

Small-business Owners Search for Work/Life Balance

Small-business owners often cite two reasons for why they start and stay in business: They want to be in control and have more time for family.

Yet once in business, many owners express frustration because they feel neither of these goals is achievable.

“The idea of being in control should lend itself to having the flexibility to decide what you want to do when, and that includes family time,” says (insert local name, title and county office). “Many business owners struggle, though, to find a balance between work and life.”

As the business owner, you are key in achieving business success. Often, especially in the startup phase, the owner has few resources to hire additional help to cover some of the required tasks. So the owner sees the day as a treadmill and consuming all of his or her time. Opening the doors, ordering stock, working with customers, marketing to potential customers, making sales, handling customer service and looking forward can't wait.

Given all of the tasks they need to do, small-business owners often find themselves feeling they are not in control and have less time for “life” than they may have had before. This issue is even more prevalent among home-based business owners, who often begin their business with an even greater desire for a work/life balance.

“Small-business owners need not give up on achieving balance between their work life and personal life,” says Glenn Muske, rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist for the North Dakota State University Extension Service. “At times, the business life will be all-consuming, but with prioritizing and planning, it is possible to run a successful business and to realize the personal goals one has also.

“Start with schedules, and then follow what you planned out,” he adds. “Yes, there will be adjustments that need to be made, but a simple schedule makes you aware of your priorities and subtly forces you to work on the most important items first.”

Another opportunity for small-business owner is to mix family and business. That may mean having family members help in the business, with the trade-off that you spend more time at home. Also understand that the business flow goes up and down, as do family demands. Understand the cycles and plan accordingly.

However, mixing family and business for home-based business owners can be troublesome. Being at home often sends the message to the family that you are available. You need to set boundaries. Even very young children can learn that a closed door means you are at work. Also, set times, such as the morning, when you focus on work.

Organization of your business and work space also lends itself to achieving the work/life balance you want. As with prioritizing, you want to spend your time on those tasks, whether work or family, that provide you with the most value.

For example, having the tools to do a job in one space and doing related tasks all at one time is helpful. Cluster meetings together, do office work at one time and even set aside certain times for handling the influx of communication you receive each day. And cut down on unnecessary communication. Be selective in what you read and handle. The old standard, “Only handle a piece of paper once,” remains true whether it is paper or an email. You can read informational items in those spare moments that come along.

“Work/life balance is possible,” says (insert last name). “It takes effort to make it happen, but it certainly can be reached. Spending time scheduling and prioritizing up front will allow you to achieve balance and make everything flow more smoothly.”

The NDSU Extension Service has resources to help business owners set priorities and organize their business. More small-business information is online at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness/. Visit the site to register for a regular small-business newsletter.

eXtension, an educational partnership of 74 universities, including NDSU, is another resource. It provides objective and research-based information and learning opportunities to help people improve their lives. Visit www.extension.org/entrepreneurship.