On March 13 and 14, 2013, the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), a division of the American Library Association held an eforum discussion on work/life balance.

Listed below are many of the questions asked of the forum participants, followed by summaries of comments.

- Does your workplace have programs (flex-time, maternity leave, child care) and a culture supporting work/life balance?
- What programs or organizational support (or lack of support) does your institution offer?
- Would you consider a wellness/health-related program to be an integral part of a work/life balance culture, or are they (or should they be) different?
- Do others notice a difference between schedule expectations for faculty-status or management and support staff? Do you think it’s a salaried vs. hourly model?
- How do you keep work stress from “overflowing” into your home life (and vice versa)? What kinds of things do you do?
- We have heard several people indicate that they would like employers to make allowances for more types of family issues. Eldercare, adoption, maternity/paternity leave etc. have been mentioned? What types of programs would you like to see and how do you think they might be introduced to make home/family issues more flexible and accommodating for a wider group of situations? In what way can an employer accommodate family needs and still provide coverage and get the work done?
- No matter what your work policies and programs are, some people are better than others at managing the work/life balancing act. Do you have personal strategies that help you find that balance no matter what the circumstances?
- Do you have any worries about layoffs? How is your performance measured when the Big Bosses start looking to cut people? How do you live with the daily, grinding stress and anxiety of “will it be me and then what??”
- Does anyone work for a union that is actively seeking to enhance work/life issues?

**Work/Life Balance Summary Day 1**

**Flexible Schedules**
- a lot of ability for library faculty flexibility in schedule. While there is a core set of hours when most things like meetings are scheduled, people's start and end times can be tailored to their commuting needs. Occasional work-from-home is also permitted
- differences between faculty librarians vs. civil service/hourly/other staff who often have less flexibility in working around schedules; this can be true for union and non-union shops as well
- flexible schedules seem to depend on not only work rules for type of staff, but coverage in public areas, and by how accommodating the manager is. Technical services areas (or non-public areas) often have more flexibility than public service employees since coverage is an issue.
- Part-time workers have more difficult time with adjusting schedules and feeling included in regular work opportunities; they may not also have access to wellness or other workplace programs
- Some workplaces are allowing little to no flexibility in schedules or dealing with work/life issues
- Telecommuting is sometimes an option, but typically only for faculty or management and not always for public services jobs
- Some workplaces haven’t addressed flexible scheduling until someone asks for the accommodation
- While management is often allowed more flexibility, they often don’t feel that they have the same ability to use that time away

Childcare & Family leave / time away /
- university does offer a preschool but no infant care
- many times there are long waiting lists for the childcare provided
- paternity leave not always addressed, but for some very generous (up to a semester if faculty)
- sometimes differences in leave for faculty/management vs. staff, who often have to use sick time or vacation
- Some organizations use “time away” or paid time off without any designation of why or when which can give employees more flexibility; doesn’t always apply to sick time
- Some organizations allow donating of sick or vacation time from employees who don’t use theirs to help co-workers who need additional time off for catastrophic health issues
- Some workplaces pay employees for unused sick time
- Workplaces tend to focus more on childcare, but single folks may also have issues as well (caregivers for others or parents)
- Washington state allows “parental leave” for court-ordered care givers

Wellness and Worklife programs:
- Wellness program offer physical activity, nutrition information
- Work life programs (Eldercare program offered)
- Employee wellness programs administered by HR offer workshop, earn points and cash
- Fitness release time – allows employees to exercise @ fitness center up to 3 hrs/week on work time
- Flex time to attend classes/workouts during the workday
- Fitness reimbursement ($25/month), smoking cessation, short-term mental health counseling, wellness conversion (cashing in unused sick days into vacation days)
- Some organizations strive for fairness across all categories of workers, others do not
- Wellness workshop, weight loss programs
- On-site testing, fitness evaluations and vendor presentations

**Challenges to work/life balance:**

- increased flexibility and ability to check in from outside the office puts pressure on people to do just that, and I suspect other libraries are not immune to the blurring of work life and home life. I think it is a challenge to determine how to balance that, especially as faculty have expectations and requirements for research and service.
- Difference between European models and US models, where US tends to require more time at work with less vacation – is that really hindering productivity and US organizations may not understand how to financially justify more time off
- Home-based/telecommuting workers often find it difficult to separate home and work and “turn off” at the appropriate times
- Requirements by faculty/managerial status employees to do scholarly/creative activities and outside volunteer work without corresponding release time to do that.
- Wanting to feel like we’re making a difference in our jobs can cause us to not leave the job at work
- Supervisors or Branch managers often feel they’re “on” 24/7.

**What we might like to see happen:**

- Rather than laying people off, reduce hours for everyone and this would give everyone more time and people would still get paid and jobs would be preserved
- More awareness of eldercare and other family issues, not just childcare
- Telecommuting when appropriate for the job
- More attention to eldercare and those employees in the “sandwich” years when children and parental eldercare intersect
- Some would like to take their dog to work!
- “unileave” or paid time off – without questions or restrictions on what you use it for

**Other topics**

There were several emails discussing workplace health issues such as ergonomic workspace design, open work spaces and the pros and cons of those, and some discussion about downright unhealthy work areas.

**Illustration that seemed to be well-received:**

I have learned that your family is your family and should be your highest priority. When you start thinking your employer is your family, you set yourself up for disappointment. I heard an illustration once (sorry don't know the source!) that a person has 4 balls to juggle: 1) spouse/s.o. 2) family 3) spirit and 4) work. The work ball is rubber. The others are glass. If you start dropping balls, the work one will rebound, but the others will be damaged severely. This helps me keep things in perspective.
Work/Life Balance eforum - Summary – Day 2

Personal Strategies for maintaining Work/Life balance:
- **Set Boundaries**
  - Be very clear workplace that I do not work from home. I come to the office and do all of my work on the premises. When I’m not here, I’m not at work. Period.
  - Turning off the technology when on vacation.
  - Disconnecting from tech has helped in my personal relationships and sleep that helps me to feel more balanced when it comes to my work life.
  - Telling people you have other things to accomplish – boundaries for “over-stayers” at work.
  - Most helpful when co-workers also follow similar boundaries; may be a generational thing (i.e. younger workers “sleeping with their phones”).
  - Require/suggest appointments to avoid drop-in visitors wasting time. Clear policies will help.
  - Setting personal boundaries may be a key, since not all workplaces have the expectations that we often put on ourselves.
  - Good discussion on when it is important NOT to pick up the slack for a co-worker out on extended leave or a position is unfilled; working oneself to the bone may give management the impression the additional position is not needed because the work is getting done – at a personal cost.
  - Schedule and time out tasks and let others know this is what needs to be done. If I add this other task, what should I give up?
  - Learning to say “no” and being able to frame it positively to conform to work priorities.
  - Heather’s rules to live by:
    “I try to live by these

Work to home
1. I do not take work home with me
2. I do not check my work email
3. I do not answer any questions or VM until I return the next day
4. I realize that my life is not defined by my job but by who I am.
5. I prioritize my life and remind myself to stick to it.
6. I realize that this is a library, and there are no emergencies in cataloging.
7. When I walk out the door, this library does not exist
8. Work will happen for a few years, my sanity, my family and my “real life are never going anywhere, so those are what needs to be nurtured.

Home to work
This one is a little harder since I put my family first and foremost

1. My family CAN function without me for 8 hours each day
2. I ignore the whiny text messages (from the children and the husband)
3. I make sure that if something specific needs to happen at home I write it down step by step for my family
4. I keep everything well organized and clear at home so that it can be understood without my being there.
5. I realize that being a work is good for me because it helps me to maintain balance in my life

- **Personal Care and Fitness**
  - Cardio kick-boxing
  - Gardening
  - Zumba
  - Yoga
  - “fluffy/trashy” novels
  - Whatever is your stress reliever
  - Try to “go with the flow” and keep Ralph Waldo Emerson in mind: "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense."
  - Take walks around campus/near work on break times

- **Vacation and Time off**
  - Use it!
  - Use it the way that works best for you – save it up or take it for sanity in smaller chunks

**Workplace support for technology, work place design, etc.**

- Use a pay-as-you-go phone and get reimbursed for the minutes to keep work separate from home
- Some feeling that if the organization pays, then you feel more required to be “on” all the time
- There was a good bit of discussion on working environment, desk set-ups, general physical office conditions and suggestions to talk to management, get ergonomic assessments and look for accommodations for personal physical needs. Suggestions were made to have students from physical therapy programs do presentations or assessments for the library.
- Have back-up personnel and back-up plans so that management is not on call 24/7 and expected to respond to every situation.
- Cross-train others in the department to help employees not feel guilty about leaving.
Professional development, reading, staying current
- Many are required to do some research, but not all get work release time to do it and end up doing it personally
- Many are just trying to fit in keeping up with lists and blogs at work as they can and some also do this on their own time
- Some attend and pay for conferences or workshops on their own if the organization doesn’t or cannot support
- Often committee or association work is done in off-work hours
- Use a good RSS feed to collect professional blogs/lists for review

Wishes:
- Ability to take pet care time or bring pets to work; other than the Read to a Dog or therapy pets and exam-time pets supporters although there was realization that allergy, training, certification may be an issue.
- That it was easier to keep home life stresses out of workday or from affecting it; part of the challenge is complex family needs and differing time off between family members. Need to coordinate well with family members.
- That working time/life expectations for were more consistent with work requirements.

Workplace Issues and Scheduling Concerns
- Some posters expressed concern for health in horrible office conditions, or management not allowing breaks or lunches in the workplace (which spurred a lot of discussion on legalities and suggestions of unions!)
- Suggestions were made to make sure to check on specific legal requirements for time off questions and different (exempt vs. non-exempt) employees.
- Discussion of the varying workday requirements in organizations. Comparisons with European countries seem to indicate that Americans work longer work days/work weeks with less overall vacation time. Much discussion ensued which pointed to the fact that some people wanted the extra time given/required for lunches and some would rather leave earlier or start earlier or later. It’s apparent that people with differing circumstances or lifestyles will have differing wishes.
- Some posters were concerned about job security and how to deal with the stress of trying to work harder and the stress of not knowing the outcomes taking their toll.
- Seems to be a feeling that with the downturn, employers and unions are not focusing on work/life balance concerns that they may have been in the past. It’s hard to ask for better work/life balance programs when people are concerned about being laid off.
About the E-Forum Hosts

Leslie Burke is Collection Development and Digital Integration Librarian at Kalamazoo College. She has worked at Kalamazoo College since January 2012 handling serials, acquisitions, collection development and e-resources. Prior to working at K, Leslie was an Account Services Manager (a librarian-on-the-road) for EBSCO Information Services for 11 ½ years, performing customer service, training, and problem-solving and providing solutions to clients in the Midwest states. Leslie was a corporate librarian for over a decade at Amway Corporation, and a serials/acquisitions librarian at Western Theological Seminary. Leslie has been active in SLA, Michigan Health Sciences Library Association and other state and regional library groups. She has presented at state and regional library conferences and at SLA Annual conferences.

Robert Roose is the Support Services Manager at Spokane Public Library in Spokane, Washington. He has worked in public services at Renton Public Library (WA), Hobbs Public Library (NM) and both technical services and public services at Jefferson County Library (WA). He is active in the Washington Library Association.