990s, and since then everything that I have learned about MS Office has been out of necessity. As I am typing this article, there are hundreds of functions in Word 2007 that I have never accessed much less understand what the functions actually do. I have spent quite a bit of time learning about Excel 2007, and every time I go to a class I learn about a very valuable tool or trick that makes my day a little easier.

Most all software applications come with some sort of online learning that is included with your purchase. Take advantage of it, and learn how to leverage your

existing technology to get you home for dinner during busy season. There are also many CPE courses focused on teaching tax and accounting professionals how to better use technology.

Read About Other Professions & Industries

As an auditor, I have always had to learn the ins and outs of each industry that I have audited. During many engagements, I have seen how my clients have leveraged technology and been impressed at the way technology hardware and software was being utilized. I always assumed that the technologies my clients were using would be too expensive or could never work in a public accounting practice. But I have since learned how wrong I was.

If you think outside the box and do a little research, you will be surprised at how you can leverage technology from other industries. Also, focus on learning how other professional services and consulting firms are solving their problems. I know there are certain tax and accounting specific processes that are only present in public accounting, but we should always be open to leverage other proven technologies. By nature, tax and accounting professionals are conservative, and we are normally the last group to adopt new technologies.

Learn More About Technology

Spend time learning about technology solutions that are focused on the tax and accounting profession. Technology changes at breakneck speed, so solutions that were not available six months ago might be available now. Read professional publications that focus on tax and accounting technology. You will be surprised at what is out there. Also, don't neglect using Google as a tool to learn about tax and accounting solutions. There are many quality vendors out there that don't spend advertising dollars to promote their products.

Up to this point, I have not asked you to purchase one piece of equipment or hire a consultant. Some people believe that you have to have money to make money. I believe that if you want to create more time, you must invest time. There are no easy ways to achieve work/life balance, but as we have always been told, nothing worth having is ever easy to obtain. Keep working at it, and you will get there. Good luck and I hope to see you on the golf course, beach, ski resort or wherever you decide to invite me once you complete this process.

For the other articles in the Work/Life Balance Series see below:

[Saying Yes is Also Saying No](#)

How to Maintain Your Equilibrium

Whistle While You Work

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