Over the past 10 years of working with senior- and middle-level executives and managers, as well as with staff in the human resources management and organization development professions, we’ve come up with four basic rules for designing and living a reasonable and appropriately balanced life.

These rules offer practical suggestions for achieving better work/life integration without significantly sacrificing professional contribution or value. We’ve seen positive results from these rules while conducting workshops for individuals trying to balance their lives while still contributing powerfully to their organizations.

We’ve coined the term midlaner to describe someone who’s deliberately living a reasonable and appropriately integrated work life, one with a shifting balance between professional and personal activities, but always staying within well-defined limits.

By contrast, we define a careerist as someone who puts professional activities first and foremost and, if time and energy are left over, they’re allocated to family, personal development and spiritual reflection.

We think that by recognizing midlaning as an alternative to careerism, many conscientious people will be better able to design and manage successful careers without undue sacrifice to themselves, their families, and other important relationships and lifestyle considerations. You may be able to translate these ideas into more balanced human resources practices at your company, and maybe even help yourself personally.

Rule #1: Change your success paradigm.

Perhaps the most difficult rule is this first one. Success, for most of us, is defined by our position, power, financial compensation and wealth. Since these usually cluster together, no real dilemmas or tough choices exist for the careerist striving for his or her “success.” However, midlaners have a more complex definition of success. Their goals are broader and more diverse, and they frequently involve tradeoffs and dilemmas.

The midlaner’s success paradigm usually includes at least the following three dimensions:

1. Personal growth and spiritual development
2. Family and other interpersonal relationships
3. Productive work and the need to achieve.

Midlaners feel that their most important life task is to find and develop their inner gifts. James Hillman, author of The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling (Random House, 1996) compares us with an acorn, both having the potential to develop into something very special if we find and follow our “soul’s code” during our lifetime. This special calling is a powerful force requiring clear and deliberate thinking to identify, harness and develop.

Likewise, midlaners believe they have
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a moral obligation to constructively use their time, energy and talents. Meditation, prayer, physical fitness, continuous learning and volunteerism are frequently important activities for midlaners.

Career conflicts often appear in this area when work assignments demand so much time and energy that there's no time left for personal development. Toxic social environments at work, chronic negativity, fear, criticism and work stress all effectively constrict opportunities for positive growth, spirituality, personal pride and satisfaction with one's work life.

Most midlaners place the highest importance on their families and interpersonal relationships. Family responsibilities come first in their success paradigm; they won't short-change or exploit family members in favor of financial or career rewards. Midlaners believe they can always find another position—but they only have one family, and they treat it as such.

Too much travel, chronically long and exhausting workdays and workweeks, rescheduled family vacations, marital troubles and children responding poorly to absences of the parents are all signals to midlaners that it's time to rebalance the work side of their lives.

Midlaners thrive on productive work and the opportunity to achieve. For this reason, they fight for the opportunity to use their natural talents and to contribute in the highest and best way possible to their employer or profession.

Midlaners use their creative and analytical skills equally. They prefer to take on assignments that are suited to their abilities so they can perform exceptionally well. The result is usually of greater value because it's done completely, correctly and with focus.

Midlaners do everything possible to align their work with their personal sense of purpose. The litmus test they constantly apply is, "Do I have my heart in this work?" If the answer is "no" much of the time, it's a clear sign that a change in assignment, position or employer is probably due.

Rule #2: Know the price and be prepared to pay it.

If someone chooses to forego the careerist's track, many negative consequences are almost inevitable.

First, the midlanner will no longer be able to remain in the central and powerful positions in their organization. They inevitably must say goodbye to the inner circle. Not only are midlaners usually excluded from this inner circle, but they're frequently treated with suspicion by all those who measure commitment and value by time spent in the office and not by actual contributions.

Midlaners are busy coaching Little League or attending their children's birthday parties, while key power positions are reserved for those who are seen as loyal to the institution and dedicated to its future.

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of their colleagues. The reactions of colleagues are often the result of their need to reaffirm their own career decisions and priorities, and shouldn’t be taken personally.

However, it’s critical that when people embark on their midlancing career paths, they continue to make their fair share of contributions and remain highly valuable to their organizations. In the case of workaholic organizations, the deliberate balancing path may not be possible. But in most cases, there’s room for some redefinition of one’s work responsibilities without major consequences. Promotions, raises and bonuses may be scarce, but the tradeoff more than compensates for this.

In summary, our second rule for midlancing is to know the price that must be paid for taking a different path, and be prepared to pay it.

**Rule #3: Know your personal dragons.**

We have found that there are three distinct sources of pressure that keep people on the careerist track and cause them to forego the midlancing alternative. We find it useful to think of these as personal “dragons.”

Rule #3 states that a would-be midlancer must clearly identify his or her own sources of pressure and barriers to a balanced life. Each of these pressure sources must be fully understood as they personally impact the would-be midlancer. Then, their impact must be controlled and managed (Rule #4). We’ve discovered that the midlancer’s three sources of chronic pressure are:

1. Psychological
2. Organizational
3. Financial.

Each of us has our own set of personal dynamics. For many who are talented, hard-working and conscientious, there’s a tendency toward work addiction, perfectionism and heroic achievements. Fear, anxiety and guilt often come into play when time is taken away from work, and job performance can suffer.

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Fear of job loss, status loss or reprimands from superiors can lead to a loss of self-confidence. Anxiety also floats around job security and competency issues. Guilt, the most insidious of the big three—fear, anxiety and guilt—may be triggered by any type of self-serving behavior, such as turning down additional work assignments, taking a vacation.

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**CIRCLE #54**

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during peak work periods or even leaving early for a dental appointment. Too often, these real and powerful psychological pressures keep us from comfortably designing and achieving a well-integrated work life.

We have found it useful to view one’s organization as a demanding, never-satisfied entity that, if not controlled, will consume the lion’s share of one’s time and energy. The people running organizations aren’t necessarily malevolent (although some openly admit to a practice of “burn and churn”), but most organizations are currently expecting major contributions from everyone, and are continually looking for higher levels of production as they face tougher competition, changing technologies and other challenges. E-mail, pagers and cellular phones make it increasingly difficult to maintain personal time and space.

Uncertainty about our present and future financial circumstances keeps many of us on the path of maximizing our income. Instead of replacing financial worry with financial planning, we view the task of meeting all expenses and future contingencies as so overwhelming we give up trying to control expenses. Instead, we lower our heads for 40 or 50 years, and work as hard as we can to earn large salaries, bonuses, stock options and other financial rewards.

When we finally look up to see if we have enough, the children are gone, much of the earned income has been wasted, and savings may be surprisingly inadequate for a comfortable retirement. If we do well financially, we’re often surprised to learn that estate taxes are currently at confiscatory rates, virtually assuring that heirs will be forced to sell real property (the family homestead).

In the meantime, expenses seem to rise with income, so the ratio of spendable income to expenses remains even. We find that during those rare moments when our personal dynamics and organizational pressures seem to be under control, we may be nagged by doubts about the sufficiency of our income and the strength of our balance sheet. Such financial concerns have a way of driving us back into toxic jobs with companies that demand all of our time and energy. Short-term financial maximization may be a way of buying better balance downstream, but it may be difficult to scale back before it’s too late.

Each of us has psychological, organizational and financial pressures to stay in the fast lane and forego our dreams for a reasonable and appropriately balanced work life. Rule #3 requires that we become introspective and aware of those specific pressures that rob us of our desired lifestyle.

Rule #4: Slay ‘em.

The three sources of pressure to remain a careerist—psychological, organizational and financial—must all be controlled and managed continuously. This insight into achieving better balance is simple to understand but almost impossible to accomplish. However, there are several techniques and actions that are successful in certain cases as people strive for their lifestyle goals.

In one of the most powerful and helpful treatises on the management of one’s self-defeating behaviors, Theodore Rubin, author of Compassion and Self-Hate: An Alternative to Despair (Touchstone Books, 1998) identifies dozens of types of “self-hating behavior.” He then suggests that such personal sabotaging thoughts and behaviors can be replaced with compassionate behavior that breaks the tyranny.

By identifying self-hating behaviors and replacing them with compassionate responses, we escape their tyrannical control of our thoughts and lives. We can then replace these with alternative responses that keep our lives in better balance.

Countless books, articles and Workaholics Anonymous chapters offer useful insights and suggestions on how to deal with one of the careerist’s most powerful pressures—the insidious compulsion to work continuously. To control this pressure, we encourage serious study of the underlying causes of work addiction, perfectionism, free-floating anxiety, fear and guilt.

We also encourage taking a higher view of our purpose and value, developing our special gifts and following our hearts as we select professional and personal lifestyles.
There are great opportunities to reduce, control and eliminate many of the pressures caused by the demands of organizations. Since these usually emanate from one's supervisors, peers or the work itself, we strongly advocate for the process of identifying the specific causes of organizational pressure and taking remedial action.

One of the most effective remedial actions is to renegotiate your role and responsibilities within the organization. To gain experience or generate a strong income stream, but for midlaners, pressures eventually take their toll.

Financial pressures can be understood first by separating income-statement issues from balance-sheet issues. We have found that great strides can be made when directed efforts are made to increase personal income by repositioning oneself in higher value-added categories of work.

Likewise, understanding and managing expenses can significantly reduce pressures and free one up to say "no" to promotions, extra assignments and second incomes. Balance-sheet items such as homes, college and retirement funds, and accumulated wealth also take on a more realistic dimension when approached analytically and less emotionally. The key seems to lie in our earlier definition of a midlaner—one who wishes to achieve a reasonable and appropriate level of success.

Here's another thought—this one is borrowed from Your Money or Your Life by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (Penguin, 1993). You're trading your life energy for dollars, and you have a finite amount of life energy left. Distinguish carefully between your wants and needs, and respect every dollar you've traded time and energy to earn.

Finally, we advocate using professional assistance when developing realistic plans for wealth accumulation and estate planning. Without careful planning, most of a life savings can be wiped out by estate taxes. An added benefit of good planning is the possibility of adjusting one's career earlier than expected.

It's exciting to shift gears and move away from a toxic and frustrating work situation to a lifestyle in greater harmony with personal values and priorities. These four rules for becoming a midlaner identify opportunities for moving toward a more balanced life.

In today's world of changing organizations, new opportunities abound for redefining your role in your organization.