

The “Work-Life” Evolution: Understanding the Past to Help Your Clients Navigate the Future

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In the 1970s we referred to *Work-Life Separation*; in the 1990s it was *Work-Life Balance*; and by 2010 we evolved to *Work-Life Integration*. Today, “integration” has come to mean never shutting down, taking calls while on vacation—and being available 24/7. It is a sign of the times when executives—and tired parents—pay a premium for a Digital Detox at resorts boasting every amenity except for WiFi. So, what will the next decade bring? And, more urgently, how can we help our coaching clients manage through their own work-life tensions in today’s frantic world?

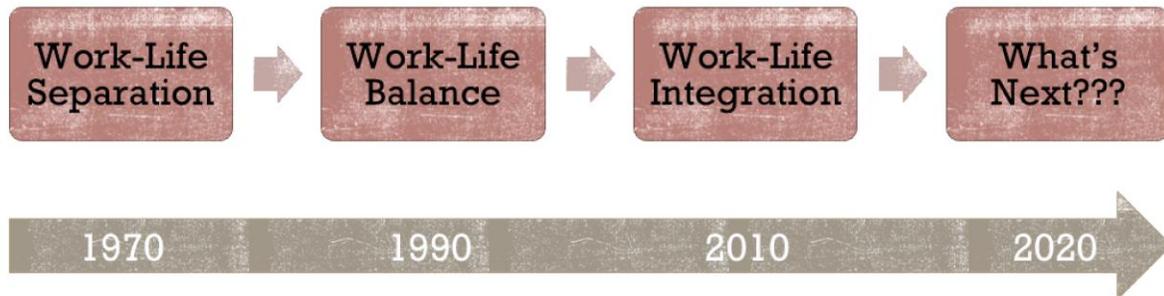
We presented this very idea to a group of Organizational Development professionals at the OD Network conference in October 2018. During the session, we analyzed the past to help us understand where we are today and prepare for the future. This article represents a snapshot of our design (and outcomes) and a powerful process that you can use when working with clients who struggle with work-life tensions.

STEP 1: Look Back to Step Forward

During the session, we first took a step back in time to analyze and honor how we have evolved as a society. What is interesting to note in the evolution of work-life is that people are not only influenced by the current time but are also influenced by how they were raised. In other words, as people enter the workforce, they carry with them preconceived notions about work and lifestyle based on their childhood experiences and observations.

As we looked at each period—Work-Life Separation, Work-Life Balance, Work-Life Integration—we identified both the upsides and downsides using a Polarity Lens [[Learn more about Dr. Barry Johnson’s work on Polarity Thinking](#)]:

EVOLUTION OF WORK & LIFE



1970-1989 Work-Life Separation | During this time, more women entered the workplace. At the time of the Equal Pay Act (1963), women made 59.4 cents for every \$1 earned by men (compared to 80.5% in 2017).¹ We talked about “having both,” meaning being successful at home and work; however, there was emphasis on keeping those domains separated. In other words, leave your work at the office, and leave your family concerns at home. Children who grew up in the 1950s lived through WWII and observed the scarcity of work. They entered the workforce with a great appreciation for work and were proud to earn money to care for their families.

Upsides: When not at work (i.e., “after five”), you enjoy time fully focused on family; there is more predictability of what to expect at work; clearer boundaries.

Downsides: Lack of authentic relationships; lack of acknowledgement of work-life tensions; feel like “worker bees;” emotions are left at the door.

1990-2009 Work-Life Balance | In the 1990s, we realized we cannot do it all—and started a battle cry for balance. Stay-at-home parents were more rare—as households with two parents relied on two incomes to stay afloat. 70% of families in 1960 had a stay-at-home parent (compared to 2012 70% did not).² “Latchkey Kids” was a popular term in the 1970/80’s indicating that more kids were coming home after school alone because both parents (in 2-parent homes) were working. They saw their parents dedicated to their work and wanted more balance for themselves when they entered the workforce around the 1990s. Pagers and cell

phones quickly gain popularity, and technology begins to find a place in our pockets. Progressive workplaces offer benefits such as counseling and discounted weight-loss programs.

Upsides: Health consciousness; re-defining of roles at home; work-life balance is discussed openly.

Downsides: Working too much becomes a badge of honor; women feel guilty for not effectively managing both work and home; technology allows work to infiltrate home time.

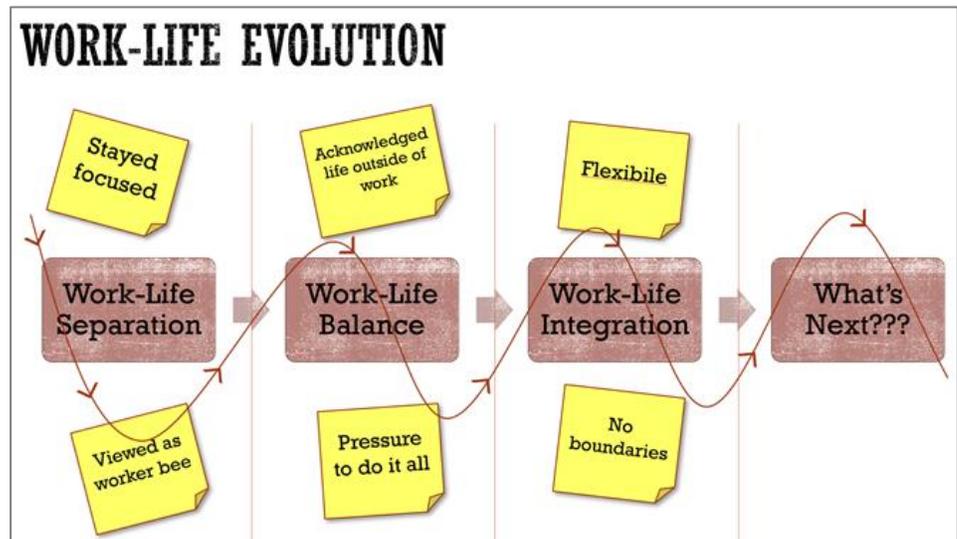
2010-2019 Work-Life Integration | Children born in the 1990s grew up with the “superparents” trying to give 100% to each domain (i.e., work and home). When entering the workforce, these workers emphasized doing meaningful work and tended to blur the lines between work and life. Today, your personal cellphone is loaded with your work calendar, contacts, and email. Workplaces offer flexible work schedules, and collaboration technology allows for us to plug in from virtually anywhere in the world. Integration means you work everywhere, including discussing a client project while exercising with a colleague during your lunch break, or watching your child’s soccer game. By 2014, 26% of the workforce feels pressure to respond to messages outside of work.³

Upsides: Working virtually; technology to telework enables flexibility; better use of talents; Millennials demand balance.

Downsides: It is not possible to disconnect; no opportunity to rest and think; feeling of stress and overwhelm. Millennials experience more depression at work than any other generation (BDA, 2013, MMPI, 2017) ⁴ primarily from constantly being “on.” And, by 2025, chronic diseases will affect 49% of the population.⁵

In analyzing the timeline and charting the upsides and downsides, we were able to see a clear evolution. If you start

with the upside of **work-life separation**, you will see an emphasis or focus on work. However, when that is overdone, the downside presents itself as feeling like a worker bee. In order to address that



concern, we moved toward achieving **work-life balance** with the upside as acknowledging a worker's life outside of work. And, when that is overdone, people are left feeling pressure to do it all. Thus leading to the next phase of **work-life integration** with the upside of flexibility, which has its own downsides that we all know too well, including having no boundaries.

No matter what generation your client is from, this is a helpful exercise for your clients to notice their attitudes towards work when they were younger and how they view work today. The idea is to use their insight from the past to help them intentionally create a future that will continue their unique evolution.

Sample Coaching Questions

- What attitudes did you learn about work growing up? How has that served you? How has it gotten in your way?
- What have you brought with you into the workplace as an adult?
- How aware are you when you are over-focusing on work to the neglect of home (and vice versa)? What feedback do you receive from others that may be your early warning signs?

STEP 2: Re-Label

Once you have explored the past and have clarity on your client's views of work-life, it is tempting to help your client identify strategies to move forward. However, keep in mind that at this point your client may not have a strong vision for the work-life they desire. Without that vision, any strategies proposed may only serve as a Band-Aid (reaction) in the short term, versus a new way of living and working.

Take time to find a fitting name for the future your client wants to live and work in. Why is the label important? Whether it is “work-life balance” or “work-life integration,” the term of reference shapes one's mindset—and the behaviors that follow. For example, if you are striving for work-life balance, your mind may envision a see-saw; you will be thinking of strategies to equalize your time at home and your time at work. Whereas, when thinking about “work-life integration” your strategies may be focused on overlapping, or blending activities together.

Before you begin exploring how to manage work-life tensions, help your client choose a new label, and even a visual image. Work with your client to create a new mindset towards work-life. Then, using that mindset as a north star, encourage them to explore strategies to make it a reality.

During our conference session, we brainstormed about the future of work-life. The theme of “purpose” was the most prominent that surfaced. The group identified several new labels for the term “work-life” in the future, including:

- Purposeful Living
- Life-Work (emphasis on *life*)
- Organic Lifestyle
- Holistic

Coaching Tips – Keep in Mind

- Several factors are likely to influence orientation toward and view of “work-life.” For example, consider how a client's gender, industry, race, career ambition, and socioeconomic status will influence the vision.
- Recognize what your client experienced growing up—including what they observed in their own parents and caregivers and what current events influenced them most.

2020 and beyond | Purposeful Life and Work

With trends such as shared workplaces (shared workspaces have grown by 200% over the past five years.⁶) wellness programs, and benefits to support the whole person, today's workplace is in

many ways the most authentic—while also the most demanding. It is also physically harmful, as we are just now beginning to study the long-term effects of a sedentary workday. Today's approach to life and work has evolved based on our learning from the previous versions.

Keeping in mind these potential new terms to describe work-life in the future, in our session we continued to brainstorm about the upsides (what we are hopeful to see in the next 20+ years) and the downsides (what we are worried could happen).

Upsides: Life with purpose. Value all work. Conscious capitalism. Mutual support. Employers are increasingly aware that productivity requires well-rested and happy employees, not just more hours. More companies are moving towards four-day work weeks and mandatory vacation.⁷ More flexible gender roles enable individuals and families to make decisions that work for them.

Downsides: There's a great deal of uncertainty as each workplace and individual tries to customize their approach. This uncertainty and surplus of options can create a new kind of stress. Focus on individual preferences and lost sense of team. We also recognized that there may be a downside to self-actualization and purposeful living. That is, what happens if we have a natural disaster, and after years of over-focusing on purpose, our practical skills atrophy—to the point where we no longer know how to grow our own food or have basic survival skills?

Work with your client to develop a customized work-life vision. What are they hopeful about or aspire to be—and what might they be worried about? Coach them to develop a vision of work-life that will resonate with them given their unique background, values, culture, and experiences.

Sample Coaching Questions

- What does wellness look like for you (in terms of emotional, physical, environmental, etc.)?
- What are you hopeful about and what might you be worried about?
- How would you label this new way of being? What is your mantra now around work-life?
- How will you bring this to life?
- Describe what your life would look like on a daily basis as you live this mantra.

STEP 3: Create New Possibilities

At this point, your client has analyzed their own past, created a vision for the future, and outlined a few hopes and fears. Now, you can help them map out strategies within this framework that are aligned to their vision. Help your client think of strategies that will leverage the anticipated upsides and minimize the potential downsides. Help them so that they do not swing the pendulum too far to either side but are rather effectively navigating *through* the on-going tension.

Sample Coaching Questions

- What are 1-2 small changes you can make now that are aligned to your vision?
- What actions will help you leverage the upsides and minimize the downsides?
- How you achieve *both* (e.g., Manage boundaries and still be responsive? Care for others and care for yourself?)

The Future of Work-Life

We have reached a point in time where we are not as concerned about how work and life fit together or compete for our time. Rather, many of us are seeking meaning and purpose for our lives, and in some cases that may be answered through our contributions at work. As coaches, we play a critical role in supporting our clients as they build their self-awareness and define plans to improve their own well-being. What's more—we have a unique view into broader trends such as observations of our client's workplace culture and workplace trends overall. Making these connections can help build the bridge to the future with authenticity and intention. And, embracing this on-going work-life tension, or polarity, for yourself is perhaps the best way you can show up in service of others.

References:

¹ Info Please. *The Wage Gap*. Retrieved from: <https://www.infoplease.com/us/gender-sexuality/wage-gap>

² Workforce. *Management Looks Back at Workplace History (1920s-1970s)*. (June 28, 2012).

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⁵ Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease. *The Growing Crisis of Chronic Disease in the United States*.

⁶ Cushman & Wakefield. Boom in UK Co-Working as Flexible Workspace Take-up Triples in Top Cities. (January 23, 2018).

⁷Think Productive. *Work Life Balance Trends*. (December 6, 2017).