

Diversity in Practice *shifting our thinking*

November 2008

By: Arin N. Reeves, J.D., Ph.D.

The Athens Group



BREAKING NEWS:

The search for work/life balance is over!

No, the search is not over because anyone has found the formula for balancing work and life. The search is over because evidence is mounting that there is actually no such thing as work/life balance.

The search for work/life balance began in the late 1960s when employers first encountered waves of women entering pink-collar and white-collar jobs and realized that managing this new category of employees, “working mothers,” required a radical change in traditional workplace infrastructure. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the U.S. federal government contributed to advancing work/life balance for working mothers through programs, legislation and benchmarks (i.e. the Presidential Conference on Families, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Quality of Employment Survey). In the 1990s, most workplaces had some form of work/life balance programs in place, and there was a feverish proliferation of work/life balance books, conferences, consultants, and employee assistance programs. By 2000, work/life balance had evolved to include men and individuals who weren’t parents.

If you do a Google search for “work life balance” today, the search will net you roughly six million hits. Many sites and articles explore how difficult it is to achieve this balance; others offer advice on how to better search for this elusive objective. Examples of success are rare.

If you connect the six million dots, a mosaic of generational perspectives, technological changes and quality of life expectations meld together to suggest that people are no longer trying to seek work/life balance. They see their lives holistically, and they have accepted imbalance on their journeys to integrate their work into their lives.

The paradigm of work/life balance has always been flawed with the presumption that one's work was separate from one's life instead of being a part of one's life. Work/life balance places an individual on the middle of a constantly teetering seesaw with work and life as the weighted ends that bounce up and down as they compete for the sole attention of the balancer who has to fight to remain standing in that precarious middle. Work and life as separate and competing aspects of one's waking hours not only sets up balance as an elusive and exhausting endeavor, but it also paints an inaccurate depiction of how people actually live their lives.

Each of us is given 24 hours every day to work, to play, to rest, to pursue our interests, to tend to our families, to learn, to grow and to do a myriad of other things that together comprise our individual lives. The search for work/life balance has revealed that it has never been about work vs. life. It has always been about the freedom and flexibility to live our lives in ways that make sense to us.

In order for workplaces to shift from accommodating work/life balance to providing the flexibility for people to integrate work into their lives, they need to fundamentally shift from "work is where you go" to "work is what you do."

Best Buy is one innovative example of abandoning the search for work/life balance and initiating the freedom and flexibility to integrate work into life. Best Buy's radical new approach, ROWE (Results-Only Work Environment), revises the traditional notions of office space, work days and mandatory meetings and institutes performance objectives driven by results instead of process. What you accomplish matters. How and when you accomplish it does not matter. Interestingly, when employees fit their work into their lives, they report being busier than ever, yet they are happier, more loyal to the company and more productive.

I can hear the screams of resistance from lawyers as they read this column. "But, that's now how lawyers work!" "That may work at Best Buy, but my firm doesn't run like that." "We are in a service industry. We can't decide our hours."

The *reality* is that many lawyers have already abandoned the search for work/life balance and have begun focusing on integrating work into their lives. Parents leave work to attend a soccer game or school play, return to work, then go home to spend time with their families and log back on to complete assignments. People call in to meetings while on vacation or conduct their banking online while they are at work.

The *challenge* is that our workplaces have not yet caught up with our lives. We are creating part-time policies instead of reducing the need for face time. We are discussing compensation structures for partnership alternatives instead of realigning partnership tracks to correlate with results achieved instead of hours billed. And, we are losing too many talented people that prefer a ROWE to a seesaw.

I am not suggesting that our profession is ready or able to immediately transition to a ROWE, but I do believe that we have to recalibrate our vocabularies and our expectations to our realities.

The search for work/life balance is over.

The hard work of shifting our thinking has just begun.