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2-2014

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### Repository Citation

Bartlett, Jennifer A., "The “Weisure” Class: The Elusive Goal of Work-Life Balance" (2014). *Library Faculty and Staff Publications*. 82.

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### Notes/Citation Information

Published in *Library Leadership & Management*, v. 28, no. 2, p. 1-5.

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## New and Noteworthy

### The “Weisure” Class: The Elusive Goal of Work-Life Balance

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Whatever happened to working from 9 to 5? Gone are the days in which we can just leave work at work. E-mail, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter: we live in a continuously online culture in which we can always be connected to work not only in the workplace, but at home. If we **can** check our work e-mail from home, then shouldn't we? If we don't, will we be left in the dust? Suddenly, being “on” 24/7 has become the “new normal.”<sup>1</sup> Further, recent bestsellers such as Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*<sup>2</sup> make the case that both men and women should, and indeed can have both fulfilling work and personal lives by working hard: “For many men, the fundamental assumption is that they can have both a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life...The good news is that not only can women have both families and careers, they can *thrive* while doing so” (23-24).

The problem, of course, is how to thrive when both personal and professional spheres demand more hours than are available, making their separation more difficult. Traditionally this has fallen under the phrase “work-life balance,” the prioritization of time spent between one's work and personal life. Increasingly, however, the lines between the two are blurred. Enter “weisure” time, a term coined by sociologist Dalton Conley to describe the intersection between work and leisure.<sup>3</sup> According to a 2009 CNN article, “It's no coincidence, Conley says, that weisure has been growing simultaneously with the popularity of the personal computer, which has helped professionals with more tedious parts of their jobs -- and has made many jobs somewhat more interesting...Weisure has been fueled by social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, where “friends” may actually be business partners or work colleagues.”<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of your occupation, the stress of balancing work and life outside of work is an ongoing challenge, not to mention achieving a manageable state of “weisure.” But do those of us working in libraries and information organizations have additional issues that add to the stress? Anna Shelton's brief November 2012 piece for *Alki*, the Washington (State) Library Association journal, offers a good summary of some of the factors unique to libraries that make work-life balance even more important.<sup>5</sup> Shelton mentions rapidly changing technology, budget cuts, and the needs of different generations of library staff who may have varying ideas of what constitutes a “work day.” However, two additional societal issues are key: the “general public perspective that libraries are old-fashioned, endangered, or unnecessary,” and “library users in the building and accessing digital services, who are increasingly stressed themselves by lack of work, financial troubles, and reduced safety nets, causing more desperation and higher need at the point of library service” (19). The combination of perceived lack of library relevancy and an increasingly stressed user base may motivate us to try to work harder and longer just to keep

ourselves afloat. Shelton offers some good suggestions for dealing with library-related stress, including asking colleagues for help and developing organizational and self-management techniques.

Another useful, recent library-specific resource offering general strategies for work-life balance is *Time and Project Management Strategies for Librarians*, a 2013 collection of essays from the field.<sup>6</sup> In addition to information about time management, organizational skills, technology and professional development, Section VII of the book features four essays specifically about work-life balance: “Managing Professional and Family Commitments;” “Time Management, Reducing Stress, and Getting Organized;” “Working From Home: or How to Get it All Done Without Going Crazy;” and “What Personal Life?” The chapter on managing family commitments, by Libby Gorman, is a particularly useful discussion about the challenges faced by library professionals trying to raise families, and covers flexible work options, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), daycare, and so forth. Linda Burkey Wade offers several useful suggestions in the chapter on time management and organization, all geared toward making the most of time spent at work so that more quality time may be spent at home. Elizabeth Nelson’s chapter on working from home discusses telecommuting from both the staff and manager perspective. Increasingly, some work tasks are not dependent on a physical location and can be completed remotely, but downsides include lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues and dealing with distractions. Lastly, Pamela O’Sullivan, in her chapter entitled “What Personal Life?,” offers strategies to help library employees clearly demarcate between work and home, which is something of a rejection of the weisure ethic: “Although we all have times when we must work longer days or take some work home with us, this should not be the norm. The best employee is not necessarily the one who spends the most time working, but the one who does the most with the time he or she spends working” (254).

Meredith G. Farkas, blogging in “Information Wants to Be Free,” offers a similar sentiment in her thoughtful, personal meditation on librarian work-life balance.<sup>7</sup> Farkas espouses a balanced approach, or having the flexibility to accommodate whatever situations work or family might demand at any particular time. As such, work-life balance is a personal decision:

I’ve noticed a tendency in our profession (and probably others) to see being immersed in the profession and spending lots of time outside of our 40 hrs/wk on professional stuff as unhealthy. And at the same time, there’s a tendency to see people who view their work as a librarian as a 9 to 5 job as not committed. To me, the only mistake you can make here is buying into what other people think and not defining balance as what works for you. It’s not about quantity, people, it’s about quality.

Although not describing it as such, Farkas recognizes the distinction between setting a clear demarcation between work and life, and adopting a “weisure” approach in which work and personal life are more integrated.

The needs of librarians and library staff differ depending on how long they have been working, their family situations, and other factors. For instance, some literature suggests that younger library professionals are not happy with the idea of devoting their lives to work at the expense of family and personal obligations, unlike previous generations. Specifically, librarians and library staff belonging to Generation X (those born from 1966 to 1976) and Generation Y (born from 1977 to 1994) often tend to have a more flexible idea of work-life balance than their parents. Rachel Singer Gordon, writing in *The NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide*,<sup>8</sup> says "One defining attribute of many Generation X and Y librarians is their tendency to place a high importance on work/life balance from the very outset of their careers" (135). Gordon devotes a chapter of the book to work-life balance, discussing the unique issues facing NextGen library professionals, the pressure to "pay their dues," and family considerations, including resources for librarian parents. This title should be particularly useful not only for Gen X and Gen Y librarians, but for their managers as well. Work-life issues are of major concern as library administration seeks to recruit, retain, and develop future library leaders; the book should provide useful insights for all those responsible for succession planning.

An excellent example of how library administration might analyze and begin to address the topic of work-life balance is a 2010 report from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. *Towards Achieving Work-Life Balance: The Library Context*<sup>9</sup> is a useful white paper addressing these issues in one particular academic library environment, but it certainly applies to other types of library and information organizations as well. As outlined in the report, problems faced by librarians include lack of adequate coverage, increased job duties, the need to be on-site, little time for professional development, lack of uniformity in application of work-life programs, and inadequate support for later-career librarians. Also useful is a literature review and industry analysis addressing national trends in academic libraries. Some suggestions for redressing problems include implementing policies for telecommuting, flex time, job sharing, dedicated research time, and temporary replacement hires.

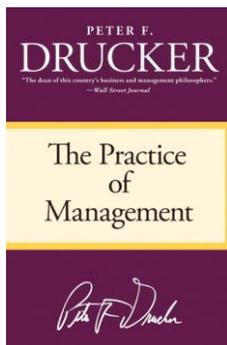
As library managers, we encounter a wide variety of personal situations affecting ourselves and our employees, including illness, maternity and paternity leave, childcare, and taking care of elderly relatives. Does your institution have policies and programs on flex-time, job sharing, health and wellness programs? What are our expectations on employee phone and e-mail access outside regular work hours? What are the expectations for your own availability as a library manager? Do you feel that you are somehow falling behind your colleagues and not serving your patrons effectively if you don't answer e-mail and voice mail on the weekends? Where do YOU fall on the leisure/work-life spectrum?

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## From the Library Leadership Essentials Bookshelf

Each month in this column we feature a classic management title, some library-related and some not. Do you have a favorite classic management or leadership book, article or website? We invite you to share a title, with a brief description, to be featured in this column (see the Volume 28, No. 1 issue at <http://journals.tdl.org/llm/index.php/llm/article/view/7047> for some examples). Please contact *New and Noteworthy* columnist Jennifer Bartlett at [jen.bartlett@uky.edu](mailto:jen.bartlett@uky.edu) with your ideas!



Drucker, Peter F. *The Practice of Management*. New York: HarperBusiness, 2006.

Written in 1954, *The Practice of Management* was one of the first management books to focus on the importance and responsibilities of management. Author Peter F. Drucker (1909-2005) taught management at Bennington College, New York University, and Claremont Graduate University, and was the author of 39 books, including *Concept of the Corporation* (1946). Although geared towards industry, this seminal book's insights are largely representative of libraries and other educational institutions as well, as in, for example, uncertainty about the role of management: "Despite its crucial importance, its high visibility and its spectacular rise, management is the least known and the least understood of our basic institutions. Even the people in a business often do not know what their management does and what it is supposed to be doing, how it acts and why, whether it does a good job or not" (6). Drucker focuses on the importance of management's role to the success of institutions, including managing by objectives, fostering the right spirit, rewarding strong performance, and creating an open work culture.

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## Notes

1. For example, see Inam, Hannah. Forget Work Life Balance: Seven Paradigm Shifts for the New 24/7 Normal. *Forbes.com*. 7 October 2013. Retrieved 20 January 2014, Available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hennainam/2013/10/07/forget-work-life-balance-seven-paradigm-shifts-for-the-new-247-normal/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The term “weisure” is introduced in Conley’s book *Elsewhere, U.S.A.: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, Blackberry Moms, and Economic Anxiety* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Patterson, Thom. Welcome to the “Weisure” Lifestyle. *CNN.com*. 11 May 2009. Retrieved 1 February 2014. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/worklife/05/11/weisure/index.html>. The article is part of a larger CNN online feature entitled “Having It All: Work-Life Balance” which includes several interesting (although somewhat dated) articles, videos, quizzes and a time use calculator (<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2009/having.it.all/>).

<sup>5</sup> Shelton, Anna. Take Action: Managing Workplace Stress. *Alki* 28.3 (2012): 18-19. Available at <http://www.wla.org/assets/Alki/alki%20nov%202012-final.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Smallwood, Carol, Jason Kuhl, and Lisa Fraser, eds. *Time and Project Management Strategies for Librarians*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Farkas, Meredith G. The Elusive Dream of Work-Life Balance. *Information Wants to Be Free* (blog), 19 December 2011. Retrieved 3 February 2014. Available at <http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2011/12/19/the-elusive-dream-of-work-life-balance/>. See also a followup post in which she mentions Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* at <http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2013/05/28/leaning-into-the-messy-world-of-work-life-balance/>, as well as an interesting June 5, 2013 podcast on work-life balance featuring Farkas, Jenica Rogers and Karen Schneider at the *Circulating Ideas* website at <http://www.circulatingideas.com/2013/06/episode-twenty-five-work-life-balance.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, Rachel Singer. *The NextGen Librarian’s Survival Guide*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Templer, Abby. *Towards Achieving Work-Life Balance: The Librarian Context* (Joint Administration-Massachusetts Society of Professors Work-Life Committee Report). University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2010. Retrieved 1 February 2014. Available at [http://people.umass.edu/misra/Joya\\_Misra/work-life\\_files/library.pdf](http://people.umass.edu/misra/Joya_Misra/work-life_files/library.pdf).