Life on the Wire
Avoid Burnout and Succeed in Work and Life
by Todd Duncan

You Can Enjoy Life and Accomplish More
...as soon as you realize there’s no such thing as a balanced life.

QUICK OVERVIEW
Moving your daily actions from “I have to” to “I want to” can be a seemingly impossible goal. But in his latest book, Todd Duncan breaks down the process—and so doing, helps readers find harmony (rather than balance) in their hectic lives.

Life on the Wire addresses the tensions everyone faces. Duncan helps readers understand the value of “purposeful imbalance” and explains how to determine which imbalance is healthiest at that moment. He points out that for a satisfying life, one simply must forgo the pursuit of recognition for the pursuit of esteem; the convenience of inactivity for the mental and physical rewards of a healthy lifestyle. The practical steps Duncan outlines will help you analyze and determine the pursuits that will lead to your best shot at a fulfilling life.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Life on the Wire offers advice on how to identify and define your true objectives, while allowing for the fact that objectives can vary with the seasons of life. He also clarifies that each person is built differently, and that for some, stability offers a much higher personal satisfaction than pursuit of creativity. Of course, the opposite is true for others. This acknowledgement helps separate Life on the Wire from many other goal-realization books.

The text of the first chapter gives practical advice on when to choose a “comfortable job” and when it’s more fulfilling to choose an “inspirational job.”

Regardless of the proper path for you, two activities will open doors for you:

SUMMARY

Life on the Wire: Avoid Burnout and Succeed in Work and Life

2. Full Engagement: Live in the present, or as Duncan puts it, “Wherever you are, be all there.”

These two activities will increase self-knowledge and build momentum.

Famed tightrope walker Tino Wallenda and his family, the Flying Wallendas, have been walking on high wires without nets for nearly a century. When asked how he maintains balance on a wire with nothing but earth beneath him, Tino gently corrects the assumption: “The reality is that you are never actually balanced; you are constantly making small adjustments—moving back and forth—and it’s those constant movements that keep you on the wire. The truth is, if you stand still, you fall.”

The same is true of harmonizing our personal and professional worlds. You are never actually balanced, nor should you try to be. To ensure a more harmonious existence, you must keep yourself moving—carefully teetering and tottering between work and life activities.

Like a tightrope walker, you must regularly make adjustments back and forth to keep yourself standing. The key is being purposeful, having sound reasons for everything you do.

FIRST TENSION POINT: “I HAVE TO” VS. “I REALLY WANT TO”

The relationship between your work requirements and work objectives plays a major role in whether you feel tension.

The various seasons of life lead you to take jobs for different reasons. As long as the requirements of the job promote your work objectives, you’re not likely to feel any serious tension. If your current objective is to maintain a predictable schedule and paycheck, you’re less likely to feel tension from a lackluster job because it doesn’t keep you from reaching your main goal. During another season, however, your primary objective might be emotional gratification, in which case you’d be less willing to accept the same lackluster job because it would be out of alignment with that “higher” (according to Maslow’s pyramid) objective.

The first step toward decreasing misalignment and harmonizing the tension between your job requirements and job objectives is to figure out what type of job best fits you and your current circumstances. For the most part, there are two types of jobs: comfortable ones and inspirational ones.

Understanding your current priorities helps you determine whether it’s time to do what you have to do, or do what you want to do. There will be a time in life for each choice.

SECOND TENSION POINT: MAKING MONEY VS. MAKING MEMORIES

Of all points of tension, the most common is the one that exists between your need to produce income and your need to engage in meaningful relationships. This tension is often the most pronounced sign that your circumstances are not as harmonious as you’d like.

The problem with life, as the saying goes, is that it’s daily. In other words, most of us reach a point where life will no longer slow down on its own. Taking a breather and evaluating—truly
assessing—your circumstances requires a significant effort. Instead of putting forth that effort, many put up blinders and maintain speed—until a crisis develops.

Two practices to adopt:

1. **Manufacture memories** by purposefully viewing interruptions to your day as an opportunity to create a memory.
2. **Fight for flexibility** by requesting/negotiating it within a position you already have, or negotiating for it in a new position.

When it comes down to achieving money/memories harmony, you must have a strong enough reason to follow through with the necessary changes, especially because they usually take a big effort. What is your reason to choose making money; what is your reason to choose making a memory?

### THIRD TENSION POINT: TAKING RISKS VS. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

When the greater cause of your work loses its luster, something often begins to tug at your insides. It typically starts with, *Am I happy doing this?* and then evolves to, *What makes me happy?* and eventually arrives at, *What do I ultimately want from life?* You are defining your version of success when you answer this question.

**Take an Honest Inventory**

Are you continually asking, *What am I missing today?* The question you should be asking instead is, *What is important to me today?* The most significant things in your life are the people and opportunities before you right now, because the future is not guaranteed.

It is not inertia that makes it possible to simultaneously fulfill personal responsibilities and pursue professional progress. It is your ability to continually make purposeful adjustments as significant opportunities and unforeseen circumstances arise. This might occasionally mean a major career shift—even a risky one.

There are two skills that are key to making those adjustments successfully in your own life and career.

1. **Assess current opportunities, pursuing the best ones.**
2. **Embrace current blessings.**

These skills will help you take responsible risks.

### FOURTH TENSION POINT: MOVING UP VS. MOVING ON

Under the right conditions, every step up your current ladder will move you closer to your potential. To achieve full harmony at this point of tension always requires risk. For some, this means forgoing a move up in order to move on to an opportunity with more potential. For others, it means teetering on an uncertain ladder until they know enough to take a more harmonious next step.

The bottom line: When it comes to navigating the rungs of your career climb, it is a farce to think you can avoid risk altogether. The nature of risk is that when you try to avoid it, you only increase it.

**Lessons to Learn:**

1. **Stay in the Tension**

   If you’re in the midst of rising progress/potential tension, resist the urge to get out right away. There is probably something important the tension can teach you about yourself and about a better path.

2. **Risk Is Unavoidable**

   Risk is the unavoidable context of all true progress and potential. How you handle risk in your career is a major determinant of your level of work/life harmony.

   Allow these two lessons to help you determine whether it’s time to move up or move on.

### FIFTH TENSION POINT: BEING NOTICED VS. BEING ESTEEMED

To be successful, you have to make a name for yourself with co-workers, colleagues and customers. To be respected and esteemed, you have to do it without stepping on toes and elbowing everybody else out of the way.

Perhaps the harmony we are seeking in this chapter is better described as wholeness. In our attempt to reconcile the tension between the very human desire to be recognized with the need to be respected by our colleagues, we have stumbled upon a profound truth. Respect/esteem is not necessarily something that we set out to achieve. Rather, it’s the byproduct of a life lived in wholeness—a life of integrity.
Pursuing recognition will not lead to being esteemed. But being esteemed will lead to being noticed.

**SIXTH TENSION POINT: GROWING PROFESSIONALLY VS. GROWING PERSONALLY**

Does pursuit of a successful career demand a high measure of personal sacrifice? Does the quest for personal significance require a high measure of career sacrifice? The answer to some extent is yes on both counts. But those who consistently pursue—and ultimately possess—both work success and life significance focus less on sacrifice and more on strategy.

Most people put their professional lives in one category and their personal lives in another. But what would happen if you put professional growth and personal growth in the same category? What would that look like?

The key to harmony is developing traits and skills that are equally valuable in both worlds, your professional and your personal life. In the end, it’s the best way to continually meet new challenges on the job and in life without losing ground in either.

To develop traits and skills that are valuable in both worlds, here are some important questions:

- What am I most passionate about?
- What are my core talents?
- Does this job engage those talents to the fullest?
- What do I enjoy the most in life?
- How do I want to be remembered?

These are the growth moments we all face at some point. We must choose to grow or to stagnate. Our professional circumstances are personal barometers. We grow in both by seizing the opportunities that present themselves.

**SEVENTH TENSION POINT: HELPING YOURSELF VS. HELPING OTHERS**

First, we must debunk the idea that significance is found in economic success. People are not significant because they can bring in the cash. True personal significance is measured in terms of a person’s impact on others.

The coach who spends 20 years with a high-school football team in middle America is no less significant than the entrepreneur from Silicon Valley. Their bank accounts have nothing to do with living a life that matters.

When the coach looks back over his years at the high school, he will be able to name people on whom he has had a direct impact. The years he spent pouring himself into the football program and those young boys will result in men with their own families, incorporating the same principles that governed his team. That is sustainable significance.

I cannot emphasize enough the trap that our society lays out for hardworking people. The trap is that success in our culture is measured by the accumulation of things, and often people draw their significance from those things.

You don’t have to quit a job and seek out community work to find significance. It may be as simple as starting a mentor program at the office for aspiring college students. Or teaching a class in prison. Or coaching a sports team. Significance demands self-sacrifice.

**EIGHTH TENSION POINT: GETTING SERIOUS VS. HAVING FUN**

Adding fun to life provides us with a break from the monotony, from the serious business of life and work, and gives us—to use an athletic term—“fresh legs.” Often we run through life as if it’s a sprint—finish school, get that great job, get married, crank out the children—you get the picture. In the microcosm of a career, it’s easy to put on the blinders and make a dash for the finish line, taking short breaks along the way.

But life is not a sprint. It’s a marathon. Pace is key, and margin is its best friend.

Life and career need pace. Sprinting to the finish line will only beat you down and wear you out. Instead of driving yourself and your family into the ground and then breaking for a vacation just before you mentally collapse, why not factor pace into your schedule?

Adding time for some fun and rejuvenation during your work life will help you fend off burnout. You will be able to go longer with short breaks that allow your mind to enjoy something unrelated to your work.

So have fun… on purpose. It’ll improve your ability to be serious.
NINTH TENSION POINT: WORKING HARD VS. STAYING HEALTHY

One of the first things we should do is answer this question: *What are the reasons behind the current choices I am making professionally and personally?*

Chances are, your reasons for doing the things you do professionally are directly related to financial success and hierarchical power.

But when we look back and see what those decisions have cost us in our personal lives, things do not look so peachy.

It is time to make some choices—some tough choices. It is time to evaluate and decide to pursue health as part of your recipe for success. It is time to realize that when we seek out personal health and fitness, we extend deeper significance to our lives. We are not just power-mongers or machines bent on making a buck. We are live human beings who realize that life harmony exists, not necessarily in a mystical or ethereal way, but in a way that brings a healthy imbalance to our professional life.

When our bodies are nurtured, our minds will follow. And a decision to cultivate both is the first step toward personal fulfillment.

TENTH TENSION POINT: MAKING YOUR MARK VS. LEAVING A LEGACY

Legacy is different from success. It is a body of work that, when held up to the light of reality, gives guidance and inspiration. It is the connection between successful numbers and moral triumph—it is a record of all that makes us who we are.

In many ways, everyone leaves a legacy. It is just a matter of the kind of legacy left behind. The man who spends his time on the couch watching television all night after work shows his kids what it means to be an adult—in the negative sense.

Each of us must ask, *What legacy am I leaving behind?*

If you are constantly looking for the next big break, you will ignore the present passing before you. It is *in the now* that legacy is built.

Legacy is accumulated over time. It is intentional living through everything life throws at you.

As you think through the tension between making your mark and leaving your legacy, consider your life experience and life passions. What have you always been drawn to? What recurring themes do you see along your life’s timeline?

Remember, either we strive for legacy by being intentional every day or we short-circuit our impact now and are content to be, at best, a flash in the pan—fiery hot, but quickly extinguished. At worst, it leaves a negative legacy.

Reignite yourself and watch your positive legacy build.

THE SUMMIT: MAKING GOOD DECISIONS VS. MANAGING DECISIONS ALREADY MADE

I look at most of the times in my life when things were not going right, and I can tie every challenge and problem and setback and failure to either the fact that I didn’t make the decisions necessary for success, or I had made the decisions but didn’t harness my self-discipline to manage them. Both are bad. One leads to lack of clarity, and one leads to lack of action. Both chip away at self-esteem, and personal integrity starts to slip away, creating the downward spiral and perpetual reversal of all things good and well.

You will be somewhere in the future. On your current course, what will you look back on and wish you had started? What regrets might you have? Whatever the answer, the first decision you must make is to start—to begin. Once in motion, then you’re on your way, self-leadership takes over, and your new decisions become your reality.

There are six governing principles of self-leadership that will give you a sense of control over the decisions you make and give you the discipline to back those decisions.

1. Self-leadership means knowing what’s important to you.
2. Self-leadership means scheduling what’s important to you.
3. Self-leadership means doing what’s important to you.
4. Self-leadership means completing what’s important to you.
5. Self-leadership means evaluating how you are doing in the areas that are important to you.
6. Self-leadership means learning from your mistakes.

You will find great tension in the midst of life. But it is that great tension that will drive you toward a purposeful imbalance, and it is the power of accountability that will mold you into the kind of self-leader who makes a true impact.
**ACTION STEPS**

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by asking yourself the following questions:

1. In my current circumstances, is job stability or pursuing an opportunity to do something meaningful more fulfilling to me?
2. What short-term and long-term sacrifices am I willing to make in order to have a more fulfilling life?
3. What are common interruptions to my workday, and how can I purposefully use them to make meaningful memories?
4. Do I make excellence a habit, or do I simply choose excellence when a particular task appeals to me? What task this week, personally or professionally, will benefit from additional effort toward excellence?
5. Do I take reasonable risk on a regular basis, or do I avoid risk? If I avoid it, what motivates me to do so?
6. What is important to me today? Am I directing action toward it?
7. What is progress or success to me? Is my definition different from the influences (such as work or parents) in my life?

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**Recommended Reading**

*Life on the Wire* is available at your favorite bookseller. If you enjoyed this summary, you may also want to check out:

- **The Truth About You** by Marcus Buckingham
- **Leading at a Higher Level** by Ken Blanchard
- **Goals!** by Brian Tracy

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**About the Author**

**Todd Duncan** is a speaker who emerged as a leader after experiencing success, failure, recovery and then success. His is a story much like Thomas Edison's self-described “2,000 ways not to make a light bulb” path. In part, his success comes from being willing to analyze and learn from his mistakes, but Duncan makes it a point to learn from the mentorship of thought leaders such as Og Mandino and Zig Ziglar. His books ring with authenticity simply because he has lived, and is willing to share, a more universal experience of taking wrong turns and having regrets—which helped build a foundation of wisdom, leading to success.