

## Episode 24\_Work-Life Balance\_transcript.mp3

**Owain** [00:01:14] Good morning. I've got another guest here for you today here on the English Waffle. And it's my sister Laura again. She is over from the U.S. and through the magic of editing, we've managed to get her back. Good morning, Laura. Thanks for coming in.

**Laura** [00:01:38] Hello! You went a bit high pitched there.

**Owain** [00:01:40] Did I?

**Laura** [00:01:40] Yeah.

**Owain** [00:01:41] Oh.

**Laura** [00:01:41] A bit squeaky.

**Owain** [00:01:41] Oh. Oh right. So, today we're going to talk about work-life balance, which I understand is not the correct term anymore. But just to give, just give a bit of background, just so people understand why, why you're a good person to discuss this topic. Laura has started a family, well, she started a family quite a few years ago now. She's got two children. She's relocated to another country and has managed to keep a career as a Structural Engineer going all this time.

**Laura** [00:02:14] Going.

**Owain** [00:02:14] So maybe you could tell us, How have you done that?

**Laura** [00:02:17] Won...wonderful way to describe it. So...the thi...the thing that I keep hearing about Work-Life Balance is that it implies that, A, there is this perfect equilibrium to be had, which frankly is the pursuit of the impossible. And it also...It's this suggestion that work is not part of your life and not something that's really important to you. It is something that you you need to fit in and then your life is outside of it. Right. So I've not heard a good alternative description for the concept, but really the thing is that there are a certain number of hours in the day and you you need to choose how to use them.

**Owain** [00:03:01] Ok, I mean, I hadn't heard anybody taking issue with the idea of having a balance, mainly because I think that...Wasn't wasn't the balance too far the other way in the past? The idea of having a balance is that people are now remembering, well, yeah, it's great to have a career and a job and obviously it's really important, but you can't forget about your family life.

**Laura** [00:03:24] It's more about having flexible working arrangements that...that work for for both.

**Owain** [00:03:29] Right.

**Laura** [00:03:30] But but recognizing that work is a part of your life and, to many of us, it's it's actually a very, very important thing. I...I took a year out for each of the kids. And by the end of that year, in both cases, I was desperate to get back to work, not because I don't love spending time with them, um, but just just because there's another part of me which I needed to be using.

**Owain** [00:04:00] Right, right.

**Laura** [00:04:00] As you said, I'm a structural engineer and that's...it...that's not the kind of thing that it's easy to put down and pick up. We're...we're in a kind of a digital revolution at the moment. And it's very fast paced. There are...there are new skills to acquire new softwares and technologies to learn about every day.

**Owain** [00:04:21] OK, perhaps...perhaps you could just tell us what...what does a structural engineer do. I'm sure that maybe you aren't really clear on that.

**Laura** [00:04:30] OK.

**Owain** [00:04:31] I know it's something to do with buildings.

**Laura** [00:04:34] If you're...if you work in building structures, yes.

**Owain** [00:04:36] Oh, ok. Right.

**Laura** [00:04:37] It could equally be applied to bridges or civil infrastructure projects.

**Owain** [00:04:41] OK, but because your, your company, the company you work for, is...has something to do with architecture and...

**Laura** [00:04:48] My company does everything. I work in a buildings group. We have...I...I am a base daily by the number of different disciplines.

**Owain** [00:04:56] What's your what's your role in all of this? We're thinking about how a building actually gets built. What...what do you do?

**Laura** [00:05:02] I make it stand up.

**Owain** [00:05:02] Actually, I think you explained it to me once. You said that essentially the architects are the...kind of the creatives, who come up with the ideas for buildings and then you have to try and make them stand up. Ve...very often because they come up with these ridiculous, er, outlandish ideas, right?

**Laura** [00:05:18] No, no, no. So ar...architects are very much generalists. They they coordinate the whole process. And it's not just about the aesthetic. They need to make spaces that function. They need to understand what the people using this space need and...And then all the layers of of other bits of building, they need to bring together the mechanical services, all of the IT, the structure, the finishes, what you actually see of the building.

**Owain** [00:05:55] Right, right.

**Laura** [00:05:56] So theirs is quite a broad roll, actually. But the the Architect/Structural-Engineer relationship, and it is a relationship, is not just that they hand us something that's completed and we then...

**Owain** [00:06:11] Right.

**Laura** [00:06:11] ...draw a skeleton onto it.

**Owain** [00:06:13] Right, ok. You're not, you're not...it's not competition.

**Laura** [00:06:15] No.

**Owain** [00:06:15] You're not on opposite teams. You're trying to work together.

**Laura** [00:06:18] It's an iterative, collaborative process.

**Owain** [00:06:20] Bit like a marriage, I suppose. So, you have your ups and downs and, you know, your arguments?

**Laura** [00:06:27] You have your incredibly demanding spouse.

**Owain** [00:06:30] And in the end you have a baby, right, which is the building. Is that a good metaphor for how the...how the process works?

**Laura** [00:06:37] It's not incorrect. I find it slightly disturbing. But anyway...Yeah, it it means it is quite it's quite a demanding relationship. There are lots of people to be dealing with at any given moment which has made some of my flexible working arrangements a bit challenging.

**Owain** [00:07:00] That's what I was going to say. It kind of takes us back to work-life balance.

**Laura** [00:07:03] So in the...in the UK in my in my team here, it wasn't just the women, actually. My company offers three months fully paid paternity leave. So there were a whole load of guys on my team.

**Owain** [00:07:14] Right.

**Laura** [00:07:14] That went off for three months and then actually were also working part time. I think at my level there were more of us working on a part time basis than full time.

**Owain** [00:07:25] Right, right.

**Laura** [00:07:26] And that made it a lot easier to kind of say, look, we're...we're working on things as a team.

**Owain** [00:07:33] Yeah.

**Laura** [00:07:35] You don't necessarily have sole responsibility for something. So if people are in and out of the office, it's not too much of a challenge. And it's it's established.

**Owain** [00:07:45] Right.

**Laura** [00:07:45] That that that's something that people do and they prioritise other parts of their life.

**Owain** [00:07:50] Which is great, isn't it? I mean, I think I think...but I think your company's particularly advanced in many areas, right, as a...as a company.

**Laura** [00:07:58] Yeah.

**Owain** [00:07:58] And really thinks quite, quite a lot about giving their employees quality of life and...

**Laura** [00:08:05] Well, we're trust owned, so we are owned by the employees.

**Owain** [00:08:08] Oh right, ok.

**Laura** [00:08:09] Which means there are no shareholders to report to....

**Owain** [00:08:11] Oh wow.

**Laura** [00:08:11] ...and that gives a lot more freedom.

**Owain** [00:08:15] So that obviously contributes to the idea: well, if this is your company, you are committed, obviously, but on, on...at the same time, then there is an incentive to try to create that work-life balance that people people need really to to be to be good professionals, to be good workers.

**Laura** [00:08:34] Yep, there are subtle differences though and you still have to exist within the cult...the work culture of the country you're operating in.

**Owain** [00:08:42] And the global economy.

**Laura** [00:08:43] Yes. So so the the US is is a little less benevolent in terms of leave and it's it's less familiar that people would work part time. So it's been it's been...despite the fact that I've been working for days over there...it's a bit more of an uphill battle.

**Owain** [00:09:04] Yeah and we won't mentioned holidays either.

**Laura** [00:09:06] Well, if you've been in a company for long enough, it's not too bad. I feel I feel terrible for our graduates in the States.

**Owain** [00:09:17] Well of course the Americans are notorious for not really having very many holidays, right?

**Laura** [00:09:20] And they don't take them.

**Owain** [00:09:21] They don't take them?

**Laura** [00:09:23] No. There are people in the team that get, like, two, maybe three weeks a year and and and still managed to rack up a massive holiday balance and lose it because you can only accrue a certain amount of time...

**Owain** [00:09:37] Okay.

**Laura** [00:09:38] ...before you just don't accrue anymore.

**Owain** [00:09:39] So does that mean the work life balance in the US has yet to establish itself? You know, people are not really thinking about it too much.

**Laura** [00:09:49] I think people people are far less likely to find an acceptable middle ground. Most of the...most of the mothers that I know either, you know, the best cases, they have six months off and then they go back full time or they just wor... stay home, don't work or work on a kind of a casual basis. There are some people I know that have their own business, which means they can set their own hours or somehow work remotely and take care of their children at the same time.

**Owain** [00:10:26] It must be a bit of a fantasy.

**Laura** [00:10:28] Yeah, I'm not sure how that one works.

**Owain** [00:10:30] Okay. Well, just last cou...last word on, on...um....Do you feel like you are getting a good work life balance at the moment?

**Laura** [00:10:36] Reasonably, I'm exhausted. But it seems to be going ok.

**Owain** [00:10:40] Yeah, the ba...the balance is basically that you, you do everything. Okay. Well, on that note, thanks for coming in Laura. We've we've come to the end our more or less ten minutes. And, um, thanks for an interesting discussion about your own take on work life balance and how it works in the U.S. Thanks a lot.

**Laura** [00:11:02] Ok.

**Owain** [00:11:02] Cheers. See you...see you next time on The English Waffle.