Review

Update in
Anaesthesia

Maintaining Work-life Balance Through Career Transitions

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Abstract

Anaesthesia is a stressful field of medicine that requires alertness and readiness for quick intervention. The anaesthetist can easily become fatigued and worn out from repetitive stressful work, long hours and heavy workload. Anaesthetists undergo career transitions in one form or the other. These transitions come with their own levels of anxiety and varied emotions. A rocky career transition can further add strain to the anaesthetist especially if there is no good work-life balance in the first place. For the anaesthetist to navigate a career transition successfully and smoothly, there should be a transition plan and an understanding of the process. Eyes should be kept on the goal and available resources tapped into. Resilience, inner strength and good coping skills make career transitions easier and new job skills may have to be acquired.

Key words: Work-life balance, career transitions, burn out, anaesthesia, wellbeing, career stages

INTRODUCTION

A career transition by an anaesthetist may be a transition within the anaesthesia profession or to another. Career transitions can be life-changing, uncomfortable and unfamiliar; they are easier when carefully planned or may become stressful, and expectations not met. It is prudent to approach a career transition carefully to avoid pitfalls. For the anaesthetist, a career transition may be complicated by the rigorous daily demands of the job.

The practice of anaesthesia hinges on the ability of the professional to combine optimal planned care of patients with the need to identify rapidly changing clinical situations.[1] Multitasking, resilience, constant alertness, ability to anticipate problems and the readiness to respond quickly are required skills in a good anaesthetist. These skills may be associated with some levels of stress when used for long durations without adequate breaks. This can be further worsened by anxiety from a poorly planned career transition. All these could easily result in burnout, or worse. Burnout in an anaesthetist may come with severe consequences such as depersonalization, fatigue, anger, sleep disturbances, high blood pressure, poor concentration, errors at work, depression, suicidal thoughts, and unsafe clinical practice putting patients at risk.

This article deliberates on how to maintain a healthy work-life balance while making career transitions in anaesthesia.

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WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance (WLB) can be defined as the comfortable balance that a worker needs, between time and focus reserved for work and other aspects of life like personal, family and leisure activities.[2] It is a major topical issue amongst anaesthetists, whose jobs are characterized by high physical and mental demands, long and unpredictable work hours and exposure to potentially addictive drugs which can trigger great stress and anxiety.[3,4] The anaesthetist's duties extend beyond the operating room and intensive care unit and cut across trauma and disaster management, pain clinics, radiology as well as radiotherapy; thus they play multifaceted roles leaving them vulnerable to stress.

WLB entails effectively managing time, energy, and resources to prioritize both work-related responsibilities and personal life activities. It can be either healthy or poor. A healthy work life balance promotes physical and mental wellbeing, reduces stress, and enhances overall satisfaction, fulfilment and productivity (Table I). This may involve setting boundaries, allocating time for selfcare, nurturing as well as maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships and pursuing interests and activities outside of work.

A poor work-life balance due to excessive workload, unrealistic expectations and ill-defined work-life boundaries, results in fatigue, depersonalization and depression.[5]

Table I – Advantages of a healthy work-life balance[7]

For the employee	For the employer
Increased job satisfaction.	Less errors at work; higher likelihood of optimal productivity.
Better job performance/increased productivity.	Fosters positive work culture.
Better interpersonal relationships amongst professionals.	Reduced absenteeism.
Increased innovation.	Attract top talent.
Commitment to the organization.	Improved compliance/commitment.
Family satisfaction.	Better returns on investment.
Improved mental health. Reduced stress related outcomes such as psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and depression.	Increased employee retention.

It is important to understand that the practice of anaesthesia and other non-work-related activities are compatible and promote all round growth. Depending on the stage of career, the dynamics of WLB for an anaesthetist will likely change.[6] Ensuring a healthy work life balance in anaesthesia is a challenge, due to the pressures of diverse and complicated patient care, the unpredictability of work hours and limited control over surgical procedures; but achievable.[7]

Quite a number of studies have shown a high rate of burnout among anaesthetists, both trainees and consultants (attendings). In a study in the US, about half of the trainees who were in training over a three-year period and 59.2% of attendings experienced burnout.[8,9] According to a study by Maria Vargas et al, 10.2% of Italian anaesthesiologists showed a moderate level of burnout rate.[10] While an African study carried out at an Egyptian hospital showed a very high burn out rate (69.1%) among the physician anaesthetists, particularly those combining clinical practice and an academic career.[11] Similarly, in a large cross-sectional study carried out in China, 69% of anaesthesiologists met the criteria for burnout.[12] In south western Nigeria, in a study carried out by Ogunsemi et al, 50% of residents reported that their jobs were stressful and they lacked job satisfaction.[13]

CAREER STAGES

Five typical career stages have been identified: Exploration, establishment, mid-career, late career and retirement stages.[14] The exploration and establishment stages can be called the early career stage.

The Exploration stage is a stage of trying different roles, entry-level jobs, internships.

In the establishment stage, the anaesthetist settles on a role or job that appears to be a good fit and begins to develop expertise in that role. It is also called the learning stage and usually occurs between 25 to 35 years of age.

Early career

Early career is the beginning or early stages of a career. It is a period of within ten years of receiving the highest degree.

Early Career Doctors (ECD) are medical doctors undergoing internship, post graduate studies or specialist training. It also includes medical officers below the rank of principal medical officer. The early career anaesthetist is a resident doctor. The hectic work schedule, shortage of staff, pressure to learn and acquire skills as well as huge family and societal expectations expose the early career anaesthetist to potential negative outcomes including poor work life balance. This period is characterized by long work hours that are not adequately compensated.[15] In some settings, this is further worsened by lack of equipment, medications and resources to work with.[16,17]

Work life balance among ECDs is poor worldwide and is worse amongst the more junior cadre and female gender.[2]

Major determining factors of WLB in early career are:

1. Workload and support: If the workload is too heavy and support from seniors and management too little, work stress increases exponentially.
2. Female gender (child-bearing and rearing age): Balancing the home front and work may be a bit tricky and women at this stage need support and encouragement both at work and at home.
3. Type of specialty: Anaesthesia is associated with unpredictable and long hours and if the work is not well structured in the department or hospital, this becomes a problem.
4. Flexibility of work schedule: Supervisors, heads of department have a role to give some flexibility to their subordinates. This helps them to live a more balanced life.

Mid-Career

In mid-career, the worker is established in his role and begins to reap the benefits of his experience and expertise. He also usually has mentorship responsibilities at this stage. Learning and skills improvement should continue, to prevent stagnation. The mid-career anaesthetist has usually completed residency and has been a specialist for a while. This anaesthetist should keep in view long term goals and retirement plans, thus the need for work-life balance. Any dissatisfaction with work must be identified so changes can be made. Dissatisfaction may be from work hours, lack of flexibility, poor pay, poor work environment, or the actual job itself. Lack of knowledge of the actual reason(s) for dissatisfaction may lead to wrong career decisions.

A mid-career anaesthetist is typically between 35 to 45 years of age.

WLB in midcareer is also very critical. Sometimes the veneer of success can cover burnout or the feeling of emptiness that accompanies reaching the peak of a career without new career goals or skills to

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acquire. Job satisfaction has been said to take the form of a gentle curving 'U'. Beginning high in youth and bottoming out in mid 40s, then recovering in older age.[18]

Some of the factors responsible for this career dissatisfaction include poor WLB, narrowing of options, regret and the seemingly endless stretch of monotony at work.

Late Career

Late career occurs at about 55 to 70 years of age, or beyond. It is a time of sharing experience with younger colleagues, teaching, mentorship, leaving a legacy. Instead of career or job advancement, the anaesthetist starts to think about retirement or the next phase of life. Routine work may be at a slower pace due to physical limitations. It is a time for the anaesthetist to reflect on identity, and purpose outside their career. Priorities may be towards better work-life balance, more leisurely activities and planning for retirement. The anaesthetist would usually undergo fewer job changes at this stage. Some may go into semi-retirement or plan actively for retirement. Hobbies may be explored more seriously.

Retirement

Retirement occurs when an anaesthetist stops work; it is an exit from the labour force and has several phases: Early/initial retirement, mid-retirement (reorientation) and late retirement (routine/stability). In the early phase of retirement there is excitement at the new freedom, exploration of interests and traveling for those who can afford it. Mid-retirement involves finding new goals and meaning, learning new things, re-evaluating one's finances and goals. In late retirement, routines become established, there is focus on maintaining physical and mental health and legacy building.

In all the phases of retirement, it is important to keep in contact with family and friends.

The retirement stage can be marred by poor finances, poor health, loneliness, feelings of being lost or useless.

The retirement experience varies for individuals depending on their finances, support, personality, preferences and interests. It is always advisable to plan for retirement.

In some countries, the retirement age is early, about 60 years. Some anaesthetists in these countries are still very active and willing to work after retirement and so find ways to keep working, especially if they need the money or want to remain active.[19]

CAREER TRANSITIONS AND THE ANAESTHETIST

A career transition is the process of learning, discovering and starting a new aspect of the same job or a new career. It may be voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary transitions are intentional, emanating from a strong desire for change to achieve certain goals like acquiring new skills or increasing financial capacity to meet demands or job satisfaction. For example, some countries like South Africa, Pakistan and Nigeria have of recent, witnessed an exodus of physician anaesthesiologists across the different career stages to other countries for various reasons, including financial.[17,20,21] This move comes with challenges of fitting into a new environment, often without the much-needed family support. The professional in this situation will face loneliness outside work hours, new work ethics and the need to build new relationships, adapt to new meals and so on.

Again, when appointed into an administrative position at work, the anaesthetist faces the challenges of learning administrative skills, human resource management, the need to attend various meetings without losing his clinical acumen and neglecting family and friends. This delicate balance is also required when an anaesthetist begins an academic career.

Involuntary career transitions can be caused by life changing events like chronic illness, laying off work, bereavement, conflict/unrest and so on.

An anaesthetist may transition from one aspect of anaesthesia to another, for example from clinical practice to simulation training or academic writing. The transition may be to another specialty, for example transition from an anaesthetist to a general practitioner, or may be to a different profession altogether; for example, transition from an anaesthetist to a businessman or farmer. Then again, a transition may be a promotion within the same career. A transition may also be the same type of job but in a far different setting with different complexities.

Career transitions can appear daunting and very uncomfortable. The process to a large extent depends on the reason behind the transition or type of transition, if voluntary or involuntary. However, for the early career worker, the decision to change careers may be easier to make as they are not as established in the profession as the mid-career professional.[17]

Reasons for Career change

Reasons for career change are varied and oftentimes multifaceted. Some are:

1. Career advancement
2. Better pay and benefits
3. Insecurity in present location
4. Better work environment
5. Better location
6. Flexible schedule
7. Remote work
8. Less stress
9. Poor work-life balance
10. Meaningful contribution
11. Layoff
12. Boredom or frustration
13. Seeking challenges
14. Ill-health
15. Serious interest

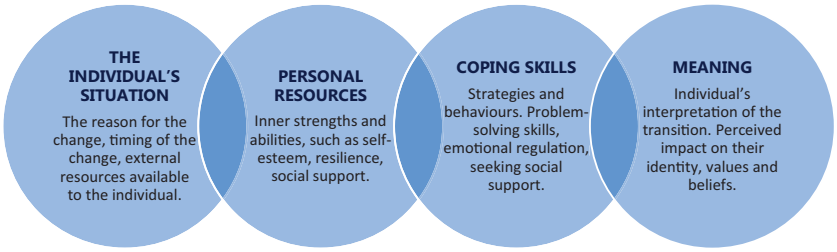

Figure 1 – Schlossberg's transition theory[24]

If the benefits outweigh the risks, changing careers can improve happiness and quality of life.

STAGES OF TRANSITION

A transition has three basic stages: the Ending Stage, the Neutral Stage, and the New Beginning Stage.[22,23]

The Ending Stage

Every career transition starts with an ending. In this ending stage, the anaesthetist has to acknowledge that things are different and to acknowledge what they are going to lose or miss. The ending stage may be protracted or very short depending on the reason for transition, for example a sudden injury may make it impossible to continue as an anaesthetist. This stage may be associated with feelings of shock, sadness, worry or loss of confidence. Or more positive emotions like excitement and relief. Conflicting emotions may be present.

At this stage it is important for the anaesthetist to recognize these emotions and seek support from close friends and family and professionals.

The Neutral Stage

The Neutral Stage is the transit between the ending and the new beginning. Plans may still be unclear. Navigating this stage usually requires a period of solitude to retreat, review past work (including likes and dislikes), assess strengths and strategize. Feelings may be positive, negative or mixed and may include depression, loneliness, reduced self-worth, frustration, anxiety, helplessness and anticipation. This stage of transition is much easier to go through if there is already another job waiting. The anaesthetist should make good use of available resources like career planning workshops, mentors, and advisors. Maintaining a regular routine helps, especially if this routine includes adequate rest and exercise.

The New Beginning Stage

At this stage, the anaesthetist begins to feel more energetic and hopeful. A lot of thinking and planning has been done and it is time to put plans into action. The anaesthetist may have found a new job or is still searching. It is a time to improve on resume and interview skills.

This is a good time to take a course in something new, or one that builds on existing skills and knowledge, for example ultrasound courses such as regional anaesthesia and point of care. Consider career options, a similar job or different role within anaesthesia, or a different career path. One is expected to enjoy the process but be focused on long term goals. At this stage, feelings may be of, both excitement and some nervousness about the future.

Coping with transition: Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's transition theory identifies four key factors that influence how individuals experience and cope with change. These are the **individual's situation**, their **personal resources**, their **coping skills**, and the **meaning** they attach to the transition (Figure 1).[24] These factors interact with one another to determine how individuals experience and cope with transition.

For example, an anaesthetist who is voluntarily seeking a new job may have different resources from one who is suddenly let go from his job and is forced to look for another. An anaesthetist who has good self-esteem and resilience and good social support may cope better with a career transition than another who does not. An anaesthetist with good problem-solving skills and emotional regulation may better handle the

Table II – Career transition plan - Authors original table

Before career transition	During career transition	After career transition
Identify transferable and additional skills required and obtain them	Give adequate notice and resign professionally on good terms	Continuous education via trainings, seminars, webinars, short courses, conferences
Add these skills to your resume	Update your knowledge and get new certifications, degrees, licences	Build your network by attending job-related events like meetings and conferences
Research and study the new field	Outline goals and regularly evaluate	Join the relevant professional bodies
Be open to entry levels and volunteer positions	Be realistic about the jobs qualified for	Be patient, gain experience, put in the effort
Identify the parts of your personal life that may change, for example relocation, additional childcare, longer commute	Practice interview questions	Identify a mentor
Be determined to succeed		

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Table III – Work-related causes of poor work-life balance and solutions - Authors original table

Problem	Solutions
Long working hours and irregular schedules	■ Work rosters should be well structured and elective surgeries have clear allocated time. ■ Shift duties can be introduced for better workload distribution. ■ Set boundaries, restrict working after work hours. ■ Know your limits and try not to exceed them. ■ Delegate tasks that you do not have to do yourself. ■ Manage available time well.
Limited control over workload and emergencies	■ Communicate needs and limitations to supervisors. ■ Collaborate with other colleagues.
Emotional/ mental exhaustion	■ Engage in hobbies and favourite nonwork activities. ■ Communicate effectively. ■ Learn to say no when necessary. ■ Seek support from friends, family and other support groups.
Lack of support and work life integration	■ Create your personal professional support system. ■ Get a mentor. ■ Advocate for WLB initiatives in the workplace ■ Integrate personal activities into daily routines.
Stagnation in career	■ Get a mentor or a coach. ■ Get advice and guidance from senior colleagues
Interpersonal conflicts	■ Create time to bond with team members outside work. ■ Be patient and understanding and communicate your feelings. ■ Chronic misunderstandings.

stress and uncertainty of a career transition than one without. Also, an anaesthetist who views a job loss as a personal failure may experience more negative emotions and stress than someone who views the job loss as an opportunity for growth and change.

Ways to undergo a career transition while maintaining work-life balance:

It is advisable to make a career transition plan before embarking on a transition (Table II). This helps to maintain focus and keep to timelines. It is also important to remind oneself of the main goals of the transition, whether financial, for improved quality of life, for experience or for professional advancement. This helps to keep on track.

The early- to mid-career anaesthesiologist and work-life balance

After achieving a successful career transition, or while in the process of a transition, it is important to maintain work-life balance. Achieving good work-life balance as an early or mid-career anaesthesiologist is possible, though it may be challenging. It requires intentionality because of the demands of the profession (Table III). By implementing effective strategies and prioritizing one's wellbeing, control can be gained; and harmony created between professional and personal responsibilities (Table IV). This helps the anaesthesiologist to care optimally for their patients.

In mid-career, supervisory roles and work should be part of a satisfying life and not diametrically opposed. Changes in the work schedule may be necessary to avoid negative effects on health and emotional well-being.

Anaesthesiologists in supervisory or employer roles should make an efforts to protect their subordinates'or employees' health. To create a healthy working environment, it is pertinent to allow employees to have some flexibility and thus be less prone to stress related illnesses.[9]

Late career/retired anaesthetist and work-life balance

As the career of an anaesthetist gradually comes to an end, there is even more emphasis on work-life balance. Priorities may shift and focus may be on other things like spending more time with family, traveling, creating a legacy and maintaining good health. Anticipation and transitioning into the retirement stage is easier if finances are good. Anxiety, stress and depression may result if retirement is not well prepared for either financially or mentally.[25] Self-worth may dive especially if the individual ties their identity quite strongly to their job or career. It is very important to plan for retirement and never too early to start planning. Investments, savings, pension plans, insurance, passive income from other sources like book royalties and patents are all ways to prepare for retirement. The period of retirement does not have to be boring or idle, interests can be pursued, and new things learnt; the retiree can also volunteer for charity or community work that is not too physically demanding.

Retirement is also a stage of downsizing. The retired anaesthetist may move into a smaller home and exchange his vehicle for a smaller car. Self-sufficiency may reduce the cost of living, such as having a farm or an orchard.

It is important to keep in touch with family and friends at this stage. It is also important to take care of one's health.

Table IV – Personal causes of poor work-life balance and solutions - Authors original table

Problem	Solutions
Poor nutrition & lack of exercise	■ Eat nutritious meals, form healthy eating habits. ■ Establish an exercise routine, get regular exercise.
Fatigue	■ Ask for help, do not be a super hero. ■ Prioritize selfcare – quality sleep, stress management, meditation, watch a show/ movie, read a book, spa. ■ Take short breaks and power naps. ■ Have a day of doing nothing occasionally – just rest. ■ Buy gadgets (or apps) that make your life easier – washing machine, dish washer, task planner, and so on. ■ Go on vacation. ■ Set realistic expectations for yourself for work and non-work activities
Finances	■ Budget and live within your means (no need to add further stress of unnecessary debts) ■ Indulge sometimes
Poor coping mechanisms	■ Build grit and resilience – set achievable goals and work towards them, practice mindfulness, have a support system. ■ Optimise time management by utilizing tools such as to do lists, reminders, calendars and alarms.
Health challenges	■ Seek the right healthcare, get health insurance. ■ Identify and communicate what you can cope with. ■ Discuss with supervisors to arrive at a reasonable work schedule.
Home front	■ Try to maintain peace at home, the home should be our oasis. ■ Leave work at the office. Make your time at home count. ■ Communicate when you have had a rough day, do not transfer aggression. ■ For those with children who need to travel for work or a conference or when on call, ensure the home is catered for and organized, then you can focus/ enjoy your time away.
Worry about retirement	■ Have a pension plan. ■ Develop good savings and invest wisely. This will give a sense of control, anticipation and adds meaning to the present work.

CONCLUSION

Career transitions are important parts of an anaesthetist's career. While transitions may be challenging, it is important to plan, learn about the new job or role, acquire required skills, make a budget, lean on loved ones' support, care for self and family, and make adjustments that will enable achievement of one's goals without sacrificing wellbeing. These are the keys to finding balance between work and personal life during career transitions.

Maintaining this balance is not a one size fits all; it differs for individuals based on personality, available support, outlook and environment. However, the key concepts for successful career transitions are the same.

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