

# Does your work fit your life?

## How to improve your work-life fit

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The month of August is often the time we finally get to have a break. Whether we are living to work or working to live, we all need a bit of down time and yet, increasingly, our down time is often just another opportunity to stay on top of our work. Some of us have the best of intentions to leave work at work, and yet... and yet.....

It seems to me that our approach to working on holiday takes its cue from our approach to working at weekends... or evenings come to that matter. As technology, amongst other factors, has changed the way we work, it is hard to be very far away from the next email, text or call to action. I suspect most of us also quite like it when we are seen as indispensable and so, despite starting with good intentions, we find the lure of a growing inbox too hard to ignore - and we become part of the problem we are trying to fix - overwhelmed by work, and yet we cant seem to switch off.

You are what you do. (Are you really?)

A summer holiday (or winter if you are in the southern hemisphere) can be a good time for us to take stock. "Am I doing what I'm meant to be doing", is a good place to start or as Richard Bolles asks in *What colour is your Parachute*, "are we also doing what most needs to be done?". Time away from work may finally give us the opportunity to ask if our work is really serving our needs, our goals, our expectations and ambitions. If January is the time that most people plan to change their job, perhaps August is the time we start to consider it. We have become so defined by our work, that our identity is inextricably linked with our working self - our job title. Parker J Palmer in *Let your life speak* likes to turn the "you are what you do" fallacy on its head. We are so much more than what we do, he says, and you need to "do what you are" instead. This seems a calling very many would aspire to, but not so many achieve. As we start out in employment, we think very hard about the kind of work we want to do and the kind of employer we want to work for. At some point, however, we might wake up and ask ourselves, "how did I get to here?"

We get stuck in a job we dont like, working hours we cant sustain, and wonder if it is possible to regain the equilibrium we may once have had. A recent newspaper article claims it is possible to come across as a hard-working employee without responding to emails out of hours or working over-time (or even on holiday). You need to draw boundaries between your work and home life, says Peter Fleming, professor of business and society at Cass Business School in City, University of London. "Make it clear to your employer that time off is essential. Norms for late-night emails slowly emerge and then are difficult to change when institutionalised."

### **Say 'no' to your employer (or to yourself?)**

Making small changes to the way you organise your life can make you feel calmer, says Tracey Eker, chief executive and founder of FlexiWorkforce. "Think about the most stressful part of your day and

see if there is a way you and your employer can work something out. For example, does the rush-hour traffic mean you spend hours in the car? Make a request to change start and finish times so you skip rush-hour traffic.”

Gary Wood, chartered psychologist and author, says this also benefits your employer. “The work-life balance question suggests that it’s a zero-sum game. However our brains become fatigued if we stick to one type of mental activity. So with less stress, we can achieve more.”

So maybe its not the job we need to change, or the employer, after all, but rather ourselves. In a few cases, that may be the case, but perhaps for many of us, we get the kind of work-life balance that we deserve. It comes down to choice, and the decisions we make about what is most important to us. It also becomes much easier to say no, when we are really clear what we want to say yes to.

### **Add good things into your week**

Though it seems counterintuitive to do more when you’re busy, adding exercise, hobbies or leisure activities into your working week can help you relax. “Make time for activities that nourish you, whether that is a hobby, exercise or being with friends,” says Sarah Archer, co-founder of CareerTree. Archer agrees that going freelance isn’t always the solution to a hectic work-life fit. “While in theory zero-hours contracts can give you choice about when you work, the reality is the insecurity means you take whatever is offered and you can’t enjoy your downtime because you’re worried about finances.”

### **Make your health a priority**

And as far as possible, prioritise your health and wellbeing at work, says Claire Gilbert, employment lawyer at Technology Law Alliance. “If you feel close to burnout, consider speaking to your GP and try to make sure your employer is aware of the effect long hours and a high workload are having on you before your health is seriously affected.”

One way to do this is to be open and maintain good relationships with your colleagues, says Dan Fawcett, a senior employment law specialist at Bond Dickinson LLP solicitors. “If you feel work is interfering with your home life, have an upfront honest conversation with your line manager. That conversation is likely to go better if you have a good relationship and can show you are committed to your employer.”

### **Fit**

Whilst many will focus the question on work-life balance, I wonder if the better question is about work-life fit. Does the work that I do, with the expectations of my employer, and the ones I put on my self, "fit" with my life and the priorities I have. If it doesnt currently fit, are there not things I can do to change myself and my patterns and habits before I go look for another situation? Because if the problem of fit has something to do with me, then I'm probably going to find the same challenge in my new organisation.

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