

# BALANCING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

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## ABSTRACT.

Balancing professional and personal commitments involves managing one's life through proper planning, organizing, priority setting, and communicating. Wildlife and fisheries professionals can use these skills to fulfill responsibilities to their family, job, professional society, and other interests, but obstacles, challenges, and constraints should be recognized. Each of us can and should be involved actively in our professional society while leading a diverse and rewarding family and working life.

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## INTRODUCTION

You probably can appreciate the moment of silence at my end of the line when Don Armentrout asked me to address the subject, "Balancing Professional and Personal Commitments", before this distinguished audience. After gathering my composure, I agreed to tackle the challenge and considered it an honor to do so. I could have explained to Don that I didn't have time to prepare the paper. But, instead, like the others on the podium, I made the commitment.

Every day, each of us has the opportunity to accept or reject commitments. Decisions must be made for example on whether to take the children to the zoo on Saturday or go pheasant hunting; whether to go to church on Sunday morning or go fishing. We can't do everything, so we must choose frequently where we intend to make our commitments. At some point in our career, most of us will make a long term commitment to our professional society or join a sportsman's club or other group.

For purposes of this talk, I am assuming that because you are here participating in the Western Section meeting, that you have made a commitment to your Society. My intention is to provide you with some friendly advice on how you might deal with your many personal, vocational, and professional commitments in a realistic and practical way. I also hope to provide some food for thought as you strive to balance the many interests and responsibilities that demand your attention.

Prior to preparing this paper, I was not familiar with literature on this topic, so I began to speak informally with some leaders in our profession in an effort to identify their methods for balancing professional and personal commitments. I quickly found that each individual seemed to treat these commitments a bit differently. There did not seem to be any clear basis on which to develop a paper. However, I finally unearthed Making Things Happen: The Guide for Members of Volunteer Organizations (Wolfe 1981). The author directed her discussion to needs of members of volunteer organizations by calling on her lifetime of experience working with various groups, including environmental concerns. Her insights helped me crystalize my thoughts and confirmed some ideas that I have tried to apply to my life.

The issue of balancing professional and personal commitments boils down to learning how to manage one's life effectively. Through proper planning, organization, priority setting, and communication, I believe a highly desirable and practical balance can be attained that

accommodates active involvement in your professional Society while meeting commitments to your family, job, and other interests. It should be recognized, though, that every minute spent working on Society activities is a minute taken from one's other personal interests.

## PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION

Many of us do not recognize how our professional activities affect our personal lives. We are also unaware that our lives can be controlled through thoughtful planning and organization. This can be accomplished by deciding how much time you are willing to give to your professional Society and other activities and by making personal rules to help control your time. Any Society member can do this, but it is very important to consciously decide how much of yourself you are willing to give and when you'll give it. There are several ways to do this and different people in different situations must choose what's best for them. A few examples may shed some light here.

One person I know spends a great deal of time working on Society activities during the business day. To fulfill obligations to his agency, he works additional hours at night and on some weekends. However, on most weekends, he retreats with his family or friends, unavailable to work on Society or business affairs. Another acquaintance is president of a chapter. He works on Society affairs only during lunch hours and on weekday evenings after 8 p.m. A biologist friend of mine who cannot be available during the day due to field work requirements spends 2 full evenings a week on Society and church affairs. An unmarried professor I know attends meetings and does Society work mostly on weekends. Weekday evenings are spent relaxing with a good book or pursuing individuals of the opposite sex.

In a nutshell, professional commitment and lifestyle should dictate how and when you will participate with your Society. As a wildlife or fisheries biologist, you must decide how to assist your profession in the most efficient and effective manner.

### At Home

I'd like to speak a little about managing your professional and personal activities at home. Several ideas should be considered seriously including 1) put your family first; 2) keep them informed; and 3) minimize disturbance by keeping your work place away from others.

Many active Society members use the telephone extensively to get things done, but there are pitfalls. For example, many of us have experienced occasions when the urgency of Society business has disrupted family activities. In the middle of a meal or woodcarving session with your child, an urgent call comes from a colleague working on a tight deadline. Remember that the colleague's demands over the phone may be uncontrollable, but your response is controllable. You can always explain politely that you can't work on the problem at that moment, but will call him back tomorrow. This way you're able to continue your activities with the family and there's still time to assist with the Society matter later.

When working on Society business, it is a good idea to avoid doing it near family members if possible. In fact, it is not a bad idea to have an isolated phone somewhere in the house where you can do Society business without disrupting the household.

If you commit yourself to participate in a large project such as arranging a section workshop or developing an educational slide presentation, it probably will be necessary to devote a great deal of personal time to do the necessary work. In this case, you should explain this to the people with whom you have commitments. Try to obtain their support. Explain that you recognize this will mean you may have less time to devote to their needs, but this is an important professional decision you've made. Such warning and explanation may not make them feel a lot better, but it should help them understand and appreciate the situation and allow them to adjust and make the best of it. However, during such periods, it is even more important to restrict outside activities during the times you have devoted to family and personal needs. Remember, your family should come first. If your family

life suffers, it is likely that your career and other aspects of your personal life will be affected. If you have children, you must reserve time to give them the attention they need and deserve.

You may be uncomfortable at first structuring your priorities and schedule in this way, but once you do, I think you'll find life will be much more productive and enjoyable. Remember also that there will be exceptions that must be accommodated. A heavy dose of common sense should be used in all cases. Often these exceptions can be anticipated and addressed.

Neatness, or lack thereof, can be a problem to overcome for those who work in their homes. You likely will have a great deal of paper work, especially if you're serving as a chapter or section officer. To be fair to the family and in the interest of efficiency, it is important to be orderly at home as well as in a business. If the neatness issue is addressed properly, there will be fewer family quarrels and embarrassing moments when friends show up unexpectedly.

One way to overcome neatness problems is to reserve a space for your own work and keep it organized! If office-type furniture isn't practical for you, you can create a simple and attractive desk and files using boards, low bookcases, and a bit of elbow grease. If feasible, a phone extension would be very handy. These facilities can go a long way toward maintaining domestic tranquility.

It's true that active involvement in outside activities, including your professional Society, can place stress on the home. However, balanced participation can broaden interests of the entire family by bringing it in contact with ideas, experiences, and friendships beyond the home and office.

#### At the Office

Many wildlifers devote office time to Society activities. Understanding the viewpoint of your employer is critical here. Because Society activities often are closely related to agency or organizational goals, some employers are eager and pleased to allow their employees to take some working time for this purpose. Other employers, for various reasons, are not supportive. For any case, it is important to carefully consider the Society activities that you do on work time.

How much office time can you reasonably devote to professional activities? You should make a conscious decision about the time you devote to Society business. Such work, even in a supportive agency, can get out of hand if you aren't careful. A Society project can seem so important and stimulating that you get carried away with it and neglect job requirements.

Obviously, you should go ahead and work on Society affairs when necessary, but be aware of how others view these activities. You can be an inspiration to a co-worker if they understand the purpose of your activities, but you also can cause misunderstandings or resentment if your intent is not communicated properly.

Analyze carefully what you're doing from the perspective of your boss, co-workers, and subordinates and ensure that your Society activities are not adversely affecting them. When your boss is supportive of your Society work, it may be most productive to do it at the office during business hours and make up the time early in the morning, during lunch hours, in the evenings, on weekends, or by taking leave. This I believe is how most of us handle the time challenge.

Regardless of the approach, it should be communicated to your employer. In fact, it is a good idea to keep track of the time you spend on Society activities. Keeping these records may surprise you and help identify possible conflicts. If so, you often can make other arrangements or adjustments. You probably will feel a sense of pride at the time you devote to your professional Society knowing that you have been fair to your employer and you are contributing to the advancement of professionalism. The personal sacrifice of time and/or money to the cause can be very satisfying and will be admired by your peers.

## IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES

Setting priorities is a major but necessary challenge. There are many demands on your personal time. You should evaluate your commitments to your job, your family, and recreational pursuits such as hunting and fishing. Then identify your priorities. This kind of introspection sometimes is very difficult and may not occur until some challenge or crisis sets the priorities straight for you. A personal example comes to mind.

A close friend of mine recently experienced a reordering of priorities in his life. Over the years, this professional devoted more and more time to his challenging and rewarding job, continuing education, and recreational pursuits such as hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities. Increasingly, his position required him to be out of town to attend meetings. He began to find himself away for days at a time, including weekends. When he returned home, he often was eager to "get away from it all" and as a result spent parts of many weekends with his friends in a hunting blind or canoeing white water. Office work demanded longer hours, requiring him to leave home early in the morning and return late in the evening. Evening graduate courses consumed even more of his personal time. Slowly but surely, family life was receiving less and less of his attention. This was not a deliberate situation, but was occurring nevertheless. He tried to adjust by spending so-called "quality time" with his family. Then one afternoon at the office, he received an urgent message from his wife. Their young son had been rushed to a hospital in serious condition, suffering from juvenile onset diabetes. He would have been comatose without timely attention. What a shock!

The child improved after a week in the hospital, but the condition will require lifelong insulin injections and close attention to diet, exercise, and health care. Future health complications are likely. In other words, there will be a change in lifestyle for the entire family. As you can probably imagine, this event precipitated a rapid reordering of priorities. It could have been much worse!

My friend returned to work a few days later and reviewed his schedule. Soon he was scheduled to travel to attend out of town professional meetings for 2 consecutive weeks. Obviously, conditions at home would not yet permit such extensive absence. Upon discussing the problem with his wife and employer, travel plans were altered. Juggling of schedules with associates permitted the necessary work to be done while accommodating commitments at home. After several weeks of adjustment, a routine was established that seems to be satisfactory to all concerned.

It is important to periodically take stock of your personal and professional commitments and occasionally reorder your life to accomplish the appropriate balance. This is not to suggest neglecting important professional commitments. However, it does require careful planning, organizing, assigning priorities, and communicating effectively.

## SAYING NO

Another related issue deserves emphasis. Some of us have a tendency to become involved with too many activities; so many that we sometimes become overly committed. Over commitment often results from strong personal commitments to family, friends, our job, and our profession. We want to offer our services, but we can't handle all that must be done by ourselves. The more effective and active a person is, the more likely they will be called upon to help with other duties. Sometimes, a colleague must pick up the ball. Therefore, it is imperative that you learn to limit your involvement before you become overly committed and the quality of your performance suffers. This can be done by simply saying "NO"--you might explain to those concerned that other commitments will not permit you to devote the necessary time to do justice to the job. You might also suggest that another member be contacted who has fewer existing project responsibilities and is eager to participate. The key to avoiding over commitment is learning to say "No" at the appropriate time.

## COMMITMENT TO YOUR SOCIETY

I'd like to end this visit with an entreaty. Make a commitment to become involved actively in your professional Society! You may not recognize it, but your expertise and effort are needed urgently. Our profession is young, growing, and at a crossroads. It is your duty to participate and assist in this development process. Whether you recognize it or not, your colleagues are working hard through your Society to help you as a professional. Working with your Society, you will not only help develop and improve your profession, but you'll experience a sense of pride of accomplishment knowing you are benefitting yourself, your colleagues, and something we all care deeply about, the wildlife resource.

A philosopher once provided some wise counsel when he stated: "What we think or what we know or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only thing of consequence is what we do." Strive for a balance of commitments and as Chuck Meslow put it earlier, "pay your part of the rent for your place in the profession." Believe me, we need you.

## LITERATURE CITED

Wolfe, J. 1981. Making things happen: the guide for members of volunteer organizations. Brick House Publishing Co., Inc., Andover, Mass. 139 pp.



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