

# STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES



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## **Work-Life Balance Is a Myth:**

Try the seven-slice approach

The conventional way of thinking about work-life balance in binary terms presents a zero-sum game. Increasing time to spend with family means less time for managing one's career. But if you don't take care of your career, you will not be able to provide for your family. It is a circular way of framing the problem.

David J. McNeff takes a different approach, In his book, *The Work-Life Balance Myth*. (2021), he contends there is no such thing as work-life balance. McNeff's alternative is called the seven-slice approach. Instead

of viewing the problem as work OR family, McNeff describes seven domains where people spend their time: family, professional, personal, physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

People need all seven.

*The Spiritual Slice may mean time spent in organized religion or time spent thinking about the meaning of life. The Emotional Slice refers to time spent with friends and not family or work associates. The Intellectual Slice refers to time spent learning something new.*

**Try This Exercise:**

Allocate your time in terms of the average percentage of time you spend on the seven activities during your waking hours. For example, a client given the name Gwen came up with this profile:

Family Slice: 15 percent.

Professional Slice: 75 percent.

Personal Slice: 5 percent

Physical Slice: 0 percent

Intellectual Slice: 3 percent

Emotional Slice: 1 percent

Spiritual Slice: 1 percent

What would your allocation look like?

## **Binary versus Ordinal Thinking.**

Gwen's first insight was the realization that she had been living her life as though it consisted only of her family and professional slices. There were areas of her life that she has been neglecting. This neglect was creating stress in her life. How can she spend more time in her underserved slices?

Work-life balance is a binary way of framing the problem. You can only add time to one side of the balance by taking time away from the other side.

But if you frame the problem from an ordinal perspective, it is no longer an either/or situation. By using ordinal framing, you are looking at shifting positions and combining categories. Ordinal thinking refers to conceptualizing something within a list of things that can be shifted or combined. Binary thinking refers to either/or: 0/1, success/failure. patriot/traitor.

## **Gwen's Solution**

Thinking in an ordinal fashion, Gwen began playing tennis every Saturday morning with a friend. This allowed her to increase both her physical slice and her personal slice at the same time.

During her 40-minute drive to work in the morning, Gwen would turn off the mobile phone and began her day listening to books on tape. This allowed her to add to her intellectual slice without reducing time from her professional slice.

Below is another example of removing the zero-sum framework of work-life balance by transforming the framework of managing life as an ordinal issue where activities can be combined:

One of our clients was Managing Partner of a law firm. The family attended church on Sundays. The daughter also attended religious education at the church. The managing partner examined the church committees and saw that the Religious Education Committee contained two bank CEOs. He joined that committee. Eventually one of the banks became a law firm client, thanks to the relationships made on the committee. While this activity supported his professional slice it also assisted his family slice.

### **Summary and Conclusions:**

Defining a life problem as work-life balance frames the issue as zero-sum. Adding time to one side of the ledger requires reducing time on the other. Framing the issue as a seven-slice ordinal problem allows for creative slicing and dicing between and within categories.


McNeff's book does not include sleep as a critical Slice. Sleep deprivation, however, is a common business issue seldom discussed openly. People like to brag about how little sleep they need, but deprivation is associated with poor decision-making. (Stybel Peabody, 2019).

Whether you think your life contains seven or eight slices, framing the issue in this manner is more helpful than talking about your lack of work-life balance.

### **References**

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