The road to success, personal or professional, often warrants responsible and dedicated efforts. Everyone desires success, although personal definitions of success may differ. But people’s success, both personal and professional, also brings with it an expectation of more from those people who depend on them. Today, the ability of people to be productive professionally, from almost anywhere on virtually a moment’s notice, has not only become possible, it has become expected. Society is learning that this shift in the professional world can become a burden creating a strain on personal lives by increasing the expectation for people to be available almost around the clock. The concept of “work-life” balance is more complicated than ever before.

In trying to understand the building blocks for a successful career, and to present a discussion of success on work-life balance within the environmental industry, we asked some of our A&WMA leaders who are highly respected and successful to share their views. Their narrated experiences are inspiring, and though personal and unique to each individual, all of them converge toward a common set of timeless themes. Presented below are the quoted responses to the questions surveyed. The answers have been edited for better reading and relevance, but the essence of the message is unaltered.
**What was the most important lesson for your successful professional career?**

“To be successful, it helps to have a focus on attention to detail. Don’t take short cuts and make sure your work is always of the highest quality. Understand the project needs and client’s objectives, and make sure to stay on point with the work product, budget and schedule.”

“Develop relationships with people—they may become mentors and sponsors throughout your careers, or could provide a recommendation for a job, some may even become your clients.”

“Make friends with the support staff. It’s more complex than it sounds, but continually proving that you don’t think yourself better than others, and gaining the backing of the people who really keep the business running is crucial. You’d be surprised at how much power and influence the receptionist can actually have. Don’t ever be too good to help with any task or to talk with any coworker, regardless of your respective positions. The reverse is also generally true—don’t be afraid of talking with higher ups as normal people… There is a lot of respect to be gained by just approaching and talking to your boss (or their bosses).”

“Get involved with an organization like A&WMA. These interactions both at the local and international levels could be very useful throughout your career. My connections through A&WMA allowed me to jump quickly into discussions and connections with senior regulators and industry. Those connections and contacts were invaluable throughout not only my early career, but continue to be extremely useful.”

“Be grateful. Recognize that any achievement in your life results from the investments of others, and let them know how they have benefited your life. The timeless mantra is that your success also depends on the success of those around you—your boss, staff, and colleagues.”

**How did you break the barrier on being respected as you entered the workforce?**

“In general, plow ahead, work hard, never acknowledge that there is a barrier, and insist on being recognized for your efforts.”

“Work hard, ask questions, and take your time to come up to speed on the ‘learning curve.’”

“Cross-train in other areas of your field, even if the topics don’t seem relevant at the time, and you may have to learn things outside the realm of your experience.”

“In many sectors in the environmental field, there is a higher credibility and respect for engineers and engineering knowledge—so taking some engineering courses at college would be highly beneficial, no matter what program you are in. Recognition as a professional engineer will also open up additional career pathways. There is also a great appreciation for other certifications like BCCE, QEP, especially in consulting.”

“And finally, just enjoy your work.”

**How do you keep yourself ahead of the curve?**

“Ask questions…even stupid questions. Sometimes, I ask questions to which I already know the answer, just to keep a discussion going and make sure others are considering all angles.”

“It is important to be a continual learner, ever more so as the pace of information and innovation increases. It is very helpful to be curious, to be a prolific reader, and to surround yourself with interesting motivated people.”

“Take educated risks and try to learn from mistakes.”
What do you know now that you wished you had known then?

“Communication, both verbal and written, is supremely important in scientific careers. Being able to clearly convey your ideas and work products is very important to being seen as a valuable resource and being respected in your field. It is equally important to summarize information in 2-3 sentences, as well as explain your whole thought process in large reports.”

“What it may seem like a good idea to defer graduation or to postpone graduate school altogether in favor of a job offer, it may not be a good idea in the long run. It may only take a few extra two months to finish your degree while at school instead of years it may take to complete while working. Moreover, attending school while working will also require significant sacrifices, and may put additional pressure on your family.”

“The experience and connections you make during your schooling will be invaluable in landing your first job.”

“I didn’t fully appreciate the importance and many benefits of networking until well into my professional career. In hindsight, I would have searched out like-minded individuals or others with a similar mission that were working on (or had solved) similar challenges to mine. This is even true in straightforward assignments like studying for the EIT or PE exams which were more difficult than it would have been had there been support from peers who were in similar situation.”

“I wish I had known how important retirement planning would become as I got older! Seriously”

What recommendations do you have for YPs on pitfalls to avoid in their career?

“Never treat your work as a ‘9 to 5 job’. Environmental work is a career and is not like a production line job. You have to be passionate and willing to be a leader and supporter of the profession. Give back to it...it’s rewarding. If you don’t feel that way, and really just want a 9 to 5 place to work consider shifting to another career. Also be prepared to do a bit extra. I’ve seen too many employees refuse going to a key dinner meeting with regulators and industry because it was outside their work hours. It is YOUR career, your experience portfolio—develop it well.”

“Have a more open mind about the opportunities around you.”

“The biggest pitfall to avoid in an environmental career is forgetting what a truly small industry this is. You will work with and for the same people throughout your career, so be careful about burning bridges.”

“Plow your own path”

“Be sure you have the support of your spouse and your family if you take on advanced learning or special assignments. These are challenging even with support, and they can be very damaging if you don’t have their support.”

How do you maintain a healthy work-life balance?

“I don’t. I’m not sure it’s possible. There are times when the scales weigh more heavily on the life side, and times when the scales weigh more on the work side. The work-life balance trick is combining business travel with semi-vacation time—my husband and I occasionally join each other on part of a business trip, or extend the trip over a weekend for a few fun days away.”

“I am still working on this. But I greatly appreciate the technology of smart phones. I am able to keep in contact with my spouse and children with my iPhone. They know they can call me in an emergency, or text me to converse when I have a break.”
“Some would say I don’t have a healthy balance, because my job is huge part of my identity. But I think that’s a good thing, as I really like what I do and find my work very rewarding.”

“I don’t even try.”

“I tend toward being on-call most of the time because that is my choice.”

“If you have children, what were the keys to balancing professional and parental obligations?”

“Sadly, I’m almost always on call. The only ‘off limits’ times have been funerals and a couple of vacations. More often than not, the smart phone accompanies me on vacation, just not all day long.”

“I am almost always available, especially with today’s cell phone technology. But my colleagues and my family use this accessibility wisely.”

“My answer is that you need a lot of team work with your spouse/partner, and it will be very helpful if you have some other family or help available.”

“My desire is to be a good listener, giving my full attention to each of my children when we are conversing. It is easier for them to share with me if they know I genuinely care and consider them priority.”

“The biggest pitfall to avoid in an environmental career is forgetting what a truly small industry this is. You will work with and for the same people throughout your career, so be careful about burning bridges.”
When work and home have conflicting demands, how do you make a decision?

“The key is setting priorities. I don’t mean that all home or all work should be a priority, but weighing each situation and event. Always communicate with your manager about setting of priorities. Good companies and managers will accept good decision-making and accept that life does have priorities. If they don’t; maybe it’s time to look elsewhere. But again, be reasonable; recognize both your priorities and company priorities and decide accordingly.”

“Home generally would be top priority, but in general decisions need to be a case-by-case basis. First, see if there is a way to resolve the conflict. Don’t be afraid to question a deadline if there isn’t an underlying regulatory need. Maybe it is selective memory, but I can’t think of any major events for my family that I missed.”

“I will say that I was one of the last to get a cell phone, and then to get email on my phone, so I was pretty slow to join the world of always being connected. But now that I have it, I don’t see how I lived without it. Of course there are some times when the phone is off but in general, I am always on-call. I keep very odd hours, so there is a very large blur of what I consider to be work time and off-time. Now that my kids are grown, I really don’t mind staying connected at all hours. I prefer being able to take care of things quickly to keep them from building up.”

“My family is more important than my job. I have been blessed with interesting and satisfying work with a very worthwhile mission, but my greatest privilege and responsibility is leading and caring for my family.”

Conclusion

Career professionals often agree that there is no single yardstick to measure success. Success is both personal and subjective. It encompasses diverse metrics, personal and professional, and consequently becomes a subjective measure scored on an individual's goals and priorities and the efforts to realize those objectives. For some, success is defined by constant upward mobility and the ambition to be at the very top, for some others, success may be defined by a respected and relevant career, while others may be happy in just having a job. Whatever your definition of success, your path to get there will be easiest if you are completely committed and just have fun. A successful career and personal happiness don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

In the same vein, in order to maintain a work-life balance, you must have some criteria about determining where professional and personal obligations end. Those limits can be hard and fast or they can be based on individual situations. Those limits will vary from person to person, but regardless, they should be grounded in someone’s personal identity. A person's career is incredibly important, but it is critical maintain focus and remember that there are rewarding elements of life outside the office.

The good news is that some of the workplace pressures may start to shift. Generation Y has brought with them a renewed emphasis on the value of balancing their careers with their personal lives. In general terms, the trends are showing incredibly engaged and productive employees, but while off the clock they are able to disengage and they look negatively on things which infringe on their personal time.

The evolution of technology is only going to make mobile productivity easier, which will, in turn, continue this discussion. And while the ability to work from anywhere may appear to be a negative concept at face value, remember that as users of the technology we have the ability to say when enough is enough. Just because professionals can be available at all times, doesn’t mean that they need to be, or that they should be. The issue of maintaining a balance between career and personal obligations becomes a matter of the precedent set by each professional. Individuals have the ability to control their responsiveness and ability to engage at a moment’s notice.

After everything said above, what do your personal answers to the poll questions tell you about your work-life balance? Is it time to reevaluate your priorities or decision-making processes? As a manager, how do you ensure that you are respectful of the work-life balance of those you supervise? It's something to consider.