

Striking a healthy workplace balance:

How to “get a life” while staying productive



Think you're working too hard? You're not alone. According to a poll conducted by a well-known online job board, more than 70% of employees believe they don't have a healthy balance between their work and their personal life. Countless hours spent toiling at the office can take precious time away from hobbies, family life and even a good night's sleep.

Many hard-driving small business managers view this imbalance as an inevitable sacrifice to be made, or even as a badge of honour that shows how devoted they are to their firms' well being. But a growing school of thought says that what's bad for your personal life can't be good for your business.

Recognise the symptoms

These are some telltale signs of a working life out of kilter:

- You check e-mail compulsively.
- You find you're skipping holidays to work.
- You routinely work on evenings or week ends.

- You're never without your laptop or cell phone.
- Your work leads you to miss important family events.
- You feel overwhelmed by work, or permanently burned out.
- Your relationships with family, friends and colleagues are strained.

Sound familiar? If this list raises red flags, you need to take a hard look at your goals, identify priorities and resolve to change.

After devoting ten years to helping her husband establish their vehicle accessories company, Dani Gregory, vice-president of Tuffy Security Products, appreciates the value of personal time. “I basically have tried to remind myself that I work to live and not live to work,” she says.

Manage your time better

If restoring balance is your goal, how can you achieve it? There are a host of simple, practical

ways to work more efficiently and gain time for your personal life:

Eliminate wasted office time. Much of the extra time that people spend in the office is wasted. It can help to use e-mail rather than the telephone to communicate, for example, particularly with chatty co-workers. But use caution here. "A lot of people sit in front of their computer and answer every single e-mail," warns Simma Lieberman, president of Lieberman Associates, a corporate productivity-consulting firm. Don't let your e-mail in-box set your agenda or divert you from more pressing tasks.

Learn to delegate. Many business owners and managers are reluctant to delegate responsibility, so they end up wasting time on tasks that are better handled by their staff. "You have to have faith in the people you've hired," says Ms Gregory. "Learn to walk away once in a while."

Control addicts also tend to invite business problems to follow them wherever they roam. Marianne O'Connor, president of Sterling Communications, recalls the time a Hawaiian vacation was ruined by an agitated employee calling her with news about a broken hard drive and some possibly unrecoverable data. Now, before heading off for a well-earned rest, she tells her employees to contact her only when there's a problem she can possibly solve. "Other than that, let me unplug," she says.

Set boundaries. It's hard to overestimate the benefits of returning to the office from a relaxing vacation or even a weekend spent tending the garden or fixing the sink. Such breaks are

necessary mental respites that help unleash creativity and prevent your outlook from becoming pedestrian and grim. But many managers make the mistake of never completely switching off. "The in-box is never going to be empty no matter how much you do, so you need to set boundaries," says Ms Gregory.

One way to ensure that you do get a break is to make firm vacation plans well in advance; otherwise you'll risk putting them off in the face of waves of work. Ms O'Connor manages this by sitting down with her husband each year at the end of December to plan the personal trips they will take throughout the next year. "We put it on the calendar," she says. "Because it's on the calendar, I can tell you now we're going to Australia in November."

Plan your personal time. Setting regular schedules for family or personal time may seem excessive, but it works. "I've managed to achieve balance by scheduling time for family activities just as I schedule time for work activities," says Patrick Lo, CEO of NetGear, a network equipment manufacturer. He makes sure he's home for dinner every night except when he's travelling. "I might have to bring work home, but I can wirelessly connect to the office from the living room, so I can sit with the kids while they're watching TV or playing video games."

Make technology your ally

Savvy use of high-tech tools can ease work pressure, but beware: by enabling instantaneous,





round-the-clock communications, such gadgetry can also trap managers into remaining on the job at all times, in all places.

Use time-saving software ... Software applications, including contact management and accounting programs, are a vital resource for helping reduce repetitive manual tasks. "In my department we've made ourselves more efficient by implementing software that automates a range of processes," says Richard D'Alesandro, assistant vice-president of human resources at Hooper Holmes, a healthcare services company. Some of today's business management applications even offer managers a daily snapshot of the state of their key business drivers, to arm them with the information needed to make better decisions about inventory, hiring needs or related considerations. What used to take countless hours in meetings with accountants now can be done virtually in minutes with the right software.

At Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, a San Francisco law firm, time-and-billing software automatically tracks the amount of time and type of work the attorneys spend with each client. "If you want to know how many hours you worked for Acme Widget last year, a couple of keystrokes can get you that information," says Ralph Baxter Jr, the law firm's CEO. Web-based solutions offer yet another route to improved efficiency. "We've gone online with employee benefit vendors," reports Mr D'Alesandro. "Eligibility communications are now paperless, and enrolments, changes and communications are also automated."

Calendar and scheduling software can likewise be a powerful organisational tool, says Mr Lo. "I put

my entire life into my calendar, including personal appointments and memos, and I have it set so that I get reminders."

... without becoming a technology slave. Yet many high-tech tools can be unforgiving taskmasters. Mobile phones and e-mail pagers are particularly intrusive. By demanding immediate attention, they can derail one's work or ruin equally valuable personal time. "You have to force yourself to leave your Blackberry at home," advises Aaron Kwittken, president of Euro RSCG Middleberg, a global public relations firm. "Sometimes, it has the reverse effect on productivity unless you set proper boundaries."

Bring balance to your workplace

You don't work in isolation, so making your workplace both more balanced and more productive goes hand-in-hand with efforts to balance your personal life. If your team shares your outlook, you'll find that balance becomes mutually reinforcing.

Hire balance-minded employees. Managers who seek balance in their own lives should strive to extend the same philosophy to their employees. "When we're hiring employees, we specifically avoid people who are accustomed to working 50-plus hours a week," says Jason Mark, president of Gravity Switch, a multimedia design company. He believes that a balanced workforce is a productive workforce. "We want people who take time to enjoy life and who can relax and come in fresh the next day."

Encourage flextime. Employees can gain better balance when they have control over their working arrangements, argues Mr. Kwittken. At his company, employees don't get points for simply showing up. "We don't have too many perimeters other than to get your work done and to do it to the best of your abilities," he says. At NetGear, where working hours can vary widely along with product cycles, "employees don't punch a time clock," says Mr Lo. If employees need to work long hours prior to a product launch, they work shorter schedules later. Commuters also enjoy flexibility.

Help out with chores. To help employees maximise their time, many companies have retained work and family benefits (WFB) specialists, who can streamline an array of time-consuming tasks. "WFB helps our employees manage childcare and elder-care referral, as well as legal and financial services counselling, all of which save an enormous amount of time and headaches," says Mr D'Alesandro. Many health insurance vendors also provide employee assistance programmes (EAPs), which offer health and wellness services at no charge to the employee. "This also helps our workforce achieve balance and optimal productivity," says Mr D'Alesandro.

Organise social outings. Company- or department-wide social events can refresh and refocus staffers and managers alike. Sterling Communications, for example, has a "ministry of fun", a group that organises events designed to give employees a

respite from working week routines. A recent San Francisco pub-crawl had ten staffers visiting different Tiki bars and comparing Mai Tais, Ms O'Connor recalls. At Gravity Switch, fun often has a serious undertone, as in a Habitat for Humanity day, when staff took a day off to help someone build a house, or in a whale-watching expedition.

Balance promotes productivity

As these steps suggest, maintaining a commitment to a balanced life is not unlike the effort to lose weight or stop smoking. Sticking to a plan requires willpower to avoid reverting to bad habits. "There's time for everything, but you do have to think about it," notes Mr Baxter. You also have to make clear that it matters. "Everyone at Orrick knows that I value my personal life," he adds.

But most important of all is the realisation that life and work are not a zero-sum game: an hour gained for yourself is not an hour lost from your business. Indeed, a healthy work-life balance not only makes for a happier, well-rounded individual, but—by reducing stress, enhancing focus and preventing burnout—also helps boost productivity. Concludes Terri Levine, president of Comprehensive Coaching U, a corporate training firm: "Executives can balance life and work, and they can also be even more productive working fewer hours."

LONDON

15 Regent Street
London
SW1Y 4LR1
United Kingdom
Tel: + 44 (0) 20 7830 1007
Fax: + 44 (0) 20 7830 1023
E-mail: london@eiu.com

NEW YORK

The Economist Building
111 West 57th Street
New York, NY 10019
USA
Tel: (1 212) 554 0600
Fax: (1 212) 586 0248
E-mail: newyork@eiu.com

HONG KONG

60/F Central Plaza
18 Harbour Road
Wanchai
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2585 3888
Fax: (852) 2802 7638
E-mail: hongkong@eiu.com

www.eiu.com

An Economist Group business

Economist Intelligence Unit

The
Economist