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Work / Life Balance - why does it matter and what should we do about it?

How many times have we said "I wish I had more time" or "I am sorry ; I do not have enough time to do this", or "There are never enough hours in the day" or "I just do not know where the time goes"?

Even more we say that we should get the balance right between 'Work' and 'Life'. We have twenty four hours per day, and somehow we try and split that between eight hours sleeping, 8 hours working and the rest relaxing.

I have never understood the reason for this. If I want to work 16 hours, sleep 4 hours and take 'leisure' for 4 hours then that's fine. Many people don't get this, and I just get the dismissive reaction "You just love your job too much" or "You're a workaholic".

In fact there are two aspects to time. There is the physical dimension as we have defined it. The 60 minutes per hour, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days per annum (3 out of 4 years!). That's a human convention - clocks run by it.

Then there is the time we spend doing things during that time. This is where we should control what we do. This is where things take more time than they should. This is where we individuals as selves and as part of our organisations should focus our time to see how we manage the balance in our lives. It is never that we do not have enough time; we all have the same amount. It is how we prioritise and balance our activities that matters.

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What is time?

I recently met up with an old friend and client Gert Veenhoven, who has been the catalyst for what I think is a simple but powerful breakthrough in my personal understanding of the meaning of work/life balance.

Gert has been doing a lot of pioneering work in the concept of time. He has written a great article 'Smarter, more fun and more valuable – by paying attention to time', which is a fantastic insight into the concept of how using the time that is available to us should be a source of personal and business value, if properly managed. We should work on making the time that we control just that – 'Smarter, more fun and more valuable', by being constantly aware of time. He contrasts that with the usual mantra that many adopt of trying to do everything 'Higher, Faster and Better', as if we can cram more minutes into the day.

My meeting with Gert led me to research an essay written by Henri Bergson in 1888 entitled 'Time and Freewill'. In that work, Bergson distinguishes between the concept of astronomical time or quantitative time and 'lived' time or qualitative time. He sets out in that article the fact that there is a construct that we have established as humans which is a measure of available time. We look at this as astronomical time which we measure via an atomic clock. This is – he says – 'objective time'. This should be contrasted with 'subjective time' which is the time we control where we do what we want, and where we live our time. It is where we can exercise our free will – in theory – to do what we want.

Apparently this idea is even supported by the Ancient Greeks who had two gods that related to time. There was Chronos who was the god that managed clock time. We recognise the word in chronology and anachronism. Then there was Kairos which is where we manage 'moments' that happen. Kairos stands for the time of the 'right' moment which we think of as 'living in the moment'. It is what we do with our time that matters.

It's where you spend your time that matters

In Gert's research he has come to divide the time we have available into three types that we must use effectively. Effectiveness is not the ratio of time spent to time available. It is making sure we control the time spend between these three:

Rationalisation - Time to think

Socialisation - Time to be with other people

Individualisation – Time to be on our own

The extent we do this is the extent to which we can 'manage our time'.

All of a sudden I had a way of understanding my own belief that the problem with work/life balance was not the balance between quantitative time, but the balance between the time I spent in qualitative time, and the extent to which I feel in control of that time.

Is it not amazing how many people measure efficiency as being the overall usage of the available time – 100% of the time, as opposed to effectiveness which is doing the right things in the time available – which does not have to be 100%.

So how can we control the balance of our time?

Many managers and people are frustrated because they operate systems and spreadsheets when they really do not know how to use them. It is legendary how much functionality exists in a product like Microsoft's Excel™ which no-one ever uses. Even more so it is true in so many commercial systems with so much inbuilt redundancy. Many of us operate systems which we do not understand. Hence improvement in our understanding of the way things work through education and training has got to help reduce the amount of time we waste in this area. But we often use the excuse of “we have not got enough time to do that” as a reason for continuing to waste our time. How many times do we avoid getting it ‘right first time’. After all it was Aristotle that said “we always have plenty of time to get things wrong; but we never have enough time to get things right first time”

To do the right thing is a constant battle. This is often because it requires us to make choices, some of which may be very difficult. Often the lesser good promises immediate pleasure and is more tempting, while the greater good is painful and requires some sort of sacrifice. For example, it may be easier and more enjoyable to spend the night watching television, but you know that you will be better off if you spend it researching for your exam. Developing a good character requires a strong effort of will to do the right thing, even in difficult situations.

If we are used to firefighting and managing with panics, it is often easier to continue to do this, as we really do not want the alternative of a sense of control in which there are fewer excuses. But if we then ‘run out of time’ we should not see that as not having enough time; it is that we did not use our time to think about how to change the way we do things. The short-term becomes the enemy of the long-term.

Most people in organisations will complain about the fact that they have too many meetings, and ‘waste time’. But so many of those people are involved in meetings where there is no meeting discipline. The wrong people turn up. The right people are at other meetings. The time spent in the meeting is not controlled effectively by having a chairman, a minute taker and a time keeper, with a clear agenda, and proper preparation before the meeting. We know that these are the right things to do, but we still do not do them. Again it is failure in spending time to rationalise the balance between social time and individual time. If we managed our social time more rationally we would have more time as individuals to think what we should do differently!

Many directors complain that they do not have enough time to think and act strategically and focus on the longer-term. But often those same managers will not allow their subordinates to take decisions which they can take, and insist on 'controlling' things by doing and checking things themselves. Delegation and empowerment could free up so much time. Trust would give us time.

Similarly so much time is spent on validating things, reconciling things, inspecting things rather than changing the processes which caused things to go wrong in the first place.

How many companies spend many hours in creating business plans once a year which are wrong the day after they are completed with a huge sigh of relief, rather than spend more time planning each month when you have more chance of getting it right? It is only because that is the way that we have always done it that matters.

If only we can focus on the improvement of the quality of our time, rather than trying to find a greater quantity of time we don't have!

It is leadership that matters

But if individuals are to work differently, then they will always struggle to take action on their own. They go with the flow. To overcome this they need leadership. That will require a focus upon creating a working environment of satisfaction, recognition, opportunity, development, leading to less stressful (not less pressure) and frustrating times.

In other words what matters is a better control of 'qualitative' time, and not just 'quantitative' work life balance. Those Greeks knew a thing or two 2,000 years ago.

It is just we have not realised it is not the amount of time we have, but it is more about what we do to control the amount of time we spend doing what we do that matters; we are much more comfortable doing things the way we have always done things, rather than changing the way we think and do what we do. It is time for a change. Kairos not Chronos.