



Regions Wealth Podcast

Episode 32: The New Balancing Act: Improving Work-Life Balance For Remote Workers

While remote work has been overwhelmingly successful for many, it hasn't come without challenges. Now, as an increasing number of companies are choosing to make remote work a permanent fixture, the ability to maintain work-life balance will become imperative for both managers and employees alike. In this episode, Head of HR Strategic Delivery and Talent Management Dwight Julbert discusses tips for workers hoping to improve their work-life balance, and what their managers can do to support them.

Episode Transcript

Sarah Fister Gale:

Welcome to Regions Wealth Podcast, the podcast that tackles life's challenges with financial experience. I'm your host, Sarah Fister Gale. At the height of the pandemic, 51% of Americans were working remotely, and this number was likely much higher among non-essential workers. Given that just 7% of Americans had the ability to work remotely before the pandemic, this represented a huge shift for many. While remote work has been overwhelmingly successful for companies and workers alike, it hasn't come without challenges. One of the biggest challenges for many has been maintaining life/work balance. Joining me remotely is Dwight Julbert. He is the Head of HR Strategic Delivery and Talent Management. Dwight, thanks for joining us today.

Dwight Julbert:

Thank you.

Sarah:

So in this episode of Regions Wealth Podcast, we're discussing the shift to remote work and tips for maintaining life/work balance. We've taken frequently asked questions from a bunch of people and developed a character who needs your help. Let's listen.

Shilpa:

"Well, hello. My name is Shilpa, and I work in tech as head of operations. I'm married with three children, and my husband is a CTO at a healthcare tech company. I've always been very success-driven, and have really thrived in my career as a result. I joined my current company in my 30s and played an integral role in the company's growth. Back then, my husband and I were intensely focused on our careers, and both of us routinely spent long hours at the office. Now that



we have three school-aged kids, it's been increasingly difficult for me to devote as much time to my career. While I can't work long hours anymore, my time at the office is -- or rather, was "me" time, and I'm a very different person there than I am at home. Needless to say, the last year or so -- between the lockdowns and remote work and homeschooling -- have been a struggle for me. I'm starting to feel like both my career and my home life are suffering as a result."

Sarah:

Before we jump into Shilpa's situation, I'd love to start with your experience. As Head of Talent Management at Regions Bank, what are some of the positives you've seen come out of the shift to remote work?

Dwight:

The first positive I would highlight would be that it drastically reshaped the way managers focus on their associates. Some managers had associates that were on the same floor and in the same vicinity, while others were at different locations or even different cities. The nature of remote work leveled the playing field for all associates. It forced managers to be very intentional about how they interacted with their associates. For some, that may have even felt like a challenge. But for others, it gave them a feeling of inclusivity because before, as remote employees, they sometimes felt left out. I think it also broke down some barriers between managers and associates because of the challenges during the pandemic, it created a lot more opportunities for associates to have a real need to talk to their managers about their personal lives, and limitations, and challenges during this period. What I've witnessed is associates opening up more with managers **and** making it easier for managers to be supportive. And finally, the remote nature for certain roles gave a much easier time for some employees to focus. Increased focus and increased control of the environment resulted in greater productivity.

Sarah:

So when you think of all of these positives that came from remote work, which do you think allowed employees to benefit the most?

Dwight:

Without a doubt, I think the single greatest thing is the increased flexibility. Blending and balancing the personal and family needs with the professional needs in some ways becomes easier. Every conversation we've had with associates, the term flexibility is almost always referenced. Across the board, it's upped the game for all employees to be more in tune with technology.



Sarah:

So let's dig into Shilpa's situation. She mentions that she's struggling with work/life balance. How common is this?

Dwight:

This is actually the counterpoint to what I said earlier. When you think about it in terms of traditional work/life balance, you get up, and leave, and go to work. So there's a physical barrier there. There's a time. There's a distance. There's a location. There was always the separation from a distance and physical location perspective. When you're in your home environment, you're managing and juggling both. That flexibility has a downside, and it's much more difficult to separate what is work and what is life.

Sarah:

So, do you think managers play a role in helping their employees achieve a work/life balance when they're fully remote?

Dwight:

Managers absolutely play a role because in some ways, they're the role models, and then the expectations that they lay out, you know, recognizing that your associate has a flexible scenario... it has to make it okay that they do the work when it's most beneficial and fits into their work/life balance. So managers who don't support that will ultimately end up creating challenges.

Sarah:

Is there any indication that fatigue or burnout due to remote work is a temporary issue, or is it the start of a more permanent trend?

Dwight:

I would say that burnout was already a reality in the workplace. In the remote environment, not only do you have the focus on getting the job done and putting in the time, then you layer on top of that the complications of balancing both work and life. You can maintain the same hours at home, but it could be compounded or eased depending on what's happening in your personal life. It's effectively a new twist on an old issue, and companies and individuals will have to explore ways to ease that.

Sarah:

So the pain points that come with a shift to remote work aren't exactly new, as you've pointed out, but they are more significant today than they were before. Which points or aspects should leaders address first before beginning a mass transition to remote work?



Dwight:

The first thing you have to confirm is can it be done from a technological standpoint? If you can't stay connected and you can't have good communication, the rest is a moot point. The second one is that you have to define expectations and performance. In a more traditional setting, managers and associates see each other. When you're remote, it's important that there be established expectations so both are clear when work is being done and deadlines are being met. Because it is a little more challenging to ensure what's meant to happen is actually happening. Finally, what we've learned over the past year plus is that not every job is created equally. And certain jobs are done better in isolation for focus, while other jobs are better done in a physical or group setting. There's a whole spectrum, so when you look at individual roles, you need to look at the role and see if the job can be fully remote, or if it's better to be done hybrid.

Sarah:

Those are all great tips. Let's take a listen to more of Shilpa's story.

Shilpa:

"While many people I know had lighter workloads as a result of the pandemic, mine seemed to triple virtually overnight, and a series of layoffs at my company only exacerbated the problem. Pre-COVID, I'd work from 8am to 5pm — sometimes 6 at the latest — then come home and be completely focused on my family. Nowadays, I'm not entirely sure where my workday ends and my free time begins. I'm constantly shifting gears during the day, and having to shift from meetings to tending to my family has really hurt my productivity levels. At night, I often find myself parked in front of the couch checking emails or working on presentations. I thought having two of my three kids back in school would help matters, but it hasn't. Also, others in my life -- my mother, sisters, and other family members -- assume that because I'm working from home, they can give me a call or drop by my house for a visit, no problem. Setting boundaries has really been a struggle for me, primarily because my family members aren't respecting them. My husband tries his best to help, but given that his job is far more demanding and less flexible than mine, we both agreed that it made the most sense for me to be the primary caregiver during the day. He's been great at keeping the kids occupied at night, giving me a chance to play catch-up when needed."

Sarah:



Dwight, we're hearing over and over how boundaries are blurred these days. Why do you think people are working outside regular hours? And what steps can they take to strike a balance for themselves?

Dwight:

Well, the truth is, we may need to be thinking or looking at different definitions of what regular work hours are. The old 9:00 to 5:00 definition, if you think about it, is really defined by the physical space and when you arrive and when you leave the workplace. When you go remote, you have the ability to weave in all of your family or personal needs within your day. So it could be that your work is done in pieces or at different hours than you had previously done before. To be honest, I think that's what our natural expectation should be when it comes to someone working in a remote scenario. The real challenge comes about when you don't have the physical departure to bookend your work day. So it really becomes more of a personal need for an individual to focus on intentionally doing something to create those boundaries in their home or remote environment. For example, you might set an alarm on your phone that would remind you when it's time to get up outta your chair and step away. You may also need to talk to your family members or other household members so that they know what the expectations are, and you can establish boundaries so that they're not interrupting you throughout the day. Ultimately, it has to be intentional. It has to be an exercise in planning and discipline to be able to manage that yourself.

Sarah:

And do you think that people should talk to their employers or managers about those plans? So that they can say, you know, "From noon to 2:00, I'm gonna take care of my kids. And from 4:00 to 8:00, I'm gonna work on this project."

Dwight:

To the degree that it's that predictable, I would say yes. The more communication that an individual has with their manager, the better. If you've got a specific sort of schedule worked out for the week, that'll probably reduce stress between you and your manager, but I don't envision that everybody will have that same ability to have a set schedule. So, you know, constant communication: "I, you know, have to step away from my computer. I'll be back in an hour or two..." Just so that they aren't looking for you. Much more intentional when it comes to communicating between the manager and the associate.

Sarah:

So a lot of remote employees and freelancers say they struggle to get friends and family to respect their boundaries during work hours. What can someone in Shilpa's position do to ensure the people in her life understand that just because she's present, doesn't mean she's available?



Dwight:

I think you have to be proactive in communicating with all of your stakeholders. So your friends, your family, other members of the household... You gotta let 'em know when you're available and when you're not. Let's be honest, it's a choice when you respond to a text or a phone call. If you know it's a social or personal text but you're in work mode, you may not be able to respond right away. You may just have to let 'em know that you'll respond later.

Sarah:

So if you don't respect your own barriers, nobody else will, is what you're saying.

Dwight:

That's absolutely true. As people transitioned through the pandemic, it probably was a little clunky to begin with. Over time, those around them began to kinda get it. Kids are very quick to learn, and able to read body language, and understand when it's okay to interrupt, and when it's not. If you stick to a consistent approach, those around you will figure it out as long as you're communicating.

Sarah:

Okay. So Shilpa's new dynamic reflects how many women have assumed the role of primary caregiver during the pandemic. How can couples and families adjust to home care and child care needs in this environment?

Dwight:

To the degree possible, I think you have to start off with a team effort. And this is me putting my spin on it, but it's a team effort to try to adjust and cover, you know, everything that the family and the home needs in situations like this. I think it's important that you have lots of communication and really detailed, coordinated conversations around the week or day ahead. Or even the afternoon ahead, to ensure partners are coordinated. You could sit down and plan the week. Personally, I look at my calendar every day, and I differentiate what is work related and what is personal, because for me to be successful, I've had to physically combine all of those things on one calendar. My wife and I, we both work from home, so we have to coordinate and-elevate that level of coordination.

Sarah:

And bringing it back to management, can leaders anticipate and address these needs for their workers, especially women?

Dwight:

At this point in time, I would hope the answer's yes. If you're having good, open, honest communication with your associates and you're demonstrating understanding of their



situation, and they're being forthright with their situation, I think many leaders have flexed a muscle that they've never had to use before in dealing with this situation. I would hope that companies are tracking these types of things and incorporating them into their go forward plans. So you think about it, many leaders have experienced it themselves personally. So during this time, it hasn't really mattered what level of the company you were in. Many of us experienced the same things, making it easier for our leaders to understand everybody's situation.

Sarah:

Alright, let's listen to the final portion of Shilpa's story.

Shilpa:

"This has been an ongoing problem across our entire organization. Last year, most employees failed to use much of their PTO. We've had a few star employees quit due to burnout, and I've noticed far too many of my team members active on chat platforms late in the evening. As head of operations, my #1 goal is to ensure that our company runs like a well oiled machine -- and in my opinion, that really starts with happy employees. I'm struggling to help my employees strike a better balance between work and personal lives during this time, and I know I'm not doing a great job of leading by example. In February, our CEO made the decision to take the company fully remote -- the benefits really outweigh the negatives. But now that this is going to be a new way of working for us, I want to make sure that we get it right. I'm just not sure how to facilitate that balance for my team when I'm struggling to do the same."

Sarah:

So Dwight, I came across an interesting stat: American workers let 768 million paid vacation days go to waste in 2018. This may seem like an obvious question, but why is it so important for people to use all of their PTO?

Dwight:

Well, we have to admit that this problem existed before the pandemic, whether an individual was onsite or remote. The reason you have time off is so you can get away from the work experience, so you can rest, recuperate, and recharge. If you never take vacation, you run the risk of burnout. You need a break to focus on yourself, and that's what the benefit is made for.

Sarah:

So what can leaders do to keep their employees from burning out and make sure that they take those vacations?

Dwight:



This one's easy to answer, but it's tough to execute. It really all boils down to the relationship between the manager and the associate. And honestly, does the manager care about the wellbeing of the associate? If you're connecting with them on a personal level about family, or things that are important to them... you'll sense when they need a break. When you see that, your job as a manager is to take action and intervene, to make sure that your associates don't get burned out. Make sure that they're using their vacation or PTO. Asking them about their vacation plans, their experiences... All of that further solidifies the relationship between managers and associates, and it also reinforces the fact that managers have the best interest of their associates at heart.

Sarah:

We know that when you're working remotely, the lines between "work" and "home" can get blurred. Shilpa mentions that many of her employees are active on chat and email late at night. Should she discourage this practice?

Dwight:

I actually struggle with this because if you think about it, if the main value of remote work is the flexibility. For some, working late at night may be their balance. That may be how they're choosing to balance the remote work and meeting the needs of their family. The thing the company can do here is really be intentional and consistent about best practices for self-care, expectations around what kind of work and how much work needs to be done, having managers focus on signs of burnout. I think if you put too many rules and guidelines around the when and the how, that could create more stress for some people because remote suddenly becomes less flexible.

Sarah:

That makes sense. So mentions leading by example, and it does seem that both managers and employees are dealing with the same issues. So what concrete actions can Shilpa demonstrate to help her employees strike a work/life balance?

Dwight:

I think the role model can come not only in the form of what they do, but also through the interactions where they set expectations. You may see that I send you an email late at night, but that's how I personally need to work to balance my day and prioritize my time. But I need to establish the expectation that just because that's what I do, I don't expect that you do the same thing.

Sarah:

How does someone like Shilpa set those expectations? Do you put a note in your email, respond when you're available?



Dwight:

I think all of those are good answers. It goes back to communication, lots and lots of communication, and good expectation setting. And not just once, that's another piece of it. You have to be consistent. You have to reinforce it. So that the associates know that what you're saying is really what you mean.

Sarah:

So, Dwight, at the end of these podcasts, we like to ask for some key takeaways from the conversation. So what are some key takeaways for someone in Shilpa's position, who is not only trying to maintain a better work/life balance for herself while working remotely, but also for her direct reports?

Dwight:

I think the first one would be, establish whether you have the right technology and if your employee's technology is in place for them to be successful. If they can't get the job done in a remote capacity, nobody's gonna be happy with the outcome. I think it's also equally important to set expectations in terms of performance and productivity, and make sure that's communicated. There's a lot more opportunity with associates being remote for the work product and the work effort to be misjudged, or maybe misaligned. And having that kind of communication frequently and confirming it, will make everybody feel better in the end.

Sarah:

Terrific. Thank you so much for your time today. That was Dwight Julbert, Head of HR Strategic Delivery and Talent Management for Regions Bank. You've given us some great actionable insights today.

Dwight:

Thank you for having me. This has been such a great experience.

Sarah:

And thank *you* for joining us today. For more on this topic, be sure to check out episode 4 of our new commercial podcast series. Host Chris Blose and Kelley Brown-Murro discuss best practices for managing a hybrid team, including communication, culture and collaboration. Visit [regions.com/commercialpodcast](https://www.regions.com/commercialpodcast) to listen to the episode.

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