

Office OM

Creating a more fulfilling relationship with your job can be as easy as stepping onto your yoga mat

by Tevis Gale

If you've ever caught yourself fantasizing about chucking your job in favor of working the food line at a retreat center or ashram, you are not alone. Indicating widespread workplace ennui, Gallup studies found that less than 27% of employees report being "truly engaged" in their work. Additional research shows that among the new corporate breed in MBA programs around the country, what really matters in our work experience isn't so much compensation (48%) or even work/life balance (45%) but that there are "challenging responsibilities" (64%) in what we do everyday. If ever there was a relationship worth healing, this may just be the one that deserves some TLC.

I know from firsthand experience. From early days slinging fast food to later years conducting business development for major Fortune 500s, my relationship with work ranged from the celebratory "Yippee! I got assigned the great new [project, position, geography] in one moment to the tearful wondering "Ohmigod, there MUST be more to life than office politics" in another. Moments of meaning, flow, or union, I found, fluctuate as much in work life as they do in any other situation.

Vrittis, or fluctuations, don't sort themselves along work versus life lines. In matters of love or how we pay the rent, the mind sorts experiences depending on where our growth feels blocked on a scale of "I like" to "I don't like," rather than trusting that the blocks ARE the invitation to growth. What's more, these fluctuations aren't the only constant—we often scrutinize our situations with "grass is greener" suspicion, thinking that somehow if we had just chosen more wisely, we would be happier or



more successful, that obstacles would not appear. Such scrutiny easily prevents us from seeing the gold to be mined from our every moment.

The yoga-work relationship

From a yogic perspective, this is not news. Our relationship with work is one of the primary challenges examined by mystics from many traditions, including yoga. *The Bhagavad Gita* is rife with wisdom regarding our relationship with work. Its summation of the situation is this: No matter what you do, you have to do it fully with your whole heart and forget about the "fruit" or reward. Mahatma Gandhi's admonition that until we find God in front of us, we must travel no further applies equally to finding the divine in that irritating co-worker. Given our proclivity for constant evaluation of whether we are getting ahead or slipping behind on one metric or another, or whether the folks we work with are worth our time, it looks like we've got a challenging responsibility all right.

Changing the experience


At 9.1 hours per week, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, we work over half our waking hours,

making those precious moments in yoga class feel like a sacred sanctuary. But multiple sources from yogic philosophy urge us to experience *turiya* (pure consciousness) in ALL of life's venues—including work—not just in moments reserved for spiritual reflection or self-care. While it is true that a steady practice can serve as a great pressure valve, rather than treating it as a spiritual martini, remember it was designed as a practical tool for folks like you and me: people getting through life one day at a time, in the midst of all the dramas of success and survival that human interaction can conjure up. Learning to use yoga to inform how we experience work is key to healing the work/self relationship.

Workplace watchfulness

According to the tantric yoga text *The Spandakarika*, our entire lifetime serves as an opportunity to witness whatever is going on around us from an energetic perspective rather than an ongoing personal narrative. By removing our attention from the habitual analysis or story-making through which we filter the events of our lives, we begin to have a direct experience of life itself. When we purposefully release worries and self-imposed torture, we deepen our relationship with life itself rather than holding ourselves prisoner within our countless stories about life. Did your boss frown at your last comment? Watch how your energy responds. Did you just get a raise? Watch what the inner experience is. Do you enjoy your morning ritual of getting to work? Watch the energetic flow.

The shifts in energy may be extreme or subtle. From a quick lift when a coworker nods in response to a suggestion to the felt sense of frustration when you can't make it to work on time, become a student of how these energetic states feel rather than what they might mean. If you can avoid applying any story to the feeling whatsoever and simply acknowledge the energy shifting within you, you will be increasingly freed from the suffering of life's many cause and effect relationships and one step closer to *moksha* (freedom).

Forget the conventional wisdom that work is oppositional to life and little more than a four-letter word. Be bigger by getting bigger than the dramas unfolding in your day. Living your life in willing relationship with all of its aspects is our first challenging responsibility. Yoga's invitation is to experience your day-to-day chaos as a perpetual call back to the wisdom of the mat. 

Office Sadhana

1. Habitual to Ritual: Project the structure of your practice onto your work day flow: centering/theme, flow/sequence, closure. Recognizing these elements within your work flow gives purpose and introduces self-mastery into your day. Where is your structure lacking: Is it in centering before the day? Is it in creating a theme or intention? If you struggle with working 24/7, perhaps Savasana is really the necessary element.

2. Stay or Flow?: Take a lesson from your preferred form of practice. Are you a flow-junkie or do you find God in the juice of being in the pose? Looking at the form of movement on the mat that pleases you most, what insights can you find about the rhythms that are most comforting/disturbing off the mat? Recognizing this preference as an attachment is the first step toward acceptance of other situations and ways of moving.

3. Sitting Easy in Awkward Chair: Approaching the mat, most of us know the poses that bring out the worst in our thinking. Off the mat, what situations summon your inner teenager? Can you catch your negative thoughts as you experience such situations and adopt more supportive frameworks?

4. Gotta Have It: Whether you feel incomplete without three full Wheel Poses or you just can't make it through the day without a few moments in Headstand, chances are there are also moments that sustain you at work; your morning routine of joking with the barista before heading up to the office; that weekly call when the team shares ideas on projects; or simply getting organized in the morning, actively recognizing what pleases you during your day provides energy that counterbalances whatever else comes your way.

5. Breathe Here Now: As in your practice, notice how your thoughts aren't the only thing fluctuating. Attuning your awareness to your breath, notice your short shallow breath during dull meetings, how it becomes hard and tight in a tense phone conversation, and that you barely breathe at all when talking to that colleague who somehow never fails to irritate you. Bring it back to even flow on the inhalation and exhalation to soothe your nervous system and steady you to respond with equanimity and centeredness.

6. Wise Wunderkind: Shiva Rea calls Child's Pose (or Balasana) Wisdom Pose. What is your cubicle equivalent for cultivating stillness and wisdom? Walking to the bodega for a piece of fruit? Taking 10 observed breaths between activities? Is it a moment inhaling "clarity" and exhaling "tension"? Assign a few Wise Child choices to yourself, and then hardwire their practice into your day by doing them and treating them with the same reverence.

Corporate veteran and yoga teacher **Tevis Gale** is founder of Balance Integration, a global provider of yoga-based tools to corporations. You can catch her speaking on yoga, work life, and employee engagement as well as training others to teach in corporations at Omega Institute and studios around the country. balanceintegration.com