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The Time (Making) Machine

For many workers, especially professionals and managers, increasing workloads and a never-ending flow of unplanned issues compete for fewer suitable resources. The challenge is to manage these opposing forces and find the balance which delivers a sustainable and profitable business. But, what about a sustainable private life for the individuals that make up this business? So many of us think we're invincible and no workload is ever too great – some are in denial and truly believe that somehow, at some point in time, it will all get done. Typically, reality proves us wrong.

The solution to this problem has many parts. I believe the following are critical:

1. ***Plan for absolute chaos, nirvana, or anything in between.*** We all know what we need to do to deliver our responsibilities – it's in our plan. But yet, when it comes to actual implementation, there are many excuses and diversions that get in the way. Don't let it happen. Plan the chaos into your day but also plan the things that must get done – in detail. Don't sell yourself short, allow sufficient funds and resources to deliver the plan. And don't set yourself up for failure by the self labelled “aggressive” other half of your brain or superiors that hand you impossible goals. Most importantly, don't isolate yourself from the world. Many time-management gurus will tell you to ignore emails, network meetings, seminars, exhibitions, open door policy and the like. Yes, in some instances, they can be time-wasters but they can also be doorways to team building, new products and services, new markets, suppliers, etc. – all potential seeds of innovation and improvement. And if there is one thing above all else that is required in Australian industry, it is innovation. Stuck within the confines of your business is not the best way to make this happen.
2. ***Focus and Discipline – until it hurts.*** Focus, focus and focus some more until it hurts. Park the diversions to one side to be dealt with at a later planned time. Now is the time to focus – it could be listening, it could be brainstorming about the next new ideas. Get in the zone and listen to every word spoken, absorb every written sentence, and engage all the senses and the brain solely to the task at hand. You'll find this results in quality thought, answers and an overall very productive use of time. It takes constant discipline and practice but the outcome is worth the effort.
3. ***Trust, Delegate, Outsource – let go!*** This is one of the best skills you can master – to learn how to trust and delegate. For those set in their ways, always hands-on and not prepared to let go, this is not an easy task, but a necessary one if they wish to manage and grow the business. Your subordinates may complain that their day is full – fact or fiction, it is an area that requires careful management. An underutilised strategy is the use of external resources that an overloaded business can easily tap into, as and when required. An external experienced organisation that will quickly attain the full confidence and trust of the team can be a valuable part of your contingency plan.
4. ***Simplify and Systemise and do yourself out of job.*** Simplify and as much as possible, auto-pilot tasks, processes and other functions. Constantly innovate, develop and

implement work processes with the clear objective of simplification with greater effectiveness. This could mean to eliminate a lot of cumbersome policies and procedures. Conversely, as is the case with a lot of SMEs, the work is more time consuming because there are no formal policies or procedures. In these instances, the SME survives day-to-day purely on the self-developed “in-the-head” routines of the individual employees. A lot of time can be freed up with the introduction of innovative and simple systems, which are continuously monitored and improved.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on these points and others that you believe work towards a better work-life balance. I’ll end this piece on a warning. Once you get to this place where your work-life balance is just right and the workload fluctuations, unplanned interruptions and projects are appropriately planned and managed – beware of Parkinson’s Law. Many professionals and managers are their own minder, manager and motivator, a difficult set of responsibilities. And this is where your true strength of character is tested – to have the self-awareness and self-discipline to keep to your plan and move forward.

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