

## Work-Life Balance

*The new essential in every career.*

We do an exercise called Clarifying Values of Choice with almost all of our clients. In recent years I have noticed that the most commonly picked card in everyone's top ten (with clients ranging from 15 to 65 years of age) is either "*balance between work and personal life*" or "*time for recreation and leisure activity*", or both! This is a new phenomenon which I did not see when I started working in this field 13 years ago.

There are many theories as to why this might be the new focus for everyone. It has been said that Generation X watched their workaholic Baby Boomer parents and they don't want to be the same. Generation X started the movement towards "working to live, rather than living to work." And Generation Y is less interested in the upward moving career path of their Generation X parents. Instead they appear willing to trade high pay for fewer working hours, flexible schedules and a better work/life balance (how they will behave now that jobs are so much harder to get remains to be seen). The Baby Boomers, having made such a commitment to their work for so long, are getting tired and looking for more leisure pursuits. And Generation X'ers have now been made redundant more times than they wish to acknowledge – that means there has to be more to life than just work!

It also appears that the rapid technology changes of the past twenty years have made life more complex and busier, not simpler and easier as may have been predicted. And, as life gets busier and bombards us with more and more information, it may be starting to affect our health and well-being. So the search is on to find a happy and balanced life with activities that provide meaning, challenge and relationships outside, as well as within, a successful and fulfilling career. A life with well-being, a life where people flourish.

According to Wikipedia (today's authority on so many things!):

*"Work-life balance is a broad concept including proper prioritizing between "work" (career and ambition) on one hand and "life" (Health, pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development) on the other."*

And the Department of Labour (NZ) defines it as:

*"Work-life balance is effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and other activities that are important to us - including spending time with family, taking part in sport and recreation, volunteering or undertaking further study. Research suggests that improving the balance between our working lives and our lives outside work can bring real benefits for employers and employees. It can help build strong communities and productive businesses."*

In other words, people want it all.

It is only in the past 13 years that positive psychology has held a place in the field of general psychology that previously focused on, according to Martin Seligman, "*understanding misery and undoing the disabling conditions of life.*"<sup>1</sup> In his new book *Flourish*, Seligman (author, psychologist and Director of the Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Pennsylvania) says "*I used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction. I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> and <sup>2</sup> M Seligman, *Flourish* (Great Britain: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011)

In this new theory, Seligman explains that “Well-being has five measurable elements (PERMA) that count toward it:

*Positive Emotion (of which happiness and life satisfaction are all aspects)*  
*Engagement*  
*Relationships*  
*Meaning*  
*Achievement*

*No one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it....The way we choose our course in life is to maximize all five of these elements.”<sup>3</sup>*

Another academic in the field of positive psychology, Tal Ben-Shahar (author and lecturer in positive psychology at Harvard University) has developed a model which includes the following 5 actions to become happier<sup>4</sup>:

1. *accept painful emotions as part of being alive*
2. *spend quality time with family and friends*
3. *do regular physical exercise*
4. *cultivate the habit of gratitude*
5. *simplify – to do less rather than more*

What does happiness, well-being and work-life balance mean or look like to you? There will be commonalities but I believe we all have our own individual version of what balance is, our personal priorities affected by our current situation (both opportunities and constraints), differing energy and motivation levels, our unique set of interests and passions, our own definition of what we find challenging, meaningful or satisfying, our individual desire or need for time spent with others and time alone, etc. In the end I think that each one of us will have our own very individual recipe for happiness, well being and balance.

In a new card sort, just released to the public, I have provided a tool to assist people to design their own ideal version of well-being, a tool which can help them work out how to establish a balanced work-life. It offers a range of activities within each of Seligman’s five pillars of flourishing, as well a variety of preferred ways of earning, and leaves the choice of how these are combined completely up to the individual. The gap between present reality and future ideal is identified and the participant is then encouraged to consider steps which will help them move towards a new future.

This tool is activity based. It stems from my beliefs that actions can create or shape feelings.<sup>5</sup> It is entirely based around individuals making choices. What they then do with those choices is up to them:

- Take the opportunity to remember what is important and place priority on it?
- Share with a partner and learn about each other’s priorities?
- Plan a long term goal, and consider the shorter term action steps that might help that goal to be achieved?
- Work out how to act on many of the choices at one time?
- Turn the choices into a “bucket list” and start ticking them off?

Whatever the choices, I hope that the end result will be to take one step closer to work-life balance, happiness and general well-being.

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<sup>3</sup> M Seligman, *Flourish* (Great Britain: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> <http://bigthink.com/talbenshahar>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201010/action-creates-emotion>