

The Leadership Forum

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“No, You Can’t Have It All” by Sinoway, E.C. Harvard Business Review, October 2012.

It’s the classic debate among working parents: Is it possible to balance your dream job with your ideal family life? This issue was highlighted by the famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) article by Anne-Marie Slaughter in the Atlantic July/August 2012 issue, in which she describes her work-life balance struggles as the director of policy planning at the State Department.¹ Physicians, both men and women, are not immune to this dilemma, especially as parents become older and ill, children enter the world, and clinical practice becomes increasingly laborious with documentation requirements. In a recent national survey of physicians, only 48% felt that their work schedule left enough time for personal or family life.² For leaders in general internal medicine, the struggles between work and the rest of life are amplified because the personal choices and challenges of each internist affects the Division’s clinical and research productivity.

In “No, You Can’t Have it All”, E.C. Sinoway proposes a different way of resolving the “having it all” debate. Instead of worrying about which ball may be accidentally dropped, Mr. Sinoway’s article highlights a framework for deciding which work-life goals should be pursued,

and then dropping those goals that don’t (or no longer) fit.

The key to this proposed framework is thinking explicitly about the seven primary domains of your life—*family, social, spiritual, physical, material, avocational, and career*—and prioritizing them via three fundamental questions:

- 1 Who do I want to be in this part of my life?
- 2 How much do I want to experience this dimension?
- 3 Given that I have a finite amount of time, energy, and resources, how important is this dimension relative to the others?

It is no easy task to prioritize these domains and these prioritizations are not static. The article suggests, however, that once domains are prioritized, identifying which opportunities should be pursued and which should be rejected becomes considerably easier.

The process of choosing among opportunities is derived by answering several additional questions: Does this opportunity fulfill a need or a want? What are the tradeoffs (investment vs. opportunity costs)? And are the potential benefits worth the costs? These questions apply to op-

portunities that are practicable. For some options, it’s important to ask if the opportunity is even possible, e.g. Steve Jobs couldn’t buy a cure to cancer, or if you can postpone this specific goal until later.

Is it possible to balance your dream job with your ideal family life?

This relatively simple framework has the great potential to help those of us struggling with work-life balance to recognize that it’s not about “having it all”, it’s about having what is truly important. From the perspective of leaders in general internal medicine, helping internists align their values with their personal and work goals may be a novel, yet important, strategy to sustaining a productive clinical and research environment.

Reference:

1. Slaughter A. Why Women Still Can’t Have It All. *The Atlantic*. 2012;Jul/Aug 2012.
2. Shanafelt TD, Boone S, Tan L, et al. Burnout and satisfaction with work-life balance among US physicians relative to the general US population. *Arch Intern Med*. 2012;172:1377-85.