

Myth-busting - Work-Life Balance

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The phrase work-life balance is frequently used by lifestyle gurus, weekend newspapers and advertisers. A Google search brings up nearly 20 million references in less than a quarter of a second so I suppose there might be something to it; but as a great many of those websites are seeking to sell a cure for the very thing they describe, they would seek to maintain the myth. My view is that the very phrase suggests that work and life are different and mutually exclusive which is of course plainly nonsense.

Life is everything and work is merely a part of the whole, a very important part I acknowledge, for many people the driving force of their very existence but still only one aspect. So my suggestion is that what is needed is balance in all things in one's life whether that be career, money, family & friends, health, spouse & romance, personal growth, fun & recreation or physical environment. During my coach training I was introduced to the "Wheel of Life" which comes in many forms, a simple one of which accompanies this article.

To those of my clients who are struggling to find balance in their lives (whatever that means to them) I recommend that they read M. Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Travelled* which is based on his personal life and professional experiences as a psychiatrist.

There's no need to read the whole book and, if your time is short just go to the first page and read and accept the first line - "Life is Difficult".

So why is it that so many dentists insist on making it even more so?

One of the answers is that the very nature of the job contributes hugely. Dentistry is an exacting, precise task. It is performed in an environment that is restricted, poorly

lit and technically challenging with materials that need sympathetic and correct handling. Added to that of course is that the recipients are awake and bring with them a lifetime's baggage of dental experiences. For success the surgeon must be in total control of every aspect of all procedures in which they are involved. That is how things should be; it is what I expect in a professional dealing with me.

The downside of this however is that dentists try to bring the successful disciplines of the surgery to every other aspect of their business; the result is frequently a micro-managing, all controlling individual who frequently has problems seeing the wood for the trees. In many cases they will not let anybody else have any more than notional responsibility for the management of the business, they have to have sight of and check every last procedure. Software systems that produce increasingly detailed reports give them ways to know (and therefore add to the delusion that they control) more and more about things that matter less and less.

With an in-built mantra of "fill the book, we're only successful when we're going flat out" they arrive at the end of the day, week, month or year exhausted but with all the running of the business to do. The result is an individual who spends his or her evenings and weekends "catching up". Why? Because nobody else knows how to write referral and patient letters correctly. No matter how many courses the practice manager has attended they're not permitted to make any kind of "strategic decisions" (that's a phrase they read about in Forbes magazine just after they were told that they had to be an entrepreneur these days to be successful) and it wouldn't be appropriate for them to know the details of the finances of the practice would it? Why on earth not?

Behaviour like this is fine in a start-up or a new purchase when you're living and breathing every element of the business, when you're feeling your way and building a business from the bottom up, imbuing it with your personality, your outlook and vision. However the time must come when both you and it start to grow up or else

those two enemies of the successful self-employed, burnout and frustration, will rear their ugly heads. The result is an unhappy principal, staff who just come to work because it's what they do to earn a crust and a business that will fail in one or more ways as it progresses on its downwards spiral.

Perhaps you are that principal, or an associate who is considering stepping up to the plate to become a practice owner. How do you prevent yourself being drawn down the route I have described above? Be under no illusion many dentists live, as Thoreau described, "Lives of quiet desperation" and sadly many do nothing about it until the pain of not taking action outweighs the pain of change.

Many dentists have been on the conveyor belt of GCSE, A-level, degree, VT, associateship and ownership. As they have made their way they have picked up student debt, marriage, family, professional & personal debt and other people's expectations. Then one day there's a "is that all there is?" moment"

Frequently the catalyst to change is a marital breakdown, a financial or other crisis within the business, a physical illness or any of several other symptoms, which may contribute to what the marathon runners refer to as "hitting the wall". The result is often a dramatic fall from the treadmill that is of their own design and invention, a call for help and a remodelling of their life - all of their life.

A brief way to start regaining control of your life is by becoming absolutely clear about what it is that you want from life. I will be covering this in greater detail in the next article but for now I would ask you to take some time and think about what you really want. The ideal way to do this is to take some time away from the day-to-day routine but I respect how hard that can be, so to start with why not stop for a few minutes on your way home from work and start to visualise the life that you want. Try using the wheel of life that accompanies this piece or make up your own and ensure that you explore every element of your life.

Your future starts here.