

# ■ The Challenge of “Challenge”

## *How to Find Just the Right Work Balance*

by Tom Terez

Talk about irony. It’s Labor Day, and while my neighbors gather around their grills, I’m huddled over my keyboard laboring over this column. I’m facing a tight deadline and want to avoid another late night.

But wait, is that the smell of bratwurst wafting up from a grill? Wow, that smells good. (Long pause while my entire being focuses on an imaginary brat.) Forget the bratwurst, get back to the column! You have to get it done or your appointment book will never forgive you. What was the topic again? Oh yeah, challenge.

My book, *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*, provides insights into the twenty-two key factors of a workplace that truly brings out the best in employees. These keys emerged from interviews and focus groups with people from all walks of life.

One of the keys is challenge, and it just so happens to be one of the most, well, challenging. So many people find deep fulfillment in situations that stretch their skills, talents, know-how, and deep interests. Yet so many workplaces go too far in either direction—either they wear people out with impossibly demanding work, or they keep hands busy but leave minds unengaged.

Despite excessive bratwurst fumes, I have developed a detailed assessment tool that will help you determine where you fall on this challenge continuum. While I run outside and visit with my neighbors, review the following items

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### So many workplaces seem obsessed with **creating rules** and enforcing rules and ruling on rules.

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carefully, and place a checkmark in front of each statement that accurately describes your current situation.

- You’re famous around the office for your Post-It Note origami.
- People occasionally snap their fingers in your face and call out: “Hello, is anyone home?”
- A big decision consists of “cheese on wheat” or “fig bar.”
- Out of the blue, you get a call from a casting director who wants you as an extra in the upcoming movie “The Stepford Employee.”

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## ■ The Challenge of “Challenge” *continued*

\_\_\_ You follow with some anticipation the results of Howard’s Tuesday evening bowling league.

\_\_\_ You feel genuine pride after sorting your paper clips by size.

\_\_\_ A colleague asks you how long you’ve been practicing self-hypnosis.

If you’ve checked any of the above items, or if any seem even remotely true to life, you’re seriously under-challenged. I recommend that you fire up your grill, cook yourself a tasty meal, and worry about things later on in this column.

If you didn’t check any boxes, you’re not in the clear just yet. Review this second set of assessment items:

\_\_\_ You look up at the clock and it’s already 5 p.m.—the next day.

\_\_\_ To replace those time-draining coffee breaks, you opt for a caffeine patch.

\_\_\_ After a late-night work session, you’re pretty sure you see religious icons in your screen saver.

\_\_\_ You’ve operated a pager, a cell phone, and a laptop ... at the same time ... while eating dinner ... at your child’s recital.

\_\_\_ You come up with a neat idea: the waterproof laptop, perfect for achieving high productivity in the shower.

\_\_\_ The evening cleaning crew offers to put aside its own chores and help you finish whatever it is you’ve been working on for the past several months.

If any of these seven items seem to apply, you face a major case of overwork. In your case, I’d bypass the grill entirely and have the food delivered.

Seriously, there are certain actions you can take whatever your situation:

- Gather your immediate colleagues for an on-going conversation about the current situation. Perhaps you can team up and help each other. Collective effort is more likely to produce a long-term solution that benefits everyone.

- If you’re seriously under-challenged, take a process that’s all your own and make it faster, better, and more cost effective. You’ll end up saving some time in your schedule, so direct it to stuff that will engage your brain and stir your deep interests.

- If you think you’re not in a position to recreate how your work is done, search for one sliver of opportunity—something you can do differently to get your brain back in gear, or something you can stop doing so you can use the saved time for more challenging activities, or at least someone you can talk to who can help you start turning things around.

- Establish a demanding stretch goal just for yourself. It should be aligned with all the other goals around you—in your work unit, for instance, or the organization as a whole—but it’s yours and yours alone.

- Consider making this personal goal setting process a group endeavor. If these goals are big

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enough—and they should be—you’ll need help to turn them into reality.

- If you’re totally over-challenged, put your schedule under a microscope. Which of your work activities adds little or no value? This can be a painful process as you realize that those monthly reports you’ve been laboring over for the past several years are read by a grand total of one person: you. Sort out what’s really important and what only seems to be important. Then start trimming away.

- Watch out for perfectionism. If you’re doing something over and over and over to get it just right, get in touch with your customers and find out what they think. You want to thrill them, to be sure, but it won’t do anyone any good if you

burn yourself out in the process.

- Recognize the sharp distinction between being conscientious and being a control freak. Ironically, your excessive workload just might be an opportunity to widen responsibility and boost empowerment.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Terez is a speaker, consultant, and author of *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*. His Web site, [BetterWorkplaceNow.com](http://BetterWorkplaceNow.com), is filled with tools for building a great work environment. Write to [Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com](mailto:Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com) or call 614-571-9529.

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