Though the dice is loaded against a balanced life, it is worth aiming for it, say Pranav Kumar and Jayadipta Chatterji.

Work plays an important role in the life of an individual. Karl Marx famously called it “Man’s metabolism with nature”, implying that to work is to be human. It is not just a means to livelihood, but also a source of self-esteem and a vehicle to achieve fulfilment. An average person spends 60-70 per cent of waking hours on work-related activities. As one rises professionally, the commitment to the success of the organisation increases, and so does the time and energy spent on achieving corporate or professional objectives. Given its centrality, it is ironic that work is not considered part of what is referred to as ‘life’ as implied by the term, ‘work-life balance’. It is almost as if there is ‘work’, and when it gets over, ‘life’ takes over. The separation of the two has profound consequences, especially in a society on the path of rapid economic development, such as India’s. In such countries, employees need to work harder to help their organisations compete in the global sweepstakes. This can cause an imbalance between work and other aspects of life, resulting in stress, chronic fatigue, burnout, strained relationships and frayed nerves. In the end, excessive focus on work, at the exclusion of everything else, may begin to impact work itself, making one less creative and taking the joy out of working. The circle of destruction is complete. It is perhaps more instructive to think of work as part of life and to rebrand work-life balance as work, non-work balance. Clearly, the non-work aspects of life are both private and public and include family, personal interests and hobbies, charitable work or spiritual pursuits. It is only when one is able to blend as many of these diverse aspects harmoniously together, that life becomes more fulfilling. In this article we look at different aspects of this phenomenon and explore how some leading professionals are trying to achieve this balance in their lives and in their organisations, and if they are succeeding.

Why is it important to live in balance?

One of the biggest fears of man is to get old and look back at life with regret. One overwhelmingly seeks monetary and physical security to prevent regret, forgetting that it can arise from the opportunities lost to enjoy life, take care of health, develop talents and spend time with loved ones, while the senses were keen, body firm and bonds strong. One senior executive confessed that his biggest regret was not to have gone for a vacation with children, when they were young. Now it is too late. Also, success achieved at the cost of health will prevent one from enjoying the fruits of one’s labour, when they finally ripen. At the same time, one who does not make a professional contribution while there was time, would end up regretting. A balanced life also puts all important things in a correct perspective, without making one or the other overwhelmingly vital. This allows one to make the right decisions. For example, someone who is totally dependent on work for a sense of self-esteem may be more prone to take unethical decisions when under pressure. Someone who can take a larger view may not. It is however, not easy to maintain balance. The dice is...
What causes imbalance?

Clearly, it is the work side of the work-life equation that causes imbalance. Very few people complain that too much of leisure is their problem, at least in the corporate sector. What is it about work that creates imbalance? First, it is the sheer quantum of work. Long work hours impact work life balance, admitted almost all the CFOs in a surprisingly overwhelming response to a recent poll conducted by IMA India (see ‘On Your Mind’) on the subject. More than half said that it has a ‘major impact’. This is not surprising given the fast pace that India had been growing at. The challenge in the current environment is different but equally daunting – a slowdown in the economy. The result is the same – more work in office and less for other activities, family and friends.

Apart from long hours, it is the stressful work environment that impacts people negatively – 40 per cent of survey respondents claimed to be impacted severely. It is not just the pressures of deadlines and targets, but also the constraints under which they have to be achieved, that create stress. Further, internal competition results in insecurity making the work environment more stressful.

Many individuals also undertake long and often stressful commutes to their offices, as the distances between homes and offices are large in big cities. It can eat significantly into non-work, waking hours of a day, the time that rightfully belongs to personal or family pursuits. Nearly 60 per cent respondents to the survey mentioned this as a cause of imbalance and nearly a quarter said it was a major factor.

People end up using this time to catch up on work, especially making phone calls, checking and replying to mails, or reading business newspapers as preparation for the day. With all the modern gadgets, the car has become a mobile office, though not a very comfortable one. RDS Bawa, Chief Financial Officer, Network18, a media conglomerate, reads a newspaper on his way to office in Noida, and catches up on his sleep on his way back to Gurgaon. Another executive in a bank in Mumbai leaves home early in his car to beat the morning rush, but returns home in an overcrowded train to save an hour, while his driver brings back the car! A long commute is not just a waste of time, but is unhealthy and irritating. It also prevents people from exercising as they often have to leave earlier than warranted to work and reach home later. Most people have accepted that a 2-2.5 hour commute is par-for-the-course. Perhaps, acceptance makes it at least easier.

Though the advent of global corporations has done a lot to spread opportunity and prosperity across the world, it has also destroyed boundaries of space and time. Wikipedia mentions that towards the end of that century, the notions of leisure and leisure time are thought to have emerged in Victorian Britain, late in the industrial revolution. Blue collar factory workers were required to perform long shifts, often up to 18 hours per day, with only Sundays off from work. By the 1870s though, more efficient machinery and the emergence of trade unions resulted in decreases in working hours per day, and allowed industrialists to give their workers Saturdays as well as Sundays off from work. Rail transport was cheap and reliable, and the first package holidays to seaside resorts appeared in the 1870s, allowing urban workers to travel on their days off. This trend spread to industrial nations in Europe and North America. As workers channelled their wages into leisure activities, the modern entertainment industry (beginning with the film industry) emerged in industrialised nations, catering to the entertainment needs of workers. This Victorian concept of the weekend (barely sufficient to recuperate from the week’s work) heralded the beginning of leisure time as it is known today.

On balance, too much work under stressful conditions is the chief culprit.

It was thought the great advances in technology which brought in greater automation and efficiencies in work and time management would give back lost hours to workers. It was expected that workers would have more time to spend with their children and in taking care of the aged. However, this has turned out to be a myth, as the time savings through these efficiencies meant more work could get done in lesser time. The net result has been bigger workloads and longer hours as technology even pulled down the barrier between work and home. Similarly, though the advent of global corporations has done a lot to spread opportunity and prosperity throughout the world, it has also destroyed the boundaries of space, and more importantly of time. Employees now work across time-zones, often burning at both ends – starting the day early morning with a conference call to Australia and finishing the day late at night with a review with managers in America. Employees in new-age industries, such as BPO and IT services, often have their circadian rhythm thrown out of gear because of unnatural working hours.

Most of the factors mentioned above are beyond one’s control. One cannot choose the amount of work...
Mantras for Living in Balance

Focus on important, not just urgent

Stephen R Covey, co-founder of the Franklin Covey Company and the author of a number of best-selling books, including The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, says that a work life balance is achieved when individual actions and priorities are aligned in a way that takes care of what is really important for each of them. This happens at two levels – one, at the personal level, when we are able to identify and implement strategies to achieve that which is of priority to us and; two, at the organisational level, when companies are focussed about their priorities, it lets employees execute jobs quickly and efficiently, so there is time left over for other life issues. Covey lists out three stages for each of us to achieve this at the personal level: first, recognise that we have the power to take responsibility for, and become the creative force of our own lives; second, decide what is most important in our whole lives and develop a vision and deep commitment to what we think is our ‘first thing’ of life and; third, put those first things first, and organise our lives around these priorities. But, after conducting this mental exercise, most individuals get stuck at the implementation stage, and therefore, suffer from a work-life imbalance. The reason for this, according to Covey, is that in this age of technology, which has made us multi-taskers, we do not have sufficient time so we deal with only the most urgent ones, which are not the important ones, like spending time with our spouses, our children, or ourselves. We deal with the important issues only when they become urgent, like when our marriage is about to break up, or our child has become self-destructive, or we have been diagnosed with a fatal disease. It is only then that it hits us that we should have found time to deal with these important issues instead of delaying them till they became urgent to do so; and only then, when it hits us, are we able to say ‘no’ to that which is unimportant.

Hemant Sultania, Chief Financial Officer, Dr Lal PathLabs, decided that the personal time that he can spend with his family was more important for him. He accordingly, hardly ever goes for parties on weekends or evenings, days and weekends will be a blurred mass of work. Clearly, although one should go beyond merely the call of duty in one’s work, one has to equally learn to say no and set boundaries. This is not just a matter of principle, but also of practicality. By adding unplanned work, one risks delaying even the planned one. It is a necessary trait to be able to respond quickly to changing needs, but there should be sanctity of a plan of work.

Further, one needs to value one’s own personal time, unless there is an emergency, which invariably will come up every now and then. Quite often, it becomes a matter of pride or false self-esteem to take on more work than one can, with the result that it invades personal time, says Sunil Sayal, Senior Director, Finance and Company Secretary, Ericsson India. “We need to let others know when we are not available, and put out that ‘don’t disturb’ sign”, says Mr Sultania. If you do not respect your own free time, why will others, he asks. We can learn a lot from our colleagues in Western countries, in this regard, feel Mr Sayal and Mr Sultania. Mr Sultania recalls that a former Managing Director of Bata, who was very competent and hard working, was unavailable on weekends and holidays. He always took three weeks off at Christmas time. He used to say that if working for the rest of the year has not made a difference, then these three weeks will not either. Mr Bawa says that it is not easy to compartmentalise life, but he has disciplined himself not to go to office on Saturdays and not to do emails on his BlackBerry after a certain time in the evening. If his colleagues need him to read a mail, they send him a message!

Many people live under the illusion and fear that the skies will fall if they relaxed, much like the village chieftain in the comic book, Asterix. However, one discovers, when one tries, that this is not the case. It can be a blow to one’s self-esteem, but it can also be very liberating.

Learn to say no

In a going concern, there will be issues round-the-clock. In a global company, the sun never sets. If one does not apply discipline, one can be swamped with work that will never end and before one realises, one’s
top three most effective ways to manage work-life balance. By delegating more, executives can recover the time that legitimately belongs to them. It also helps in having more time for value-adding work. The inability to delegate springs from the same source as the inability to say ‘no’. Delegation has to be supplemented with training, mentoring and occasionally redoing some work, which is always time consuming. But in the long run, it is a better alternative for everyone concerned. Also, delegation comes with a responsibility to help employees manage their own work-life balance issues. Most importantly, delegation of responsibility has to be supplemented with delegation of authority as well. This is usually easier said than done, because it means sharing power. However, if done right, its impact on work-life balance as well as employee productivity can be dramatic.

It also follows that the management philosophy needs to shift from one of suspicion to one of trust. Raj Dutta, Executive Vice President, Quatrro BPO, says that he offers employees in his team complete flexibility to choose when and where they want to work from – home or office. He judges them on results rather than the number of hours they spend in office. Yet, in many Indian organisations, the commitment of an employee is measured by the latter yardstick. This forces people to sit in office, much beyond what is needed, simply because those who leave on time, are considered shirkers. Mr Sayal says, “on days I leave late for some reason, I find the desks in the finance department empty”, but he considers this a mark of an efficient organisation rather than a mediocre one. Mr Bawa says if one is sincere, one does not need to be in office for more than eight hours, exceptions aside.

Flexibility helps

Though there are a number of jobs that require onsite presence all days of the week, increasingly most can be performed from remote locations. It is difficult to know if a colleague is travelling thanks to technology such as wireless internet access, instant messaging and of course, the BlackBerry. In many companies, admittedly more in multinational than Indian, and then again more in services than manufacturing, employees are given the flexibility to work from home on some days, either based on a fixed schedule or on need. Of course, there are issues with ‘telecommunting’ a fancy term for working from home. If one is not careful, the distinction between personal and work time dissolves quickly. It can actually exacerbate work-life imbalance! Further, it may become difficult to not get involved in household challenges that arise routinely, especially for women workers. Also, the house may not have a suitable place for work. However, the biggest deterrent usually for senior executives is the mindset that ‘face-time’ in office is critical. However, under certain circumstances, the productivity gain of working from home may outweigh the concerns mentioned above and one should avail of this option. Some companies, such as IBM actually encourage it. In fact, it talks of these issues as work-life integration, encouraging people to balance their lives. Says Nandita Jain Mahajan, Chief Privacy Officer, IBM Daksh, “IBM recognises that boundaries between work and life are blurred. On the one hand, you may need to work on a weekend to meet important deliverables, on the other you may have to book your holiday travel during work hours. At the end of the day, it is your commitment that counts.”

Keep your interests alive

Most of us manage to engage in passive hobbies, such as reading and listening to music. Even this has great therapeutic value. Mr Bawa likes to read Louis Lamour, a series of light fiction books depicting the lives and times of cowboys. He remembers the time when he had gone for an interview at a Tata company, and he was asked what he read. When he mentioned his favourite author, he got blank looks except from Russi Modi, who also enjoyed reading Louis Lamour!

Any activity that is unconnected with work is important for happiness, wrote Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher, mathematician and a Nobel Prize winner in literature. The more varied the range of interests, the more the chances of happiness. Active interests have an even bigger impact, as they engage more of one’s senses as well as foster interaction with others not connected with work. In this respect these activities are different from the team building or
During the years that people are building their careers, health is not a priority. In fact, health, like happiness, gets noticed only when it is fail-
ing, and therefore for many people it becomes important only when the ability of the body to bounce back has impeded. Even so, many people keep ignoring the warning signals, until it is really too late. Travel, irregular work hours and poor eating habits takes its toll gradually at first, and steeply later. Poor health is condu-
cive neither to good work nor to a good life. A regular health regime is therefore important, from as early as possible.

Mr Bawa admits that he does not find much time for health, but he does go for a morning walk, and also walks his dog every day. Mr Seth is also an avid walker and plays badminton with his kids, apart from cricket for Maruti’s team. Mr Dutta tries to go to the gym three times a week with his wife. Apart from exercise, this gives them time together to talk about important issues that get neglected during the day. For Mr Sultania, early morning Yoga is non-negotiable and he fits his routine around this as much as possible.

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pounded by the extra calories that are invariably added when one eats out. A regular exercise routine, involving swimming, gym or plain walking should be part of the routine.

Trade-offs are inevitable
The conflict is not always between work and life, but also between other priorities of life; for example between time for family, friends and self. All of them are important and cannot be ignored. Mr Bawa likes to have his personal time when he prefers to read (but not watch television interestingly, considering he works for a television company). Many executives, especially women, tend to miss out on time for themselves as any non-work time is considered important for family. Also, they seldom find time to bond either with colleagues or friends after work. Further, one may have myriad inter-
est and one needs to prioritise which ones to pursue.

Mr Dutta gives the example of his musician friend who works 18 hours a day, and writes music scores on the weekend. His friend has decided to focus on his job for a few years, after which he will focus only on his music. Doing what you like to do is important, says Mr Dutta, admitting that like his friend, he too nurtures a dream and an ambition to teach and do research. He is confident that that time will come. But, for now, he is able to indulge in this

Ms Dhupar has not just to contend with the pressures of work at a growing organisa-
tion, but also to meet the emotional and other needs of her growing daughter. Amid all this, she manages to practice for and run the Delhi Marathon every year. She has also enrolled in an amateur dramatics club and is quite proud that she has been part of two plays that have been formally performed. A surge of work prevented her from taking part in another one, but she has accepted that it will not always be possible. She believes that it is always possible to find time for what one passionately wants. Rajendra Prasad, President, Finance, SRF Limited, is actively involved in supporting a religious educational organisation by donating his expertise and time. The organisation cre-
dates digital content on IT, trains young people on interview techniques and other soft skills, and also helps place them. During periods of intense work, he sometimes works late into the nights, without letting his day job suffer. He feels more complete and happy as a result of his ‘non-work’ related work.

Mr Seth plays cricket regularly and is part of the company’s cricket team. He even broke his thumb once! Rupa Vora, Chief Financial Officer, IDFC Ventures is actively involved with the Art of Living Foundation and manages to find time for a regular practice. Her calm demeanour is proof that it helps.

Make health a non-negotiable priority
It is usually the case that success comes to most people when they are no more youth-
ful. There are exceptions, especially in the new-age services businesses, but they have a correspondingly higher pressure environment.

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It is very important to set the expectations of family members right without feeling guilty or apologetic because their families expect them to spend more time with them, than their work allows them to do. They face constant battles within and without to balance the expectations of family with the demands of their work. It is very important to set the expectations of family members right without feeling guilty or apologetic. It is of course, perfectly okay to leave the high pressure job for a low pressure one, but as long as that decision is not taken, this conflict should be avoided. A Chief Information Officer of an insurance company left his job for reasons other than work-life balance, but is quite happy with his consultancy work, as it affords him the freedom to indulge in golf and spend time helping his son settle in the US where he has gone for higher education. However, this is not an option open to everyone. The CFO Connect survey showed that making such a career switch is the least preferred option to balance one’s life.

It's your life

Finally, work-life balance is a very personal issue and no two persons may agree on what is right. What is right at one stage of one's life may not be at another one. The amount of stress one can take may be very different from another person. Also, the level of ambition, circumstances of family and whether both spouses work, are some other factors. The solutions that people seek to balance their lives are equally different. It may be reading for one, social service or spending time with family for another. Everybody needs to find their own Nirvana. Finally, it is important to remember that work-life balance is a journey and not a destination. It is like the truth that must be found each day.

Preach what you practice – helping your team have work-life balance

Can you allow your team members, however junior to have as much flexibility as you want for yourself? Absolutely, says Mr Dutta. He says that Spectramind, where he was working earlier, was the first to buy Reliance’s mobility cards for its staff to be connected 24/7 and be able to work from remote locations and home. Employees may need even greater degree of flexibility and the company may find it worthwhile to offer it. For instance some women may ask for flexible hours for the first year or two after having entered motherhood. Still others may want to quit to rejoin later, or take up a less pressured job.

Former Senior Vice President and Group Head, HRD, at Infosys, Hema Ravi-chander says that there is no overarching law or policy that companies follow, but at Infosys she had individually sat with staff members to find out their stress levels, and worked out a flexible plan. It is also important for individuals to have mentors, who have worked out a balance and take advice from them when employees find their own balance going awry. P Dwarakanath, Director, Group Human Capital, Max India Limited, says that the manager or the immediate boss of an employee plays a big role in allowing a work life balance.

At Maruti Suzuki, CFO Ajay Seth says that he tries to ensure a work life balance for his team by regularly engaging informally with a select group of five to six people from across levels, to find out how to make their work more exciting and challenging. They often talk about balance, and the company has tried to address this by holding one-hour communication meetings which are open house, having picnics with the staff and their families, and out-bound training programmes with wives and, where possible, with their whole family. These activities sponsored by the employer are not substitutes for self-selected ones, but they do help in reducing workplace stress.

Leaders should also be able to handle overly anxious and zealous workers, who are in a hurry to get to the top and who prioritise work to the exclusion of all else. They run the risk of burning out quickly, as they care little for a work-life balance. Mr Dutta gives the example of one employee at GE Capital (his previous employer) who, even after getting married, worked 20 hours a day, and then the stress finally caught up with him and began to show. Such people require counsellors to even out their work schedules, he says, adding that employers need to do their bit by out their work schedules, he says, adding that employers need to do their bit by such workers and tell them that they recognise their initiative, but also urge them to get a better balance.

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Accept it will not always work out

Despite best efforts to remain anchored, we will sway this way and that with the winds which constantly keep changing direction. Modern life leaves very little margin for the unexpected and usually something has to give. At times it will be the non-work aspects of life that will be compromised. Mr Seth is candid in accepting that work takes priority. Sarva Nagayam, Chief Financial Officer, British Telecom India, who has moved from the United States to take this role while her family is back home, recognises that at this stage of her career, making these sacrifices is inevitable. There will always be important projects that will make one cancel the much awaited vacation. One may have no choice but to accept the circumstances and re-write the script. And hope that sticks.

Set the expectations right

Many people are under pressure only to the extent of training younger executives in the organisation. It is useful sometimes to set personal goals for say, a year; for instance, read classics for this year and learn painting the next. Having a desire to do both at the same time, may only lead to frustration.

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