



Dr Schwartz is the Editor-in-Chief of *Applied Radiology*. She is the Chief of the Division of Neuroradiology and holds the Robert A. Zimmerman Chair in Pediatric Neuroradiology in the Department of Radiology at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She is also a Professor of Radiology, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. She can be reached at erin@appliedradiology.com.

Can You Have It All?

Erin Simon Schwartz, MD, FACR

Recently, I was invited to deliver a lecture titled, “Work-Life Balance: Can You Have It All?” My first instinct was to approach the podium, announce the title, say “No,” and sit back down.

Tempting as that would have been, it would not be entirely accurate. Or professional. Or respectful of the organizers. But it would be funny.

All joking aside, I did feel the need to revise the title. The term “work-life balance” is a well-worn phrase, that is true. But for me, it brings to mind a seesaw, with work on one side, life on the other, and a continuous struggle to keep it perfectly even.

Most of us know that’s not reality.

I have long preferred to call it “work-life integration.” There are times – like right now as I write this on an airplane taking me far from my family— when we should be 100 percent focused on work. And there are other times—on days off, on vacation, enjoying time with friends —when we should be entirely focused on life.

My goal is to integrate my personal and professional demands in such a way that they enhance my well-being over the long haul.

It’s been argued that work-life balance is a continuous cycle of re-assessment and adjustment, not an achievement; that a balanced life “integrates the personal and the professional in a healthy way, supporting an identity that includes the career, but doesn’t necessarily revolve around it.”^{1,2}

Studies show that professionals who report the highest levels of happiness are those who are able to “compartmentalize, to disconnect, to switch off without guilt from work.”²

That all sounds great. But, for me, being accessible to colleagues via cellphone, email, text, drop-ins, and applications like Slack makes disconnecting from work virtually impossible. They also make separating from my “life” during work hours equally challenging, especially when working from home.

It is a tough time for radiologists. Case volumes are sky high at many places, with little to no hope among those in academia for lower research and education obligations. Add roles like journal editor, division chief, medical director, and society president, and it’s enough to make your (my!) head spin.

Yes, these are positions that I have actively chosen, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t exhausting at times. I have also chosen my roles as spouse and parent, and they are also exhausting at times. But I could not succeed in any of my work roles without the support of my family, who are my life.

Some experts argue that one’s goal should be to avoid working too much.³ Sadly, their definition of “too much” is laughable in healthcare. Remember the battles over cutting trainees down to 80 hours a week? For many of us, 45 hours a week is practically part-time. And yet working beyond that has been shown detrimental to physical and mental well-being.³

Our performance relies on optimal brain function, which in turn requires strong physical and mental well-being. We cannot achieve either by furiously working in airports to meet deadlines, checking email on vacation, or taking on yet another professional role.

To paraphrase an old advertisement, we may have come a long way, baby. But we still have a long way to go.

References

- 1) <https://hbr.org/2021/01/work-life-balance-is-a-cycle-not-an-achievement>. Accessed April 28, 2023.
- 2) <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230227-what-does-work-life-balance-mean-in-a-changed-work-world>. Accessed April 28, 2023.
- 3) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maurathomas/2022/07/26/what-does-work-life-balance-even-mean/?sh=402e31072617>. Accessed April 28, 2023.