Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT

Cynthia Golden, Editor

ISBN 0-9672853-5-6
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An EDUCAUSE e-Book
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Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT

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“Can I really do this job well and have a life?” If you’ve found yourself asking that question, you’re not alone. It is not unusual to hear IT staff say they feel they have too much to do and not enough time. In a world with expectations of service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, IT staff often feel pressure to put in long hours, to work from home, and to be constantly on call, online, and available. At times of great stress—or at annual performance review time—this question of balancing work and home life is bound to come up. Contemplating a new job where the levels of responsibility will increase also raises the issue.

Studies show that IT workers have more difficulty with work/life balance than their non-IT counterparts do.1 In casual conversations with colleagues both on our own campuses and around the country, we often hear people express the feeling that they have not achieved what they consider an acceptable balance between work and personal interests. The research supports these perceptions. Working long hours, working on the weekends, and bringing work home are most often noted as the major disrupters to work/life balance.2 Many studies, including a summary in Communications of the ACM,3 have also pointed to the perceived variability in the work/life balance depending on gender, generation, culture, income level, and type of job.

The problem is also affecting the pipeline of potential IT leaders. A 2004 ECAR study of the IT profession in higher education found that the typical IT professional is a male over 40 who works more than 50 hours per week.4 It also reports a lack of interest among respondents—particularly women in mid-management positions—in advancing to the senior-most IT positions. Another study found this phenomenon in the wider population as well.5 This study showed a trend among both women and
men that involves lowering career ambitions to avoid having to make the personal trade-offs associated with advancing to jobs having more responsibility. While a number of factors might influence decisions not to pursue more senior-level IT positions, it is difficult to discount the perception—or reality—that senior IT jobs are just too demanding. All our employees have to do is look around to see the long hours that their managers and leaders work.

A growing trend in today’s workforce puts a greater emphasis on living a successful, happy life versus simply achieving success at work. A recent study found that employees who place a similar priority on family life and work (“dual-centric” people) had advanced more in their careers than those who are “work-centric” or “family-centric.” Dual-centric and family-centric employees also exhibited a greater satisfaction with their jobs and lives than work-centric employees.

Does trying to balance work and personal life have to cause problems, conflicts, guilt, and tensions both at work and at home? We believe this balancing act can be done successfully, to the benefit of both job and family. Commitments to family, church, community groups, and others make our lives rich and rewarding. Performing well in a challenging position, at an interesting place with friendly colleagues also brings satisfaction. The pressure to do it all and do it well is strong in our society. Finding ways to bring a sense of balance to your life—to feel successful in your job and happy in your outside activities, is what we address in this chapter, suggesting strategies for both the supervisor and the employee and making a call to action for the IT leadership at higher education institutions.

**Personal Values—What Drives You?**

Whether or not you realize it, the decisions you make are influenced by what you value—the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas you think are important. These values shape the choices all of us make in our lives, and understanding more about them helps us make choices we can live with, both for our careers and our personal lives. Identifying and understanding your own values is a first step toward understanding your current position and helping you make adjustments to achieve the balance you desire.

Numerous values assessment tools are available in books, in journal articles, and on career development Web sites. Several university career counseling centers, including Arizona State University (http://career.asu.edu/S/careerplan/selfdiscovery/ValuesAssessment.htm) and the University of British Columbia (http://www.sauder.ubc.ca/ccc/docs/AssessmentHandouts.pdf), can get you thinking about what is important to you. Start by examining the *intrinsic* values,
or the things that provide you with inner satisfaction, such as working for a good cause or experiencing adventure, and the *extrinsic* values, such as your salary, job title, or level of authority at work. Factor in lifestyle values, too, such as living in a rural or urban setting, having time for spiritual or personal growth, spending time with family, or being active in your community.

**Evaluating the Gap**
Looking at the values you have identified as most important to you and then reflecting on how you spend your time, do you see any gaps? How have the values you ranked most important influenced your career choices and your life choices? Might you need to make changes to bring your work or your personal life more in line with what you value? Prioritize the multiple roles you perform so that you make decisions and set limits between the demands of work and your home life. To focus, organize your life priorities.

**Managing Priorities**
You can take two simple yet important steps to limit the demands of work and manage priorities. Understanding the job and knowing the schedule can clarify and simplify the overwhelming list of things to do. The suggestions that follow are divided into two sections, for an employee and for a supervisor. Looking at both may give you insight into the workplace environment and the work/life balance.

**Understanding the Job—for Employees**
- **Develop a broad perspective.** Understanding how higher education works can help you decide if you want to stay in the field. Working in higher education is not the same as going to college or attending graduate school. For IT, higher education may be as pressured an environment as any corporation. Getting summers off in higher education is a myth for IT—summer is the busy season for many IT departments trying to catch up on systems upgrades while students and faculty are not on campus. At the same time, summer may be the most difficult season for parents of young children who need to balance summer camps, vacation, and simple relaxation with hectic, high-pressure schedules at work.
- **Know the goals.** For a staff member, knowing why something must be done can be very helpful. A good deal of frustration from having too much on your plate can be relieved by understanding the project goals. It is also easier to discuss how to balance workload if you have the whole picture.
Understand expectations. Make sure you understand your job description and the expectations of your supervisors. For example, a frequent point of contention is after-hours communications. Are staff members expected to check e-mail in the evenings or on weekends? Do you have to carry a cell phone or a pager? What are the policies covering off-hours? If you take responsibility for meeting communications expectations, you should be able to take time off without guilt or recrimination.

Understanding the Job—for Supervisors

Know the goals. Really understanding the environment and expectations of your job makes setting priorities simpler. Maintaining perspective on what is important—what must be done immediately and what can wait—becomes easier if you see the big picture. A supervisor must determine and communicate goals and objectives clearly. Know where you are going and what you expect yourself and others to do. Be available for questions, and anticipate them. Explain how your department fits into the larger environment. Describe the issues and options. Do not expect everyone to understand your perspective every time. Be patient.

Distribute decision making. One way to help staff understand priorities is to let staff work with you in setting them. If you can, bring the issues to the table and present the full picture. What resources are available? Are there constraints or issues to address? What are the deadlines? Can the work be distributed across departments? After an open and creative discussion, new alternatives to accomplishing goals may arise, and the team feels a sense of engagement from going through the process together.

Set clear expectations. Clearly communicate expectations around work schedules. If you work 50 hours a week, do you expect everyone to do that? If you arrive at 8:00 a.m., should everyone be there? Is flextime an option? Do departmental habits or customs dictate staff hours? Can staff telecommute regularly? Do they have Internet access at home provided as part of their compensation packages? What about laptops? Decide on acceptable behaviors and be explicit about your expectations. What are the policies? You can take the following specific steps to achieve clarity:

- Work with staff and human resources to develop a set of operational norms that include work hours. Communicate these to everyone.
- If people do not meet expectations (for example, by coming in at 10:00 a.m.)
each day), let them know immediately. Tell them what you expect (everyone at their desks by 9:00 a.m.) and ask for the rationale behind the later arrival time. Perhaps the expectations were not clear, or the person might have a long commute or childcare responsibilities. If exceptions are not acceptable, you will need to work out a performance plan to ensure changes.

- Publish clear policies on after-hours coverage. If you expect staff to check e-mail at regular intervals on weekends, make it part of the job description and orientation. Do not assume everyone knows what he or she should do.

Know the Schedule—for Employees

- Understand business cycles. If you know that the end of August and early September will be busy on campus, try not to plan competing events at home. This is not always possible, of course, especially if you have young children starting school who need extra time to adjust. Discuss options for a more flexible schedule with your supervisor—in advance.

- Share the load. Get to know your colleagues. If you build good relationships with them, it will be easier to spot areas of overlap. Know the team’s strengths and weaknesses, and share the burdens. If you see another team member struggling with something, offer to assist. Then when you are under pressure, chances are co-workers will help you in return.

- Communicate often. Communication is key. For supervisors, employees, and communities, it is important to keep communication flowing. Understand the relevant goals, know the priorities and who has responsibility for each task, and be clear on the deadlines. Share questions and concerns before problems get out of hand. Maintaining good communication with partners at home is also critical. Further, knowing when problems really are based at work and not at home can help prevent arguments. It is also important to keep a sense of humor and perspective.

Know the Schedule—for Supervisors

- Know cycles and patterns. Higher education has routine events and regular cycles. Every year the academic calendar dictates the work on a college or university campus. Developing a calendar of activities and reviewing it with the staff well in advance of the events is basic to good project planning and can help avoid surprises and late nights at work.
Accommodate the schedule. The back-to-school time can be particularly taxing and affect schedules more than other times of the year. Hiring temporary workers and scheduling student workers for fall hours before they leave for the summer break are two useful techniques. Working across traditional boundaries can also be helpful. For example, the administrative systems group is busy at the end of the fiscal year, not at the start of the fall semester, so some staff time may be available to assist with fall activities. At Brandeis, everyone in the Library and Technology Services division pitches in on Opening Sunday, when new students arrive. A tremendous team-building event that provides great visibility for the department, it also provides help to the small group supporting student computing and telephony when they need it most.

Productivity and Managing Time
Controlling the demands of work and being productive requires that you manage your time well. This is easier said than done, but a few basics will help you find the model that works best for you.

Managing Time—for Employees

- **Create a schedule.** Follow a schedule as much as possible. If your work offers a shared calendar utility, use it—it’s easier to schedule meetings and make effective use of everyone’s time. If you can keep to a routine schedule and mark blocks of time for regular tasks, you can better plan and execute your work. Once you get into a routine, you will see how long it actually takes to do something and become better at predicting your schedule.

- **Find a time-management strategy.** Many time management models can help you organize your schedule. David Allen proposed one popular approach, chiefly making and using lists. Allen’s model offers ways to collect things that demand attention, process them, organize the results, review options, and do something about them. His theory is, do it now or do it later, and schedule it, delegate it, or forget it.7

- **Plan some uninterrupted time.** Reserve an hour of quiet time every day, and close your office door if you can. Use the uninterrupted time to catch up on e-mail, work on projects, or return calls. Marking that hour a day in your calendar will keep others in the department from scheduling you then. If taking that time during the day is not possible, try to schedule it at the end or beginning of the day. Know the flow of work around you, and adjust to it.
Managing Time—for Supervisors

- **Respect others.** Your calendar is important, yes, but remember to respect your staff’s time as well. Hold meetings only when necessary, and keep them short. Check to see if staff are busy before initiating a meeting. Give advance warning on the time and topic. All meetings should have agendas and minutes.

- **Open door policy.** If you need time to concentrate on writing or making calls, put the time into your calendar and shut the door. As long as others know the signal, and you are available for consultation on a regular basis, holding aside occasional periods of solitude will not cause a problem.

When Worlds Collide
Making choices is what the balance between work and life is all about. There may be times when the choice between moving ahead with your career takes a back seat to your health or happiness at home. How to make choices and deal with the demands for your time and energy are up to you. The values you identify as important can guide you in making decisions.

One of the places where conflict arises, for women in particular, comes during childbearing years. The decisions on having children, whether to interrupt career plans, how soon to return to work, and how to manage ongoing child care are a source of conflict for many workers. According to a 2002 RAND study, whether women remain in the workforce will depend to a great extent on working parents’ ability to balance work and family. As a woman enters the labor force, not all of her homemaking responsibilities will be transferred to others. These dual work and homemaking responsibilities can strain a woman’s limits on time and effort. Women (and their spouses or partners who share in homemaking responsibilities) are therefore likely to increasingly favor family-friendly workplace policies and benefits.\(^8\)

Similarly, working adults may face greater demands when it comes to caring for aging parents. According to the same RAND study, the proportion of elderly people requiring help with daily activities increased from 35 percent in 1984 to nearly 43 percent in 2004.\(^9\) To provide this help, middle-aged and older workers may increasingly need flexible scheduling and assistance with finding caregivers. Individuals who care for both children and aging parents may feel pressure from both sides at the same time.
Fortunately for many of us, institutions of higher education have led the way in providing policies and services that support faculty and staff. On-campus child care, health and wellness programs, telecommuting opportunities, flexible working hours, and more generous leave policies can assist staff in balancing these family and work demands. Careful, thoughtful, and open communication with your supervisor, your colleagues, your partner, and your family is critical to dealing with these special demands.

**Dealing with Burnout**

We have all heard colleagues describe themselves as having had enough of the pressures and demands of the job. Not only do self-described workaholics experience high levels of stress and anxiety, but even those who try hard to maintain a reasonable work/life balance will at times succumb to stress. Burnout is not simply excessive stress but a complex reaction to ongoing stress—“a physical, mental, and emotional response” that often includes emotional exhaustion and an increasingly negative attitude toward work and perhaps life. A person who is overwhelmed, overworked, or burned out can not only be ineffective in his or her job and have a very negative effect on colleagues but also is at risk of serious depression that can threaten employment, relationships, and health. College and university health centers and counseling centers have resources available to help individuals deal with job burnout and identify early indicators of a developing problem. It is important for all of us to observe the early signs of burnout and develop strategies to avoid it.

Mental health associations, counseling centers, and career Web sites offer lots of advice on how to identify problems and monitor levels of stress. Not surprisingly, many of the strategies for preventing burnout are the same as those recommended for managing stress. A good tool for understanding and preventing burnout is available from coping.org (http://www.coping.org/growth/burnout.htm). Examining and making changes to your job or even to your daily routine can help prevent stress from building.

**Making Changes**

This may seem dramatic, but many times a drastic change is needed to obtain your desired balance. If your work schedule is excessive or inflexible, seek remedies from your institution—talk candidly about the situation with your supervisor. Flexible scheduling tends to increase employee satisfaction and lessen the conflict between work and family. When the work schedule fits poorly with an employee’s preferences, burnout is more likely.
If your institution cannot accommodate you, you may want to seek other positions at other places. IT is a very mobile profession; use that to your advantage. If IT is the source of your problems with balance, consider changing careers. For some people, the fast pace of change in technology may be a reason to get off the IT career track.

**Strategies to Promote Balance—for Employees**

- **Take time off.** Work has been hectic for months and things at home have been busy. Tension has been building for weeks. What should you do? Plan a vacation and take it! Your vacation can be a day on the porch with a good book, a picnic by a river or lake with the kids, or a trip to a far away location. The point is—it is not work. A break in the routine, even a small one, can bring back perspective. Relaxation is important for good physical and mental health.

- **Take a lunch break.** This may not always be possible, but no one should work through lunch every day. Get outside into the fresh air and sunshine. Take a 10-minute walk. Take care of yourself, and then you can take care of others.

- **Exercise.** Working up a good sweat eliminates lots of frustration and has many other benefits. It takes time to make the commitment, so work on managing your calendar and your time. Make exercise a priority.

- **Volunteer.** Join a committee and get a new perspective on the organization. Meet new people and give yourself a new challenge. Volunteering can lead to a new job, help you contribute to your organization or community, and break up your routine.

- **Learn something new.** Teach a class or take one. Can you use the class to make your job easier? Or to help you get another job in the future?

- **Laugh.** Keep your sense of humor. Read the comics every day. Tell a silly joke. Blow bubbles.

- **Get help.** Ask for help if you need it.

**Strategies to Promote Balance—for Supervisors**

- **Be a role model.** Follow the preceding advice and let your employees do the same. Work on making your organization healthy and productive. No one is irreplaceable, and no one needs to be there all the time. You may find your employees more relaxed when you have been away—they can get things done.
in your absence. Insist that staff take all the vacation they earn. One IT division at an institution in the east implemented a policy where every IT staff member was required to take five consecutive working days of vacation every year. Temporary staff can help if necessary. Train other people to help where they can—cross-training is a morale builder that benefits everyone in the organization. Remember that you are a role model for your employees. What kind of manager or leader do they see? Can you find positive ways to change your behavior? It will help them as well.

- **Cultivate the next generation.** Build a good team with good managers and next-generation leaders. If you have a good team working for you, you can relax more yourself. The trust you have in each other will provide the stability and structure needed for letting people take vacation or pass tasks to team members.

- **Promote camaraderie.** Allow for humor and play in the organization. Food is a great icebreaker and a way to get people to mingle. Could you have lunch as a group? Are there playing fields nearby for a quick softball game? How about bowling during a winter break? Movies and popcorn? Potluck lunches? Do you do team-building exercises during meetings to get to know each other? Do you have casual dress days? Do you have “team” shirts or other types of rewards for staff? Anything outside the routine can help in creating a strong team, but remember to respect individual preferences on participation.

- **Use your resources.** Use your human resources department as a place to get advice when staff members need help. Often the HR office can point to resources or offer suggestions on how to open up channels of communication.

**Conclusion**

Our profession is full of people who have found ways to achieve a balance that works for them, providing career satisfaction and personal fulfillment. It can be done. Finding that balance is key. We believe that IT professionals who build supportive, friendly relationships with their co-workers and network with their higher education counterparts feel more satisfied with their jobs and more able to achieve a work/life balance.

While this chapter provides advice and techniques for finding and maintaining a healthy work/life balance, our work leads us to conclude also that as a profession
we must make a concerted effort to pay attention to the jobs that we ask people to do. We in leadership roles need to carefully manage the job expectations and requirements so that requirements are realistic and expectations can be met without excessive compromises. Clearly, doing so is in the best interests of our institutions and our employees.

Endnotes


2. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. David Allen, Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity (New York: Penguin Books, 2001). His Web site (http://www.davidco.com/what_is_gtd.php) describes his methodology and offers suggestions to get started. Allen also made the point that everything we do, both work and personal tasks, should be viewed together. On any given day you may have to write project specifications, take your daughter to basketball practice, attend a meeting with the provost, and pay your property taxes. He argued that his methods, in order to be effective, need to apply across the work/life spectrum. This translates into keeping all of your tasks on one calendar.


9. Ibid.

Useful Web References

Work/Life Balance

- Articles with strategies for overcoming burnout: [http://www.inc.com/guides/growth/20792.html]
- Institute on Work & Family at Boston College: [http://www.bc.edu/centers/cwf/research/]

Ways to Work

- David Allen: [http://www.davidco.com]
- Publications on appreciative inquiry and thinking differently about how we work: [http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/research/bibPublished.cfm]
- Marcus Buckingham, author and keynote speaker at EDUCAUSE 2004, about thinking positively about how we work: [http://www.marcusbuckingham.com]
- Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0743269519/102-5557301-7363344?v=glance&n=283155]

Women in Technology

- A collection of articles on women in leadership: [http://www.fastcompany.com/guides/leadwoman.html]
- Listserv and forum for women in technology: [http://www.systers.org]
- American Association of University Women: [http://www.aauw.org]; see especially [http://www.aauw.org/research/womenatwork.cfm]
- Women in Technology International: [http://www.witi.org]
- University of Massachusetts at Lowell site on Women at Work, with references to other resources: [http://www.uml.edu/centers/women-work]
- Professional development and networking for women in technical professions: [http://www.womenintechnology.org]
- The Anita Borg Institute: [http://www.anitaborg.org]
- The National Center for Women & Information Technology: [http://www.ncwit.org]
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