

Balancing Act

Adopting a new strategic role is making it even more difficult for HR executives and practitioners to achieve work/life balance.

By Julie Cook Ramirez

From his very first day on the job, the demands on Scott Eblin were huge. As vice president of HR for the gas pipeline division of a large energy company, he was part of a management team brought in to transform a bankrupt, regulated utility into a market-oriented, competitive company. As he puts it, "there was a lot of pressure to change a lot of things at once."

That was no easy task and Eblin – who had served previously in top HR spots, but never before at the Fortune 500 level – quickly found himself overwhelmed. Just one month into the job, the CEO called him into her office and suggested they go out for a beer.

"While we were waiting for the elevator, she looked at me and said, 'This is a little steeper climb than you thought it was going to be, isn't it?' " says Eblin, who asked not to name the company. "She said, 'I need you to stay sane; I need you to take care of yourself and not get so sucked into the swirl that you lose your perspective because I brought you here for your perspective.' "

That conversation, along with a 360-degree peer review in which Eblin says he "just got slammed" by his staff, served as a wake-up call. He began paying more attention to work/life balance, returning to what he calls "some spiritual routines, some physical routines and some mental routines," including meditation, reading and journaling in the mornings.

These days, Eblin no longer works as an HR executive. Instead, he is now an executive coach, president of The Eblin Group in Herndon, Va., and author of *The Next Level: What Insiders Know about Executive Success*. Still, he practices the same daily rituals to ensure he is grounded before embarking on whatever his planner holds for him.

"I use that morning time to set the course of the day and ask myself, 'If I'm going to be at my best, how do I need to show up?' " he says. "Is every day perfect? Not by a long shot. Do I have days when the stress gets really high? Yeah, sure. But if I come back to those kinds of routines, it makes all the difference."

Eblin's situation may have been extreme, in that he eventually left the HR profession entirely. However, his experience in struggling with work/life balance is one that HR professionals increasingly face.

"As HR elevates to being a real strategic partner with a seat at the table for senior leadership discussions, [its practitioners] are getting caught in the eye of the storm of what those [executive] lifestyles are really like," says Kevin Cashman, CEO and founder of LeaderSource Inc., a Minneapolis-based leadership development and executive coaching consultancy. "Like every other executive, they are getting hit by a wave of unending demands, particularly in global companies with 24-hour clocks, where they are wired in from every imaginable device."

As a result, "HR people, as a rule, have no work/life balance at all," says Liz Ryan, founder and CEO of WorldWIT, a Boulder, Colo.-based global businesswomen's network. Having spent 25 years as a corporate HR leader, Ryan says she sees HR "at the bottom of the heap when it comes to personal work/life balance." She blames the situation on a variety of factors, including HR professionals' own desires to prove their worth.

"HR people are trying to legitimize themselves by coming in on weekends and working late into the night to prove that they are just as serious as any other business person in the place," she says. "They have fallen into the trap of always apologizing and trying to 'do better.' That really works against their being able to have any work/life balance."

HR's stature within the organization may have been elevated in recent years, but Ryan believes far too many human resource executives still see themselves as underlings, rather than strategic partners. Therein lies part of the problem. While a CFO may think nothing of announcing his or her intentions to leave work early for a round of golf, Ryan says few HR executives would be comfortable making the same declaration. That mind-set is disturbing to Eblin.

"To me, that says, 'My view of myself is to take the order, as opposed to having relationships with my fellow executives as peers,' " he says. "If you hold the point of view that you can't do what everybody else does and take the afternoon off, you diminish yourself in the eyes of the executive team. If you don't have confidence in yourself, they are not going to have it in you."

Stick to Rituals

As with Eblin, morning rituals play a key role in maintaining work/life balance for Margaretta Noonan, executive vice president and chief administrative officer (in charge of HR) for Hudson Highland Group Inc., a New York-based professional staffing and human resource consulting firm that spun off from Monster Worldwide three years ago. In her case, morning gym time is sacrosanct. Because Hudson has a large number of operations in the Asia-Pacific, there are times when she is asked to take part in conference calls beginning at 7 a.m., however. While she obviously can't decline the invitation every time, Noonan says she does refuse to participate "often enough" for people to understand that her time is hers to give.

Noonan also achieves work/life balance by setting "electronic boundaries," a strategy that is endorsed by Karol Rose, a work/life and human capital consultant with Karol Rose & Associates, in Edgartown, Mass., former leader of the work/life practice at PricewaterhouseCoopers and author of *Work-Life Effectiveness: Bottom-Line Strategies for Today's Workplace*.

She recalls a senior HR director telling her how her boss had expected her to be reachable by cell phone 24 hours a day. If he had a brilliant idea at 2 a.m., he would call her. After several years of complying with his request, she found herself faced with an ultimatum from her husband: "It's either the phone or me." Fearing termination, she informed her boss she would no longer be "sleeping with her cell phone." To her surprise, he respected her pronouncement and she is still employed by the company today.

By refusing to be available 24 hours a day, this HR professional, who asked not to be named, not only bettered her chances of obtaining work/life balance, she also bettered her standing in the eyes of her chief executive, according to Gayle Lantz, organizational development consultant and executive coach, and president of Gayle Lantz LLC in Birmingham, Ala.

"I'm sure she gained the respect of the CEO by taking a stand and saying, 'No, this is how it would work best for me,' " says Lantz. "I wish more HR people had the courage to do that."

For Genevieve Girault, manager of human capital communications for PricewaterhouseCoopers in New York, technology plays a big role in helping her achieve work/life balance. The mother of two young children, a 6-year-old girl and a 4-year-old autistic boy, Girault works from home on Tuesdays and Fridays. On those days, she has the flexibility to attend meetings at her son's school or serve as a chaperone for one of her daughter's field trips.

BlackBerry in hand, Girault feels confident she will be able to respond quickly should someone at work need to reach her. She is adamant, however, that she has not fallen into the trap of 24/7 availability, adding that the BlackBerry gets turned off when she ends her work day, usually at 5 p.m., to have dinner with her family. That said, she does admit turning the device back on from time to time just to make sure there's nothing pressing awaiting her.

"I can turn it on quickly, check for messages, and then have piece of mind, knowing I can focus on my family without that nagging feeling that somebody's trying to reach me," she says.

Unfortunately, not all HR professionals are able to achieve peace of mind. In her past position as executive director of human resources for Frederick County, Md. public schools, Linda Barkdoll handled everything from recruiting and hiring to contract negotiations and disciplinary actions. Those weren't the duties she loved most, however. A self-described "problem-solver," Barkdoll particularly enjoyed counseling employees and helping them find solutions to issues plaguing their professional and personal lives.

"I'm a good listener, and it was easy for me to listen to employees describe their personal matters," she says. "I was honored that they were comfortable sharing that with me."

Over time, Barkdoll found that the credibility she had built among the workforce led to massive demands on her time. As more employees discovered her helpful nature, the more they turned to her to help them resolve their problems.

From Barkdoll's perspective, this was a good thing, but she hadn't been hired merely to counsel employees. She still had all her other HR duties to attend to. However, she found it difficult to hand employees' troubles over to other members of her small HR staff. Not only were employees relying on her to help them find solutions, but they were counting on her to respect their privacy and not divulge the details of their confidential conversations. Barkdoll was overwhelmed.

"I have a very strong work ethic, and if my bosses are expecting me to get something done within a certain time frame, I feel obligated to do everything I can to meet those expectations," she says. "I just couldn't get everything done in the workday, so I felt compelled to work long hours to fulfill my obligations and to help the people who were relying on me. Between the two, it just took over my life."

In the end, Barkdoll's lack of work/life balance led her to opt for early retirement. She left her post in 2001 after 31 years working for Maryland's schools. Such a loss is a huge blow to an organization because of all the knowledge that walks out the door with a seasoned HR professional, says Rose. "We are losing a very valuable resource and we end up with pieces when these people leave an organization," says Rose. "In HR, that's huge because of all the relational capital we are losing."

After leaving her position with the school district, Barkdoll spent the next four years as an adjunct teacher for Hagerstown Business College in Hagerstown, Md., conducting classes, workshops and seminars on topics such as recruiting and hiring, as well as termination and dismissal processes. At one point, she even returned to the school district to serve as interim HR director for one year. In 2005, she accepted a part-time position as coordinator of the graduate program in human resource development at McDaniel College in Westminster, Md.

Barkdoll's responsibilities are still heavy – recruiting and counseling new students, teaching courses and marketing the program by building contacts in the business world – but she claims it doesn't begin to compare with the rigors of an HR leader's job. In other words, she's got the best of both worlds.

"The change has allowed me to stay active . . . helping others to gain skills in the HR field and teaching others to do what I did," she says. "I can do this job conscientiously and still have time to do other things in my life."

In recent months, those "other things" sadly included the terminal illness and eventual death of Barkdoll's mother this spring. Had she still been working a full-time HR director's position, she believes she would not have had the flexibility to accompany her mother to doctors' appointments, spend precious final days with her, or make arrangements for her funeral.

Rest and Relaxation

Barkdoll concedes that she could have done more to try to achieve better work/life balance in her role as an HR director. That said, she did employ a few strategies to maximize her down time. Although hesitant to be out of the workplace for an extended period, Barkdoll would frequently use her vacation days to piece together long weekends or tack them on at the end of a business trip. While gone from the office, she encouraged her staff to handle matters by themselves, rather than feeling compelled to call her. As a result, Barkdoll gained some much-needed relaxation, and her staff felt trusted and empowered.

Ike Reighard, chief people officer for Atlanta-based HomeBanc Mortgage Corp., agrees that "finding the right people and empowering them to work together as a team is one of the great cures for burn-out." A former pastor, Reighard still prides himself on speaking to community groups, involving himself with local charities and serving on the boards of several educational institutions. At times, such activities take him away from the workplace, but he feels confident his team is equipped to handle any matters that may arise in his absence.

Unfortunately, the fear of being away from the office prevents some HR professionals from taking advantage of vacation days. That fact was made painfully clear to PricewaterhouseCoopers' HR executives last year when the department began looking at metrics related to vacation time around the firm. Much to their surprise, HR practitioners discovered they ranked among the worst when it came to forfeiting vacation time. Girault estimates that more than 60 percent of HR people at the firm had "capped out" and weren't accumulating any more vacation time because they weren't using what they already had.

Seeking to boost company awareness of the importance of taking regularly scheduled vacations, HR initiated a communications campaign that involved hanging posters in PwC offices and distributing a booklet explaining how the company's employee-assistance program could help them plan for days off. In addition, every HR person at the firm was required to attend a two-day national HR meeting, which focused heavily on work/life among other issues. New metrics are not yet available, but Girault is confident that her colleagues in the HR department have improved when it comes to taking time off.

Few people would argue with the value of taking a few days off. Yet Ryan stresses that simply being gone from the office does not guarantee work/life balance. "It's a deeper question than actually going on vacation or not going on vacation," she says. "For the HR people who feel so stressed that they regularly give up their vacation time, the problem is not going to be solved by them going on vacation because they are just going to be sitting on the beach stressing out about the work on their desk."

Reighard believes he has found the solution to that particular issue by booking his family vacation in Hawaii every year. Because there's a six-hour time difference between Atlanta and Hawaii, the work day is virtually over by the time Reighard gets up, eats breakfast and places his daily phone call to the office. That allows Reighard to relax because, as he puts it, "you don't worry about anything in the office the rest of the day because you've already found out everything that went on that day." What's more, the sheer distance alone makes it highly unlikely he will find any emergency pressing enough to put his vacation on hold and return.

"If I was close by and there was an emergency, I would feel compelled to run back and try to handle it," he says. "Getting that far away and making the commitment to call in every day allows me the opportunity to refuel."

July 1, 2006

Copyright 2006© LRP Publications