
Editorial: Entrepreneurship: Moving away from work-life balance and toward work-life harmony

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Among entrepreneurship scholars and practitioners, *balance* is the dominant metaphor for describing contexts in which work clashes with life. The results of poor work-life balance include stresses and anxieties that can be deleterious to the wellbeing of individuals, their families, and other people around them. Such implicitly human outcomes occur naturally when work and life are imbalanced because people regard life activities, in an absolute sense, as fundamentally more important than work activities.

In an ordinary or a practical sense, work is vital to the human condition. With work-life balance, one's work increases one's capacity to support and care for self and others. Poor work-life balance, on the other hand, hinders one's own work performance and also damages one's employer: It can affect other members of the organization, directly or indirectly, in negative ways. However, the more important outcomes of poor work-life balance usually tilt in the other direction, toward the quality of one's life, which makes the imbalance more personal and less professional. Over time, the resulting stresses and anxieties can generate negative effects that are potentially mortal or tragic. Most people are working to live, not living to work.

The balance metaphor

The concept of work-life balance has historic roots in the industrialization of commercial activities and organizations. For centuries, rigid and standard weekly schedules and clear temporal denominations of hours and minutes effectively set the boundaries for work and life. As such, when one is not working, one can pursue life activities as one chooses. By the same token, when one is working, one is compelled to pursue work activities in ways chosen by others or determined by authority structures. Such limits create forced tradeoffs that are germane to the balance metaphor.

To be sure, the balance metaphor still applies to employment scenarios in most large organizations. It is a logic for integrating work and life. For employees in those contexts in general, working more requires living less, and vice-versa. However, in entrepreneurship contexts, new ways of integrating life and work are practiced regularly. These ways have become paradigmatic, not merely programmatic. Why are those new ways emerging? Do they herald a new paradigm for entrepreneurship settings? Do they extend the balance metaphor?

The work-life balance metaphor does not describe how most entrepreneurs live and work very well. Based on our research activities and our many engagements and experiences with startups over the years, we believe the integration of life and work in entrepreneurship reflects a different kind of logic. In what follows, we describe some extensions of the balance metaphor based on the nature of entrepreneurial phenomena, technological advancements, cultural changes, policy shifts, and education trends. These extensions illustrate an alternative metaphor based on *harmony*.

The harmonic metaphor

Entrepreneurial careers require robust flexibility. Freedom to work on one's own terms, when one wants and where one wants, is necessary for members of an entrepreneurial venture to retain and cultivate its capacities to pivot and innovate. Flexibility and freedom also enhance



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the capabilities of an entrepreneurial venture's members to manage work-related and personal responsibilities simultaneously; with the same integrated activities. Entrepreneurial ventures are unique in that the boundaries between tasks, authority levels and other traditional limits are not as stark or reliable as they are in more established, larger companies. There are opportunities for synergy between life and work. These distinct aspects give entrepreneurs and their teams greater affordances for shifting limits as necessary, in transformational and dynamic ways, effectively tuning the parameters of their work to maintain harmony with the melodies of their lives.

Whereas the balance metaphor explains these relations in traditional industrial-organizational settings, the harmonic metaphor explains them far more coherently in entrepreneurial settings. Business scholars and popular press authors have begun pointing out the shortcomings of work-life balance over the past two decades. A simple literature search will reveal contributions showing that harmony, integration and other metaphors for synergy have been suggested explicitly as better alternatives. What is the need for these contributions? No matter what it is, those contributions are not adopted in management research as readily as they are in entrepreneurship research. Why not? What is different about entrepreneurship?

Harmony versus balance in entrepreneurship

We see two underlying reasons for the lack of adoption noted above, which both derive from the differences between management and entrepreneurship. First, traditional strategic planning sets a course for an organization that its structures and processes must follow. The rigidity of its approach eventually rubs out frictions and snuffs out clashes between life and work for an organization's members. Its effects are magnified in extreme circumstances (positive or negative) and they are especially powerful over longer stretches of time. There is little place for harmony in such organizational contexts. By contrast, such forces compel an organization's members to either find the capacity to balance competing demands, or to leave the organization voluntarily or involuntarily. Second, as the reader can now see, the logic underlying the work-life balance metaphor has spawned other conceptualizations into the nomenclature of managerial sensemaking, such as person-organization *fit*.

The metaphors of balance and fit reflect a paradigmatic assumption of stasis, in which the logics of work and life oppose each other functionally. World-class entrepreneurial ventures run on a composition of qualitatively different energies from various team members and venture partners. Harmonies amongst those diverse energies drive higher-order effects that enable entrepreneurial firms to respond to radical environmental shifts. Balance and fit do not make much sense in entrepreneurial settings. The static character of their assumptions thwarts the evolutionary nature of entrepreneurial phenomena. This character not only limits the innovative capacities of an entrepreneurial firm to promote synergies between members and partners, but also stymies how each member personally integrates their life and work.

The underlying logics of balance and harmony are coherent if each is applied to the right context. Entrepreneurial ventures look within, to navigate external environmental uncertainties. Strategic management and planning look without, to establish internal operational certainty. Harmony applies to the former. Balance applies to the latter.

What is it about the internal operations of entrepreneurial firms? Why does work-life balance not always apply very well in those settings? A large proportion of entrepreneurial firms rely on high-technology applications in their core operations. Historically, unlike for military organizations and large corporations, high-technology business solutions have not been very accessible for small entrepreneurial firms. Today they are more commonplace. The reality has shifted as the affordability of technology has increased.

Technological trends continue to yield breakthrough functionalities due to the social mechanisms that are increasingly embedded in new technologies. As the technological and social realms converge, entrepreneurs can better negotiate all kinds of deals and execute business activities and transactions from their homes, in automobiles or on airplanes. Work can thus begin to harmonize with life, with fewer frictions and more synergies, enabling one's professional and personal identities to inform each other.

Whereas boundaries between work and life are still important and necessary, the entrepreneurial age is extending the balance metaphor so far that such boundaries are being redrawn on finer scales, with novel harmonic features yielding synergies between life and work. For entrepreneurship, this illustration delineates how the harmonic metaphor challenges traditional notions of balance in powerful and basic ways, inviting novel and significant theorizing and enabling unique practical approaches.

Conclusion

As the industrial-organizational paradigm slowly recedes and the entrepreneurial paradigm rises, cultural shifts and policy changes will favor and promote more entrepreneurial activities. The inefficiencies of traditional and established companies have become more apparent in recent years, manifested as layoffs, closings and retrenchment activities. Government entities and policymakers with interests in economic development are responding with new legal statutes that are designed especially for entrepreneurial activities. National, provincial, state and municipal governments are offering incentives and grant programs to encourage innovation.

We have watched a slow but powerful shift in the culture-based definition of entrepreneurship and meaning of entrepreneurship as a viable career path. Social narratives, cultural values and norms, and policy changes are aligning to better support creative and unusual entrepreneurial endeavors. Such trends help entrepreneurs integrate personal, family, and community commitments, which fosters a greater sense of harmony in their lives with respect to their work.

A growing emphasis on entrepreneurship in primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions has increased the number of entrepreneurship curricular offerings and programs. Twenty years ago, about 40% of a university business school class might be expected to indicate a serious desire to become an entrepreneur, controlling for those students already in family business. Today, it is closer to 75%. All kinds of educational institutions are responding to this trend. As the field of entrepreneurship research evolves, it yields unique, endogenously generated frameworks now being taught in degree programs and courses at universities around the world. Future generations of students are more likely than previous generations to pursue entrepreneurship as they launch and build their careers. Their future perspectives on work-life harmony will surely reflect themes we describe in this brief editorial.

The harmonic metaphor stimulates new thinking about the integration of life and work. In our experience, entrepreneurs who attempt to rigidly balance work and life tend to incur debilitating frictions and clashes. The effect is magnified as one's entrepreneurial firm gains traction and grows. Embracing a different paradigm offers substantial heuristic power and theoretic promise for entrepreneurship research to improve its impact on the entrepreneurs of today and tomorrow.

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