



Glain Roberts-McCabe sat down with Roundtable Member, **Julie Thompson**, Director Program Management and Compliance at Plan Canada, to get her perspective on how to achieve life balance while still demonstrating commitment to your work.

Mentoring **MATTERS**

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I work in a fast, paced, demanding work environment where the sensitivity for “life balance” is low. The expectation is that the demands of the business will always come first. How can I make space for my personal priorities without it seeming that I am not committed to the business?

I have spent the last 15 years working in the non-profit sector, specifically international development where I am drawn to the missions that these organizations serve. While this is work that I am very passionate about and that brings much reward, it also comes with some sacrifice. Compensation is typically less competitive, and the context and complexities of our work and its demands, in some cases, can make life balance very challenging.

In my current role at Plan Canada, my work cuts across different regions, including Latin America and Asia. This essentially has me working on a 24 hour clock. Our project implementation is in some of the most vulnerable and marginalized areas in these regions that are prone to natural disasters, humanitarian crises and conflict thus making it very difficult to 'turn off' or ignore the little red light that is flashing on my phone, regardless of the time of day or night. My job also requires a lot of international travel at times, which is by no means glamorous. The travel and time zone changes are not easy, the days are long, busy and require lots of prep, and evenings require time to keep up with the demands that continue back at the office. Staying healthy and balanced in this role and environment is definitely a challenge!

While I don't always claim to be just where I want to be as it relates to balance, I see this as a work in progress and have certainly realized the gain in taking some small steps. Here are some of the strategies that I've employed to tip my balance scale.

Prioritize – Sometimes you just need to accept that you can't do everything. It's important to recognize what's urgent and what's not, and we all need to determine our own criteria for this. In my case priorities include anything that may impede other things from moving forward, things that are external facing including donor requests, and executive team requests.

Delegate – I have learned that I can't, and perhaps shouldn't, do it all. Early in my career when I wanted to prove myself, I did feel that I had to do it all. Now I see delegating as a good opportunity for others to grow and learn - as long as it's done well. I think there's lots of value to building and equipping others to take things on for you. As part of my effort in delegating, I try to ensure clarity around expectations, keep communication high through regular update meetings, and I provide team members with similar criteria for prioritizing their work and what they cover with me in their update meetings.

Work From Home – Working from home on occasion was something that I was hesitant to ask about at first, but that has provided me with great flexibility to get some personal things done during my work day or early evening avoiding the commute; whether it be an appointment, laundry or a class. In my case, my boss had set the tone for flexibility, working from home herself on occasion. This did help me feel it was ok to ask, but I certainly viewed and continue to view this as a privilege and I always respect it. Building trust early on and then maintaining it has been key in making this flexible arrangement work for me. High communication, being available and responding quickly, being proactive and transparent about when I am not available and why, have all been helpful in building and maintaining the trust around this arrangement. With my teammates, I try to be respectful of their preferences for face-to-face meetings and accommodate those. And, I check in regularly to ensure that my boss continues to be comfortable with how things are working and make any necessary adjustments.

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Take Vacation – For a long time I was not always particularly good about taking vacation time, though I was always good at making sure that others around me did. Over time I discovered the importance of me taking vacation too. I've discovered how it allows me to recharge and regain perspective; to be more strategic in my thinking; and that it sets the tone for my team as to the importance of vacation and taking time for one to recharge and come back fresh and recommitted.

Schedule Time for Me – Whether it is a run, a yoga class, or walking the dog, scheduling time for these types of things in the same way that I schedule a meeting helps me see it much more like a commitment. I put all of these things into my calendar and protect that time, which for me has proven to be the only way that it works.

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Step Away From My Work Environment – Whether I am at my home office, my corporate office or my hotel office, a short break away from the environment I'm working in can help me and my day feel so much more balanced. It may be taking a walk, going to the gym, going to the coffee shop or the park with a book, or getting out for a meal with a colleague when I'm travelling. It doesn't need to be for long to make a difference. When I am unable to physically step away, taking a few minutes to listen to some music to get me grounded or energized again usually does the trick!

Small steps can become better habits and create big gains!

How balance is defined is very personal. It may not be the same for me, as it is for you. And what I define as good balance for myself now may be different than what I define as good balance at a different stage in my life. We all need to consider how we can achieve the balance that works for us, and sometimes small steps become better habits and can create big gains!



Julie Thompson is Director Program Management and Compliance at Plan Canada where she oversees a high-performing team dedicated to effective program implementation and compliance in Latin America and Asia. She is a passionate and committed advocate for child rights and international development issues whose work in the sector spans several continents, more than 30 countries and multiple thematic sectors such as gender equality, education, health, protection and economic empowerment. Julie works to ensure that program funding is results focused, impactful and ultimately benefits the most marginalized and vulnerable beneficiaries.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.