

AAT Branch focus

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SECRETS OF A GREAT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

A recent AAT Bristol Branch event explored ways of managing time so that work does not overwhelm other aspects of life

We're all pressed for time these days. But do we ever stop to think about how we could use our time more effectively? Most of us don't, especially if we're quite organised. We tend to live in a comfort zone of our own making, running our lives according to our habits and inclinations, which we rarely examine.

But those habits may be hindering rather than helping us as we take on more work and greater responsibilities. Indeed, they could even be dangerous to our health. Recent research published in the *European Heart Journal* suggests that working more than three hours' overtime every day increases the risk of heart

disease. So, maintaining a good work-life balance is not just an abstract ideal; it's vital to our health and well-being.

Helping others achieve a great work-life balance is one of the main aims of personal and corporate performance coach Coral Jones. She trains individuals and corporate teams in a variety of techniques to improve confidence, enhance leadership skills and practise effective time management.

Good time management

Coral was recently invited to talk to AAT Bristol Branch members on the secrets of a great work-life balance. It was the first time she had delivered a presentation to AAT members and she was surprised by what a diverse bunch AAT members are.

Coral began the event by talking about accelerated learning techniques, which, broadly speaking, are fast ways of learning using demonstrations, music and movement. She uses them to impart information and she says that, by involving the whole body in the learning experience, neural connections are enhanced and learning takes place easily and quickly.

To start with, Coral used a metaphor to explain and demonstrate time management. With the theme music to *Mission Impossible* playing in the background, she filled a jug with stones. Then she added smaller stones followed by rice then water and finally sugar. At each stage, what seemed like a full jug was able to accommodate the new materials. It's a useful metaphor for how we use our time because, just as we can choose what goes into the jug and still fit more in however full it is, we can choose how we use our time and do more with our days.

Five steps to using time wisely

To do more with our days, we must use our time wisely. Coral teaches five steps to help decide how to do that. The first step is to identify what we value, such as providing good customer service or spending time with the children, and set goals and objectives that align with those values. They can be fixed or can vary day by day, but as soon as we've identified what we're aiming for, we can immediately see which tasks need our attention. Then everything else should be set aside until the

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most important tasks are completed. This analysis may reveal tasks that we don't want to do ourselves so we should delegate them. And, Coral stresses, ideally, it should answer the question, 'What's the best, most efficient and effective use of my time?'

The second stage is to allocate time to each task. Setting aside 30 minutes to answer emails, say, may be a better use of time than checking them all day long.

'We may think we use our time effectively,' says Coral, 'but research shows that when you are constantly interrupted, your IQ drops by up to 10 points, which is the same drop in mental capacity as occurs when we lose a night's sleep. And it can take up to 25 minutes to get back into what we're doing once we've been interrupted.'

Then the third step is to break tasks down into smaller tasks and address each one within an allocated time. 'It's like a

pile of ironing,' explains Coral. 'You don't want to do it, but by tackling the shirts as one task and trousers as another, you're making the whole job manageable.'

Once you've got shirts and trousers sorted into separate piles, so to speak, it's imperative that we decide which to do when. And this is often the stumbling block for busy people. So, to illustrate the fourth step, Coral uses the metaphor of the advice given in airplanes in an emergency. When the oxygen masks fall from the overhead lockers, parents are advised to put on their masks before their children's. It's a counterintuitive act, but one that makes absolute sense. In the same way, putting one's own needs first is often the best way to ensure everyone else's needs are met.

As a fifth step, Coral advises applying steps one to four to a Wheel of Life – a representation of eight wider values, goals and objectives. What are the most

important things in life and are we giving them sufficient time and attention? In a perfect world, what would be happening? Having decided, start with step one, identify your values and set goals and objectives to achieve a work-life balance that accords with them. Then work through steps two, three and four to get there.

Soft skills

Coral's talk was very well received by AAT Bristol members, says Heidi Rockett, Chair of the Bristol Branch. Members responded positively on their feedback forms and Heidi was pleasantly surprised that a 'soft skills' event had gone down so well.

Heidi is considering becoming an AAT member in practice, so Coral's talk really made her think. 'I found the Wheel of Life very useful and I realised that I was putting "me time" too far down on my list of priorities,' she says.

As Coral teaches, 'You wouldn't get on a bus if you didn't know where it was going.' So it always makes sense to have a plan.

To find out more about Coral's coaching and workshops, visit www.coaching4rsults.co.uk or call 01275 843923



Coral's top tips to achieving a good work-life balance

- 1 Managing self:** Choosing your emotional state gives you control over your life. As a first step, Coral recommends actively maintaining your health, ie going to a gym, and making time for hobbies. 'Feeling you can control your emotions is very empowering,' she says.
- 2 Managing others:** This means managing the expectations of employees, clients, customers and family members. Give people times when they can have your undivided attention.
- 3 Managing environment:** The phrase, 'Tidy desk, tidy mind' applies here. Research by *FastCompany* magazine revealed that workers waste six weeks per year looking for lost documents. Ordering your environment is time well spent.
- 4 Planning:** Coral says the old cliché, 'Fail to plan and you plan to fail' is worth repeating. 'Make a plan and stick to it, with others' support, if necessary,' she says. 'People spend a lot of time dealing with urgent tasks, but by planning they're able to focus on what's important and tasks rarely become urgent.'
- 5 Prioritising:** This goes hand in hand with planning. Make 'to do' lists, keep a diary or calendar, and constantly reassess what should take priority. If you're not sure, go back to planning to clarify what your values, goals and objectives are.