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SMALL-BUSINESS REPORT

Balance Your Life as Well as the Books

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Small Business Report

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Susan Allard was a typical harried small-business owner, busy putting out fires at her fast-growing executive search firm, Allard Associates of San Francisco, and regretting that she had so little time to devote to her personal life.

Then she stumbled onto the services of an executive coach and began to reshape her work-life equation in dramatic ways.

These days Allard is still busy, but she has found time to begin to write a book and has changed her vision of who she is and the role of work in her life.

Striking a better balance between work and life issues has made her more effective on the job as well as off, she said.

"It's about taking the time to reorganize so that you can spend your time being inspired instead of being reactive or just checking off a long list of tasks," said Allard, 52, who juggles the demands of her 23-year-old company with those of her family. She has a daughter in junior high school and another in college.

Offered the temporary services of an executive coach by one of her partner companies, she was so impressed with the results that she signed up for coaching on her own.

Allard figured that others could learn the same lessons about "all work, no play" and has added executive coaching to the services offered by her search firm's parent company, Allard Institute of Davis, Calif. She has also given three-month coaching sessions as gifts to friends and family.

Investing time and money in learning to create a better work-life balance, whether by hiring an executive coach, attending a seminar on the subject or pursuing self-study, is worth the cost, experts say, especially for entrepreneurs and small-business owners.

The potential payoff is in increased productivity and innovation and the resilience necessary to survive and thrive in the long run. That adds up to a competitive advantage no business owner should ignore.

Entrepreneurs, more so than hourly wage or salaried workers, can take steps to create the support structures they need to balance work and life.

"If you are the business owner, you have the flexibility to protect your most valuable asset: yourself," said Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute, a research and advocacy center in New York.

That holds true even if, as her research shows, entrepreneurs and small-business owners typically put in longer days than hourly wage and salaried workers, have more hectic schedules and travel more often.

Learning how to use the flexibility that comes with ownership can create a higher level of work-life satisfaction, she said.

Executive burnout is nothing new. What has changed is the awareness of the need to address the issue and the volume of resources available.

Small-business owners and entrepreneurs can delve into dozens of websites devoted to work-life issues, hire consultants or coaches, sign up for convenient telephone-based seminars or attend classes.

Coaches may differ in how they help business owners reach a healthy balance between work and life, but almost all call for a renewed focus on tending to personal relationships, physical health and emotional or spiritual issues.

"Those three areas that are not work are what give you the ability to work well, to work hard and to continue to get results," said Inga Estes, chief executive and founder of Coaching Corp. in Santa Monica and the former chief executive of an aviation business.

Entrepreneurs busy with sales, production, administration and hiring can get caught in the "as soon as" trap, said Jim Bird, president of WorkLifeBalance.com, a consulting and training firm in Atlanta.

"It's, 'As soon as I get this third shift running right, I'm going to take time with my kids,' or, 'As soon as I get this project done, I'll start exercising.' It can eat you up," said Bird, who grew a fundraising products company from zero to 400 employees before selling it 15 years ago.

He advises clients to use their core values to guide their choices and set the right kind of goals.

"Critical to having work-life balance is having way-of-life goals," Bird said.

It is important, he added, to ask, "How do I want to live my life every day?" and not just, "Where do I want to be tomorrow?"

Reconnecting with what inspired them to start their businesses in the first place also can help entrepreneurs set goals and begin to create a balanced life, experts say.

"Most people go through life doing and don't stop to think, 'Who am I being?' " said Carly Anderson, a certified personal coach and president of Laguna Hills-based Creating Group, whose clients include Susan Allard.

Anderson stresses the importance to small-business owners of regularly taking time to stop and reflect on whether they are spending time on tasks that support their goal of achieving work-life balance.

"Stopping and self-questioning can be the most important thing you do all day, and it's most important just when you think you have no time to do it," Anderson said.

For Allard, taking time to write a personal development plan, which includes scheduling time for personal renewal, has allowed her to take concrete steps to reshape her own work-life equation.

That includes thinking of herself as more than the president of a small company.

"I never knew I had a book in me," said Allard, speaking from her room at the Canyon Ranch spa in Tucson. Taking time for the trip was part of her plan's focus on personal development.

The experience has renewed her energy for work, which she now feels is more aligned with her personal goals.

The satisfaction that comes from that alignment will help her to be more effective in her work and personal life, experts said.

"One of the toughest things for entrepreneurs to understand is that the game of business is not a sprint; it's a marathon," said Estes of Coaching Corp. "Work-life balance is really about pacing, about being able to maintain a steady performance over time."

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