



Work-Life Balance

TAKE BACK CONTROL OF YOUR TIME – AND YOUR LIFE

by Dori Saltzman / July 02, 2012

Travel sellers must manage competing priorities continually. Tasks hit all the time, from all directions, frequently at the same time. Most react impulsively,

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Jeff Davidson, work-life balance expert

GET OVER MULTITASKING

Multiple priorities need to be balanced and maintained continually, but multitasking is not the answer, said Jeff Davidson, author of *Breathing Space*.

“Multitasking means you’re attempting to take on two or more tasks at the same time.”

That’s OK when the tasks are low level and familiar and there’s no danger involved – say reading the newspaper

bouncing unconsciously from one task to another.

There's a better way. Pre-establishing a limited number of priorities and knowing when each priority should dominate will allow agents to manage their time more effectively, according to Jeff Davidson, a.k.a. "the Work-Life Balance Expert."

A conscious approach to your priorities also creates a sense of control – and a more comfortable work-life balance, said Davidson, executive director of the Breathing Space Institute and author of *Breathing Space* and *Simpler Living*, among others.

"Travel agents always have more to do. New travel plans, new government regulations to learn, keeping up with the competition – theoretically your day never ends. You could sit there until the next morning doing productive stuff," Davidson said.

But it's unhealthy to live your life constantly "on" – balance is required. And the way to find balance is to manage your priorities.

Travel Market Report asked Davidson to elaborate.

Identify your priorities

The first step in managing priorities is to verbalize them. Make a list.

If your list is longer than nine or 10, you're probably listing subdivisions of the main priorities. In a given day, a typical professional is going to have somewhere between five and nine major priorities, Davidson said.

Priorities should be identified as broad categories – like career, health, family, etc. By ordering these priorities consciously, it is easier to determine whether something requiring your attention belongs at the top, middle or bottom of your daily or weekly "to do" list.

"Priority means it's of the greatest importance," Davidson said.

Let one priority dominate – sometimes

On any given day, most people do at least one or two tasks associated with all their priorities, but one or two priorities will dominate.

So though it might be a work day dedicated to your career, you may still go for a jog (health) and take the kids to school (family).

and eating cereal. But when both tasks require your brain's sharp attention, multitasking is actually a futile effort.

"You think you're doing both activities well, but what's really happening is your brain is reverberating back and forth between the activities and you lose productivity."

Rather than trying to do two or three things concurrently, busy people need to tackle one item at a time.

You can switch between tasks, so long as you give your full attention to each one when you're working on it. "You still tackle one task at any given time. You can choose to say, 'I've taken that as far as I can for the moment, I'm going to turn my attention to Task B.' That's fine," Davidson said.

Respecting your priorities

Davidson argues that multitasking actually dishonors the priorities you've set for yourself.

"Suppose your children are a huge priority, as is progressing your career. If you bring home work from the office and try to get a booking for somebody while at the same time trying to play with your kid, you're not taking care of your client's business to the best of your ability. And your kid is getting the message that he's going to have to compete for your attention."

What you're actually doing, Davidson said, is "chipping away" at the priorities you've set for your life.

Take Back Control of Your Time – and Your Life

One priority should not dominate all the time, Davidson said. Nor should one priority be dominant all day long. In other words, your career priority should not spill over into your weekends or evenings.

Some separation required

But the days of strict separation between your work and personal life are over. Thanks largely to mobile devices, you can be handling personal business during the work day and career-related business during the evening.

You might order a new pair of shoes while sitting at your desk during the workday, and you might write thank you notes to customers during commercial breaks while watching your favorite TV show in the evening.

Yet some separation is necessary, Davidson advised.

Time with your kids, for instance, should be separate from time working for clients. Trying to do both at the same time will leave your kids feeling like they need to compete for your attention, and your clients feeling like they're not important to you.

Taking back minutes, hours . . .

If one priority is dominating too much, you may need to take back some time and reassign it to other priorities.

If you typically work late, a first step is to start leaving work at a reasonable hour, even if you only do it once or twice a week. Start by leaving 30 minutes earlier than you usually do, then bump it up to an hour.

People need to have a life outside of work, Davidson said. They need time to spend with their friends, their kids, their spouses, even just with themselves.

“You need to not be ‘on’ all the time. Human physiology is [such that] we are not wired to be ‘on’ all the time,” he explained.

Lunch is another time to reclaim. Rather than work through lunch without leaving your desk, force yourself to go for a walk, call a friend or read a few chapters in a book.

. . . and days

Once you're accustomed to taking time for lunch, or leaving work at a reasonable hour at least a few days a week, try taking a weekend off from work as well.

“Weekends used to be sacrosanct. You’ve got to start carving [out] your weekends again,” he said. Pick one weekend a month where you don’t do paperwork or check your messages more than a couple of times.

Reassign your time

Another tactic is to reclaim time from certain parts of your job and reassign it elsewhere.

For example, if you’re constantly being interrupted by client calls, carve out time for paperwork or research. Change your voicemail to tell callers you’ll be unavailable from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. today.

“People understand and respect this because they’re fighting the same demons,” Davidson said.

Redefining the interruption

Realizing that there are times when imposed tasks will need to take priority also helps.

For example, if growing your business is a priority and you know that getting PR in your local newspaper will help, then an unexpected call from a reporter may take priority for the moment, even on a weekend. However, if you’ve got more business than you know what to do with, feel free to turn the reporter down.

You need to pre-establish your priorities, so when a client calls you know whether to deal with it right away or not. “If you start accepting every little call and every little issue, then you’ve lost track of managing priorities,” he said.

Resource:

Free audio lessons. Visit Davidson’s [website](#) for 10 free audio lessons on topics ranging from prioritizing your time, avoiding multitasking and coping with information overload. The site also links to numerous articles on work-life balance issues.

For more work-life advice from Davidson, see: [“Get Focused: How to Manage Interruptions at Work,”](#) May 24, 2012.