



## Regaining your work-life balance

*Anita Brook, director of chartered accountancy firm Accounts Assist, gives her tips.*



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### ***Regaining your work-life balance***

Turn on the television and you are almost guaranteed to see a dazzling working mum, skilfully balancing work and home life, touring the country and appearing the absolute professional before jetting off home to be an equally perfect mum. After a long stint in the office and a dash back home just in time to see the kids off to bed, it can be tough to believe there is any hope of achieving a healthy work-life balance. There just aren't enough hours in the day, right?

Well actually, there are, but making well-meaning tweaks to your schedule here and there simply isn't going to address the problem. If you are tired of the constant pressure of juggling work and family, you need to take a big step back and change the way you organise your life.

### ***Ask yourself honestly, what are my priorities?***

Creating a sustainable and satisfying balance between the many commitments in your life is not about giving them all equal attention, it's about working out your priorities and assigning your time proportionately. If you don't have realistic expectations in this respect, you'll find yourself feeling overworked and disillusioned.

Whenever I'm faced with new challenges to my schedule, I work through my commitments, asking myself, "What do I want/need to achieve from this?" For instance, will I be happy at work as long as I'm earning enough to support my family, or are my goals loftier, such as breaking team targets or winning national recognition? When I have a list in place, I can see more clearly what I'm striving for and start to see where my time is going, and where it needs to go.

If you're not sure when you relax, when you work, or how often you log in for a peep at your company email outside office hours, keep a journal for a week of everything you do. This will tell you how you are currently dividing your time, and the results could surprise you.

### ***Create a definite space between your work and home life***

Laying down clear dividing lines is vital if you intend to maintain any control over your life. If you find yourself answering emails while cooking the evening meal, you may feel like you're being productive, but you're likely to go to bed feeling like you've worked every waking minute, and eventually this will take its toll on your productivity.

Think about all the roles you play in your daily life – manager, parent, friend – and organise your time accordingly with clear slots marked out for work, family and leisure. This is where the word 'balance' can be misleading. It's very unlikely that you'll be able to assign one hour to leisure for every hour spent working, but you should be achieving a balance that sees you away from your desk and enjoying yourself often enough to make you feel like a human being rather than a workhorse.

If you're running your own business, this is particularly key. Owners of businesses are typically more emotionally invested in their work than employees and so are consequently more likely to give up family time to keep the business ticking. In a position of such responsibility, it's only realistic to expect to work long hours, but this doesn't mean that scheduling in family time is any less vital. In fact, if your time is stretched, it's more vital than ever. Indeed, what's the point of being your own boss if it prevents you from living any other part of your life?

### ***Avoid the classic mistakes that let work spill over into family life***

The best intentions in the world can be shattered in an instant by a quick squint at the emails on your phone. An evening intended for relaxation with your partner is instantly turned into an evening of sitting in front of the computer when you spot an email from a client that just can't wait until morning. Or at least you think it can't.

You may think that such a predicament is unavoidable. After all, how can you control when a client chooses to contact you? Well you can't, but the expectations your boss and/or clients have of you are often entirely of your own making. If your office hours state that you are open 8am – 6pm, stop answering client enquiries after that time. That way, they will never expect a same day reply to an email sent at 7pm. As soon as you start sending correspondence at evenings and weekends, you are effectively committing yourself to working 24 hour a day, 7 days a week. Discipline in this respect is the only way to regain control of your life.

### ***Don't battle against life: make sure friends and colleagues know your plans***

Planning to leave work at 6pm every Wednesday come hell or high water so that you can pick the kids up from football practice is a great first step, but if your colleagues don't know your plans, you may soon find yourself burdened with commitments that make leaving the office impossible. Your best laid plans will end up in tatters and people in at least one part of your life will inevitably feel let down.

To succeed in restoring your work-life balance, your friends, family and colleagues should be working with you to make the balance work. They should understand your priorities as clearly as you do and be on board to help you achieve them.

Asking for help to get your life in control shouldn't be seen as a selfish request; it's about communicating to everybody that you want to be as productive and fair as possible for the benefit of everyone, and for that you will need their help and co-operation. If your family and colleagues follow your lead and create their own schedules to mesh with yours, you could find your life running infinitely more smoothly.

***Don't let temporary hiccups dissuade you from your goals***

From time to time, particularly during a recession, things will happen that will throw your schedule off course, and one side of your life will simply have to lose out in the battle for your time. When this happens, it is vital to act quickly to put your long-term schedule on hold and work out a short-term plan that will get you through. If you let this new demand on your time simply overwhelm you, you will lose control of your time and all the balance you have worked so hard to achieve.

Commit to your new schedule wholeheartedly and consider it the most important tool in your life. You want to be a great mum, productive worker and happy friend? Scheduling your life can sound like a pain, but it really can be your ticket to the life you want.

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