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“Get Back Your Life”

by Shannon Scully and Lisa Waddle

3 ways to improve your business by getting a life

As a small business owner, it’s easy for work to take over your life. You started your company doing everything yourself, and that workaholic lifestyle was probably rewarded in the short term with business success. Long term, though, it’s a prescription for disaster, leading to personal burnout and stalled company growth.

That’s why you need to keep reminding yourself of the payoffs from integrating your work and life. These include deeper relationships with family and friends, better health, and a sense of purpose and peace in your life. Only by recharging yourself can you return to your business with new ideas, a fresh perspective and the ability to reenergize your employees.

As a small business owner, you’re well-positioned to ease the tension between work and play. Unlike corporate 9-to-5 employees, you don’t have to live by inflexible rules from higher-ups. As the boss, you have control over your most important resource: time.

On the following pages, small business owners tell how they’ve made time for family, hobbies, rest and relaxation – all while running successful companies. For some, their integrated lifestyle resulted from a personal crisis that forced them to be as deliberate about building their life as they are about building their business. Others have taken a more gradual approach. For all, their advice boils down to three steps: 1. Get help, 2. Set Limits, and 3. Grow Yourself.

Remember, you want to build a business, not just do a job. That’s one of the big reasons many small business owners left the corporate grind in the first place.

1. Get Help

Multitasking is a way of life for most small business owners. Besides company president, you’re often the salesperson, receptionist and janitor. But trying to do it all swamps you in day-to-day details, keeping you from being strategic about your company’s growth.



With the help of technology and staff, you can stay in touch with your company without having to be present. Learning to delegate also allows you to focus on the best use of your skills.

Rick Restelli relies on a strong staff, laptop and cell phone to run his logo apparel company and spend time with his wife and three children. The technology makes it possible for him to leave the office for his children's' soccer games and catch up on work later in the evening.

"It comes down to empowering employees to make decisions, so the work doesn't all end up on my desk," says Restelli, who stated Pittsburgh-based International Apparel PPC, at www.iappc.com, six years ago.

Little did Restelli know how his delegation skills would be put to the test. Last summer, he returned from a business trip with headaches that were diagnosed as a brain tumor. Three days later, Restelli had surgery, with no time to prepare his business for his leave of absence. When he returned to the office a month later, he was pleasantly surprised to find the four-person company still running smoothly.

"It made me realize I didn't have to be there," Restelli says. It also gave Restelli the chance to reevaluate his priorities: he no longer feels guilty for leaving work to be with his family.

Delegation starts with hiring quality staffers. Restelli pays a consultant to find applicants and administer a personality profile test, ensuring candidates are a good fit for his company.

Empowering employees to make decisions allows Karen Borgnes control over her life. She left the corporate world in 1993 to run Kent, Wash.-based Pacific Aero Tech when she couldn't find a way to get her daughter to swim practice by 4 p.m.

"I bought this business so I could have a life," says Borgnes of her airline-repair company. "I make it clear to my employees that I'm not going to be in the office all the time."

Borgnes chooses to work in the office about 24 hours a week. That frees her to be with her two daughters, ages 10 and 6, and volunteer at their school.

For delegation to work, she knows she has to let go of day-to-day decisions. "You can't hog-tie your staff if you decide to go swimming with your kids," says Borgnes, a single mother who doesn't mind if employees bring their kids to the office. It's also important that she trusts her 20 employees to make sound decisions when she's not there.

Borgnes checks her e-mail when she's at home, but has structured her business to run smoothly without her constant input. "I refuse to write job descriptions. If employees see a job to be done, they should do it."

Borgnes considers herself lucky to have a viable business, yet also meet her kids at the school bus several afternoons a week.

"We could have more business if I worked more hours," she says. "But I'm happy with what I make. Big isn't always better."

Roger Greene has taken to heart lessons learned from the crash-and-burn Silicon Valley dotcoms. Since starting software company Ipswitch Inc., 10 years ago, he's worked hard to develop his life holistically, and helps his 140 employees do the same.

“There are too many stories of people who’ve ruined their lives by working all the time. That isn’t the kind of environment I wanted to reproduce,” says Greene, who delegates duties so he has time for cycling, swimming and reading. “Most people don’t want to work 70 hours a week, no matter how much they love it.”

Employees at the Lexington, Mass., firm get four weeks vacation in their first year and five weeks in their second year. It’s an incentive Greene uses to hire the best people who he can trust to do the things he doesn’t have time for.

“I don’t have a beeper, so I’m not bothered about every small decision,” says Greene, who estimates he works a 50-hour week. The strategy has proven successful for Ipswitch, at www.ipswitch.com, which had 2001 revenue of \$21.3 million.

Even if your business is a one-person operation, getting help is essential. Vanessa O’Neal, who started In-Tegral Executive Search & Consulting firm Inc. (www.in-tegralesf.com) three years ago in Fayetteville, N.C., relies on a support network of family and friends.

“My mom will call me and say, ‘Let’s take a break this afternoon.’ That keeps me from spending all my time at work,” says O’Neal, who schedules time for reading, community events and exercise. The flexibility of being the boss makes work/life integration easier, because of the control O’Neal has over her time. “I can take a long lunch and get my nails done, or not take a lunch at all,” she says. “I’m not a club person, so I can work on Saturday nights in my pajamas, then take a weekday afternoon off to play volleyball.”

Jim Warner, president of business counseling firm OnCourse International, depends on delegation and a network of mentors to keep him on track.

“It’s vital to focus on what you’re best at and not fall into the trap of ‘no one can do it as effectively as I can,’” Warner says. “That’s a death knell.”

Having friends who hold him accountable to his goals helped Warner break the workaholic lifestyle he led as head of a software company for 13 years. It took a three-year sabbatical and the sale of that company for Warner to rediscover what it meant to be a complete human being. That led him to start OnCourse International, www.oncoursein.com, where he shares his insights with other small business owners.

Red Flags to Watch For

Don’t wait for a physical or mental breakdown to work on integrating your work and life. Jim Warner, author of *Aspirations of Greatness* (John Wiley, \$27.95), point to these warning signs that you are on the road to burnout:

1. Marital Stress
2. Money matters most. The bottom line is vital to your business’ survival, but it can’t be the driving force of your life.
3. Escapes are out of control. When work, like alcohol, food or gambling, becomes excessive, it’s time to reassess.
4. Poor health. Not taking care of yourself derails the engine of your company.
5. Becoming flat. Total focus on business makes you one-dimensional. If your business is your life now, what will happen when you retire or sell?

2. Set limits

Scheduling time to go to the movies or leaving work early to watch your child play soccer aren't integration if you spend that time on your cell phone or obsessing over a work problem. Likewise, you can't do your best at work when overtired or worried about a sick family member.

Instead, be present in the moment and pay attention to every aspect of your life on a regular basis. Too many small business owners focus exclusively on their business for five or 10 years, saying that once they achieve a certain level of revenue they'll be able to spend time with their family or on hobbies. The problem is, in five years they find they've missed their child's youth or are estranged from their spouse.

Focus can be as simple as stopping for a minute to remind yourself of your goals for your company and your life, and being sure what you're doing is bringing you closer to those ends.

"When I feel I'm not centered during the day, I stop and take a breath," says O'Neal. "That makes for less stress and less mistakes. Corporate America doesn't give you time for that. They're suspicious of anyone just sitting at their desk, looking like they're not working. But that's what it takes."

Deborah Wainstein, owner of Priority Staffing Solutions in New York City, takes a walk outside for a few minutes if she feels overwhelmed. "Getting out of the office and away from the eye of the storm helps me think about things more clearly."

Restelli relies on a cell phone to keep in touch with his office when he's elsewhere, but he doesn't see the need to be reachable 24-7. "There's a power button on the cell phone and so many people don't use that," he says. "You have to set limits. I have learned from older and wise businessmen not to miss these precious days with my family, because if you do it right, your business will still be there when your kids are grown, but the reverse may not be as true."

Soapworks founder Amilya Antonetti stays focused by sticking to a strict schedule. "I live and die by my calendar," says Antonetti, who travels almost 30 weeks a year for her Phoenix-based company that makes hypo-allergenic cleaning products. "It may appear rigid to some, but as a business owner, a mother and a wife, my time is extremely valuable."

Regardless of what's happening at the office, Antonetti blocks off from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. every day to spend with her 9-year old son, David. Afternoons with David are reserved for fun activities, like cooking, yoga or bike riding.

After eating dinner with David and husband Dennis, who also works in the 7-year old Soapworks, Antonetti often goes back to the office for a few hours. Scheduling every minute of her day not only ensures quality family time, it also helps Antonetti make better decisions at work. "I ask employees to schedule specific times to talk with me about problems, rather than just popping in my office. That way, when I'm meeting with someone, they have my undivided attention, and I'm less likely to make a flippant decision," says Antonetti, who manages 52 employees.

At the end of each quarter, Antonetti evaluates her time-management skills, focusing on prioritizing to reach her goals. "If you end up trying to do everything, you feel empty afterwards."

Part of setting limits means making time for vacations – and realizing that when you're off work, you need to let go. Some, like Greene, prefer to go away for several

weeks and never check in with the office. “Seeing that the company can survive without me is a valuable experience,” Greene says.

Others stay connected to a degree, but emphasize the benefits of shutting off work for as long as you’re comfortable.

Simple Steps To Start Integrating NOW

You don’t need to go on a week-long retreat or take a year off to get your life back in order. Here are five steps you can take now that will start integrating your work and life:

1. **Set priorities.** Determine what’s important in your business and personal life and write it down. This list will provide perspective when things get chaotic.
2. **Be still.** Carve out self-reflection time each week to allow ideas to percolate.
3. **Be in the moment.** You never know who you’ll meet while with family or pursuing a hobby. Great business contacts can be made at your child’s soccer game.
4. **Get away.** IF you put out energy all day without a break, you’ll deplete your physical and mental reserves. Retreat to an unused office, rooftop or a quiet place, even if only for a few minutes.
5. **Stick to it.** Integration doesn’t happen overnight; it’s a continual, gradual process. Start with short-term steps and move forward toward your long-term goal.

3. Grow Yourself

Too often, small business owners interweave their identity with their company’s, to a dangerous degree. It’s easy to do when your name is on the business sign and the community views you as the embodiment of your business. But if your identity comes solely from your company, what will you be when it’s time to retire? It’s vital to develop yourself as a person holistically, so your self-worth doesn’t depend on the performance of your business.

That doesn’t mean filling your already packed schedule with more activities. The best internal development may come from sitting quietly, reflecting on your life, purpose and goals. But you also need to schedule downtime, when you’re not thinking about work or other problems. Your hobbies should stretch muscles that aren’t used when running your company, whether physically, mentally, spiritually or emotionally. That way when you do go back to work, you’re recharged and refreshed. And your life becomes about more than work.

“I find myself more energized and committed to the long-term development and success of my company because of the range of outside activities I’m involved in,” says Greene, who this year started playing the piano after hearing a lecture on the importance of music to human development.

“A lot of people work really hard for 30 or 40 years, then retire and try to do all the fun things they didn’t do before,” Greene says. “I’d much rather live life as it goes along and enjoy every year.”

Learning new skills, such as Spanish, is how O’Neal takes off the often-heavy hat of company owner. “It’s a relief to place myself in the position of student,” she says. “It’s not a meditation thing. It’s about sitting and not doing anything.”

For Restelli, being home often means playing with his three children. But he also gets away by himself, making time to ride the Harley-Davidson motorcycle he bought a few years ago.

Wainstein expects her 12 employees to play just as hard as they work. “Everyone has to have an interest or hobby, or the atmosphere becomes stale,” she says.

Saturday horseback rides recharge Wainstein for the long weekdays she puts in at the New York City staffing company she started three years ago. “You’ve got to have something you do because you enjoy it, not because you have to,” she says. “Riding helps me renew myself and regroup for the next week.”

A change of scenery often helps your mind approach work and life problems in new ways. “I have the best ideas when I’m not sitting behind a desk trying to solve a problem,” Wainstein says.

Here’s Help

www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk – This British organization offers resources to help small business owners, including a downloadable manual on work/life balance policies.

Your Best Year Yet! Ten Questions For Making the Next Twelve Months Your Most Successful Ever, by Jinny S. Ditzler (Warner Books, \$12.95). An interactive book that offers step-by-step instructions on setting goals and making changes in your work and life.

Inner Excellence at Work: The Path to Meaning, Spirit and Success by Carol Orsborn (AMACOM, \$14.95).

The Simple Living Network offers advice and resources to live a more conscious, simple, healthy and restorative life. The are at www.simpleliving.net or 1-800-318-5725.