

# Work-life balance

## Achieving the impossible?

As the NHS apparently moves towards a more workforce friendly approach to organising its human resource, we examine whether more controlled hours, flexible working arrangements and better pay add up to that elusive aspiration known as work-life balance. What else plays a part and how can you best adapt your working practices to suit the modern era of healthcare?

### What is work-life balance?

Work-life balance means different things to different people and even different things to the same person over time. It is thus difficult to define precisely, although the complexity is readily understandable. Did the more traditional Senior Registrar working 80+ hours per week have more or less work-life balance than an ST5 soon to be confined to 48 hours? The answer is often the unpopular and politically incorrect ‘yes’, especially if that person viewed work as a vocation about which they were passionate, had few family ties, believed that exceptional doctors had their learning as grounded in experience as theory and was set on advancing through the profession at the maximum rate. Ironically, under those circumstances, that person was probably also safe in practise, suffered fatigue only rarely and had reserves of energy, along with a feeling that life was on track. However, the opposite could equally be true, with that person suffering constant fatigue, more prone to mistakes and feeling that medicine took over their life, perhaps sometimes even questioning whether it was all worth it.

Work-life balance is more about assessing the relative importance of different areas of your life and then applying yourself in a way that consistently delivers for all of them. The key denominator is you. It’s your game plan and it should be based on a combination of the aspirations you have in all areas of life and your own internal wiring, drivers, beliefs and values. Tiredness and fatigue comes not from doing too much but from getting the balance wrong, highlighted both by people who work at a high rate but then play vigorous sports at the end of the day, remaining energetic and ready for the next day’s challenges versus others who work minimal hours in undemanding but unsatisfying jobs who complain of lethargy, demotivation and low energy.

So, work-life balance is less related to the demand on your body and much more dependent on the degree of match between your behaviour and your inner blueprint for a great life. That makes it pretty difficult to achieve work-life balance without first understanding the inner blueprint – the first imperative!



### Work-life balance in healthcare

The core driver or motivation for many people entering healthcare is to help people in a very meaningful way, whilst engaging in intellectually stimulating activity. This driving force stems from two fundamental human needs, contribution and growth, and links to the age-old premise that we all have a purpose. Consequently, it is not difficult to see that working as a doctor or nurse, for instance, becomes a vocation rather than work, much akin to Mother Teresa’s devotion to a life of helping the poor. Equally, the human needs of certainty and significance were also well provided for by the workplace, with secure employment unaffected by market forces and a doctor-patient relationship that was built on trust stemming from patients holding doctors in the highest professional regard.

In the NHS of old, this resulted in many people working extremely long hours with enormous personal effort to ensure delivery, receiving their reward not in extra salary but in the underlying feeling that the right thing had been done by the patients. That isn’t to say that the work wasn’t taxing or that many people felt a constant pull between professional responsibility and the need for a life outside work. However, if you ask the same group about the present and evolving working environment, you’ll find a strong trend towards a degradation of morale, despite the hours being more controlled and the salary being superior. When you probe more deeply, you can certainly see how the modern environment leads to this, see below.

Need	Effect of the modern environment
Contribution	The effect of constant media bombardment around health service failures, coupled to an ever increasing difficulty in providing the ‘ideal’ healthcare to each individual results in many doctors feeling that they are doing the wrong thing more often than they should.
Growth	The European Working Time Directive coupled to ever increasing service demands to meet stringent targets has resulted in many consultants feeling that they have slipped back into a worker bee role more than a clinical leadership role for which they had worked so hard for.
Significance	New found worker bee status, coupled with significantly less autonomy in how you deploy yourself or what products you can prescribe, leads to a growing feeling of being less significant than of old.
Certainty	The market economy in health, with tenders, new provider types and competition from previously collaborative colleagues does nothing to reassure healthcare professionals over the security of their employment or even that they know how to operate in such an alien environment.



It is clear that definition of the medical role in healthcare needs a radical rethink in order to support professionals in re-attaining a strong sense of purpose that ultimately restores their sense of wellbeing and work-life balance.

### Successful work-life balance

The key to successful work-life balance is attaining satisfaction across all fundamental human needs in a way consistent with your values. Additionally, ensuring that satisfaction or balance is achieved in all major roles is just as important. If we take a typical consultant as an example, we might define the areas needing to be balanced as:

- Certainty
- Variety
- Significance
- Love & Connection
- Growth
- Contribution
- Doctor
- Service Leader
- Teacher/ Mentor
- Husband/ Wife
- Parent
- Self
- Friend

Balance is where that consultant feels they are having all of their fundamental needs met through activity that also delivers success in each of their roles. When this is achieved you feel energetic, motivated and have a sense that you are progressing or delivering in life. Vital to this process is gaining an understanding of what activities, behaviours and patterns deliver for you as an individual in each of those areas.

### Where balance erodes

Let's say, for example, that Mr Consultant has derived his need for significance and contribution from his role as Doctor but a loss of autonomy in that role along with a focus on targets and sometimes arbitrary measures, means that it no longer delivers a satisfying result in any of these areas. Naturally Mr Consultant fights harder to restore the balance, often resulting in more work whilst also resulting in greater fatigue through stress. This now detracts from the quality and quantity of his experience as spouse or parent, resulting in a downwards spiral further away from balance. This is no different than consistently working too many hours, knowing that your children would benefit equally from your time and simply shows how the interrelationship of the factors affects work-life balance. It also helps to explain why people under stress often seek to 'simplify' life as a potential solution.

### Strategy for restoring balance

Using the same example, Mr Consultant can move towards greater balance by examining each important area or role in life and determining two things:

- What set of goals, behaviours or activities would restore that area to satisfactory?
- If that area were pushed from satisfactory to 'wow', what would it look like and what would you be doing?

The outputs of the exercise may involve some uncomfortable truths. For instance, maybe Mr Consultant's working life doesn't deliver in terms of significance or even a feeling of contribution. That can be rectified either by deriving those needs elsewhere, perhaps through the role of parent, or by altering the working environment, for instance by setting up a social enterprise or considering a new role in a healthcare system that works differently, always mindful that any move in one area will ultimately influence all of the others too. The consequences of remaining in a pattern that is inconsistent with your blueprint are likely to be far more uncomfortable in the long run than the transient disruption and uncertainty caused by a change. Equally, work-life balance out of kilter can be seen as a wonderful opportunity to re-examine life's possibilities. After all, none of it is a dress rehearsal.

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