



Business owners' control of their work-life balance is the fine line between hard work and hell

We live in a society in which people are trying to do more each day. Both work and life are worthy competitors for time. Yet the complex demands of modern society have redefined the notion of work-life balance.

Work-life balance has different meanings for different people and is often linked to individual preferences. We interviewed franchised and independent business owners in Australia to understand their work and life priorities.

Although not always aware of it, most people in small business reconcile competing work and life demands on an ad hoc basis. This is because a variety of reasons motivate small-business ownership.

Most owners, however, want control. Being one's own boss, having the freedom to make decisions and determining one's own rewards are key determinants of control. All are important to business owners.

Work and life priorities

Remarkably, only six of the 30 business owners we interviewed considered work-life balance important when establishing their businesses. Five who had families clearly stated that their desire and ability to allocate time to family drove their choice to be in business.

Many owners were unable to articulate where their lives were out of balance, although they expressed concern about having to skip or compromise on family and social activities. They used terms such as *time poor*, *burdened* and *frustrated* to describe their feelings when juggling priorities.

Some owners had not connected their state of frustration with their lack of opportunity to allocate time effectively.

One said:

Getting up to go to work because you want to. Knowing there's a light at the end of the tunnel, knowing you're in control of your own destiny... I kid you not, it has been three years of hell.

However, many owners admitted not having previously recognized this as a work-life balance issue.

This suggests it is highly likely that work-life balance is a concern for them although they saw it more in terms of excessive work demands rather than forgone opportunities to participate in other esteemed activities.

The table below reports the most common responses from business owners regarding their attitudes toward work-life balance and prioritizing activities.

Question	Most popular answer	%	Second most popular answer	%
How do you allocate your time between work and 'life' activities?	Work is the priority/ work dominates	45%	Desire to include other activities but work can take over	30%
How do you feel about how you allocate your priorities?	Satisfied/ business ownership requires commitment	40%	Frustrated work dominates.	35%
How would you describe your work-life balance?	Some days very poor some days good	40%	Better with business ownership	20%
What are the factors limiting your opportunity for work-life balance?	Cannot let go of the responsibility for the business	30%	Cannot rely on my staff to run the business satisfactorily	25%

Irrespective of how work, family or community are prioritized in a work-life balance model, interviewees reported a sense of *imbalance* when they lose *control* in setting and achieving their priorities.

Interestingly, the factors the business owners identified as limiting their opportunity for work-life balance were also those that minimized their discretion when making choices, particularly in allocating their time.

This harks back to the need to feel “in control”, which a business owner articulated:

OK, if I was owning a franchise, for example ... probably I would have to open from 6am until 10pm whether I am busy or not. In my business here, I open from 8am to 5.30pm and there you are. I've got my own right to shut the business whenever I want and I'm there for my kids at home.

Control over work versus control over life

Ownership of a small business provided most individuals with greater control over the *work* aspect of their lives. However, many interviewees felt overwhelmed by the multiplicity of roles or one that dominated others, thus limiting the opportunity to broaden their lives.

Some also found it difficult to acknowledge that there are trade-offs. Clearly, there is a need to feel in control of their own lives in whichever role they play.

Interviewees felt they were in control when the decisions they *choose to make* were based on what they *wanted to achieve*. This implies that work-life

balance requires better consideration of the variety of roles at hand, the availability of the resources to make the preferred choices, and a better system to allocate preferences to those roles.

Business owners need to understand what they want to achieve, how these objectives are prioritized and how to allocate energy to realize these priorities.

Many policies designed to enhance work-life balance are employee-focused and do not apply to owners of, say, coffee shops or similar businesses. Access to flexible hours and work conditions, for example, does not apply to businesses with predetermined hours.

The use of technology at home has also subliminally extended the workday for many. As such, if location determines work-life balance, then owning one of those small businesses will not improve work-life balance.

The traditional notion of work-life balance might be inappropriate for small-business owners. The satisfaction they derive from operating their own business affects how they allocate time and work.

In particular, some owners were happy working long hours as they were benefiting and they derived a sense of achievement from self-employment. They felt a sense of control and empowerment over decisions they made about their lives rather than being subject to external forces.

The independents could only rely on family and staff. Franchisees could leverage a support structure provided by their franchisor. However, many cautioned that inappropriate support or non-delivery of promised support in the franchise system – such as being required to attend meetings at the end of a long day – often added to the pressure on franchisees.

To sum up, business owners have full responsibility for business outcomes. As a result, they find it difficult to remove themselves from the daily operations and enjoy a sense of work-life balance unless they take control of their multiple roles and have reliable support to stand in their shoes.

This is why a market can appear to be doing great and then suddenly fall at the first hint of inflation.

Authors

[Park Thaichon](#)

Lecturer and Cluster Leader, Relationship Marketing for Impact Research Cluster, Griffith University

Park Thaichon is a Lecturer in Marketing and the Cluster Leader of the Relationship Marketing for Impact research cluster within the Department of Marketing, Griffith Business School. Park main research interests include Relationship Marketing, Dark Marketing, Social Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Integrated Marketing Communications, and Retailing. Park has received several faculty Research Excellence Awards (2015 and 2016), Best Paper Award (2015 and 2016), Best Poster Award (2013 and 2015), Best Reviewer Award (2017), and Best Presentation Award (2014). The fundamental aim of his research is for a better tomorrow - "I wish that my current and future research would contribute to the overall benefits and well-being of the society".

His research has been published in leading marketing journals including but not limited to the Journal of Business Research, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Journal of Strategic Marketing, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, International Journal of Bank Marketing, International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, and Services Marketing Quarterly.

Park's research has been highlighted on the CNBC, The Conversation, 7 News Seven Gold Coast, Gold Coast Bulletin, and ETBrandEquity. He is the incoming managing guest editor for Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics (2017/2018), Journal of Strategic Marketing (2018/2019), Marketing Intelligence and Planning (2018/2019), and Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services (2019/2020).

[Sara Quach](#)

Lecturer, Griffith University

Sara Quach is a lecturer in the Department of Marketing, Griffith University, Australia. Her research interests are in the areas of services marketing, marketing research, consumer behaviour and relationship marketing.

Sara's research has been published in leading marketing journals including but not limited to the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Journal of Relationship Marketing, Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, and Services Marketing Quarterly. She has won several awards at top marketing conferences such as Best Paper Award at The 2016 Mystique of Luxury Brands Conference, People's Choice Award (Best Poster) at the 2016 Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy Mid-Year Doctor Colloquium, and the Best Paper Award at the 2015 Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy and Global Alliance of Marketing and Management Associations Joint Symposium.

[Scott Weaven](#)

Professor and Head, Department of Marketing, Griffith University

Professor Scott Weaven is Head of the Department of Marketing at Griffith University. His current teaching areas are Introduction to Marketing, Marketing Management and Strategy, Entrepreneurial Marketing and B2B Marketing. He has research expertise in franchising, channels of distribution, entrepreneurship and small business.

Disclosure statement

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.