Early Career Members

Balancing Personal–Professional Responsibilities

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Technological advancements, such as email and cell phones, have provided us with the option of staying connected to work 24-7. Now work is no longer inaccessible after 5 pm or on weekends, and everyone is theoretically “on call” all the time. This has resulted in increased stress and burnout among professionals. The phrase “work–life balance” was coined to arrive at an unspoken rule that there must be an invisible middle ground of balanced time spent at work and personal time outside of the office. At best, this is a precarious balancing act that paints a lopsided picture, essentially making the statement that work is not part of regular life. Moreover, the pursuit of balanced personal–professional lives leads to perpetual exhaustion due to the underlying assumption of a feasible middle ground for “balanced individuals,” be it at home or at work. What is often not explicitly discussed is how this balance is achieved: what aspects need particular attention? Where is training needed? What can/should be adjusted as roles and responsibilities change both in an individual’s personal and professional lives.

In this article, five early career members of our Societies were interviewed about their approach to work–life balance. The questions were directed to get a general sense of hours typically worked per week, availability of flexible work hours, work responsibilities (e.g., research, teaching, extension, and mentoring), and caregiving/parenting responsibilities. The respondents were also asked about the initiatives they have taken and support they have received from work and family. Finally, the question asked about initiatives that can be promoted by employment and professional societies to develop a healthy work environment.

All respondents shared that personal lives have to be emotionally fulfilling and satisfying. A sense of accomplishment and purpose of getting both little and big things done is critical whether at work or at home. The central theme of the responses focused around the following key points:

**Priority.** With no exceptions, all respondents emphasized the importance of prioritizing tasks. Don’t feel compelled to say yes to every project: it is okay to say no. As an early career member, this may seem difficult; however, in doing so, you are raising the value of your time both on a personal and professional level. Saying no can be an anxious process for many, but set priorities and make it a point to be personally responsible for acting on them in an orderly manner. This is partial trial and error as we progress in our careers. Setting priorities applies to both workplace and personal lives.

**Flexibility.** All respondents reported that a flexible workplace helped them maintain balance. Flexible office hours and telework are great tools to allow employees to fulfill their responsibilities. However, it is important that work at home be treated as seriously as that done in an official office environment. Have a dedicated space and remain on task as much as possible. Telework provides employees with a relaxed work atmosphere, reduces commuter time and drain on environmental resources, and allows for uninterrupted work hours that may be difficult to achieve in a traditional office environment. Pattern is important. Habits and routines help establish a pattern that conditions the mind to stay focused on the primary task at hand. Find a routine that works for you and stick with it. The key is to not just spend time on job requirements, but also on personal responsibilities.

**doi:10.2134/csa2018.63.1226**

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