

'ALWAYS- ON' MINDSET IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Redefining how we use our time and reframing our expectations could be the key to a better work-life balance

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It's amazing how a piece of technology measuring less than the size of your hand has transformed our lives. The mobile phone has revolutionised how we work, and given that it's only 30 years since this transformation began, the speed of change has been dramatic. Now it's commonplace to see businesses being run from anywhere because of the freedom that tech can provide.

But the freedom and flexibility come at a cost. The dividing lines have blurred between work and home, and this reality was particularly noticeable during the recent pandemic where many people were forced to work from home. The 'always-on' culture that we've since got used to meant there was literally nowhere to escape, especially when the kitchen table doubled up as the family eating space as well as the boardroom.

This situation caused an increase in levels of stress and an inability for people to switch off from the day job, take time to relax and recharge. And it's also fair to say that business leaders may have exacerbated this culture at times, by communicating with their employees at all hours of the day and night. Being always on is unsustainable and we see more people suffer negative health consequences as a result.



So, how can we set clear boundaries?

Rethinking what work is

Rather than work-life balance, it's time to reframe how we define 'work' and 'life.' Traditionally, work was viewed as an activity that happened between 9.00am and 5.00pm, where an individual engaged in a task or activity providing their physical labour, knowledge and skills in return for a wage or salary. This money was then used to pay for the essentials of life such as rent, food and fuel. Any excess was then used for luxuries, cost of looking after a family, travel and giving back – perhaps to charity or other good causes. It could be split into time for the employer and time for the individual.

If we want to find a balance, the start point is rethinking these definitions. Working at all hours has become a daily staple in

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many people's lives, where we take calls while dining out with friends or attend a conference call from the poolside on a family holiday. And life has flowed into work. As a society we are moving away from the definition of work based on hours served to more of an outcome-focused culture. Deliver the results, and the boss is less concerned about how long it takes.

Clear boundaries

Integration is where workplace cultures are moving to and that necessitates the need for clearer boundaries. If you have ever eaten raspberry ripple ice-cream you

see this concept clearly. The raspberry fruit paste appears in a rippled effect consistently throughout the vanilla, and the production process ensures that it doesn't turn into pink ice cream without clear delineation of both ingredients.

Leaders must be prepared to have conversations with their people about expectations from both sides. When is it acceptable not to respond to an email – after 7pm, 8pm, 11pm? At the weekend? And does sending a WhatsApp require an immediate response or not? Without conversations to understand expectations, people slide into responding immediately all the time.

Equally, employees need to think about how they boundary their time. What can often cause stress to people and bring about the always-on culture is not taking control of their own time so that they can deliver the highest level of productivity. That might mean blocking out some time at the start or end of the day to plan for the day ahead and work out priorities.



The pomodoro technique

A level of push back may be needed to enable an individual to outline how and when they are most productive to achieve the agreed outcomes.

The pomodoro technique, a time management technique developed by Francesco Cirillo, is becoming more widely used, whereby the day is broken up into 25-minute chunks separated by five-minute breaks. The idea is that it instils a sense of urgency and focus to get a task progressed rather than procrastinating and letting the activity stretch out over an entire day, which

can lead to working late and eating into leisure time. It also avoids that mindless scrolling through social media or responding to the ping of an email alert, which interrupts one's focus and attention. And it's multi-tasking that's the killer for concentration because the brain doesn't function well when having to switch attention quickly.

One London-based recruitment company found that when it introduced the pomodoro technique across the team, productivity rose, and people found the enforced five-minute breaks invigorating.

Four-day week revolution

There also appears to be a move towards a shorter working week, giving people more leisure time and home life. For example, a four-day working week with a three-day weekend is one approach. In some companies everyone agrees to take the same day off, and in others, it may be two afternoons that provide

the additional time. Importantly, salaries remain the same and the intention is not to cram five days' work into four.

This approach chimes with increasing evidence which suggests that changing working hours makes people more productive. A study carried out by Stanford University in 2014 showed that productivity plummets after working 50 hours a week. In 2021, the average working week in Europe was 36.4 hours. This varied country by country from 32.2 hours in the Netherlands to 40.1 hours in Greece. In the UK, the average working hours are 36.6 hours per week and the trend is downwards from its peak of 38.6 hours in 1995.

In some US companies, working hours are becoming a differentiator in the war for talent. Those in the workforce, particularly the post-millennial generation, are attracted to employers offering greater flexibility and a shorter working week. So, this may be a viable option for business owners to contemplate if they want to retain good people and improve productivity.



Take back control

There are also some very practical actions to take back control of our technology rather than allow it to strongly influence how we behave. Even though a computer system automatically provides audio alerts when an email comes into your inbox, it does not mean that we must all keep them switched on. Turn off the audio alert, and you will notice the difference that fewer interruptions have on concentration.

Many people are also now temporarily deleting messaging apps from their phone when they go on holiday, such as Slack, or WhatsApp, or moving them away from the home screen. You can also manage availability on calendar apps to block out time when you are not available. Even those businesses that operate across multiple time zones can set intentions as to when they're available to others in different countries.

It can also be helpful to manage other people's expectations of your availability by a summary of your working hours in your email signature. 'I'm not available on Fridays' is a clear indication for others not to expect a response from you.

Promote recovery as good practice

Finally, when we watch people competing in a high-performance sport, it's not a surprise when they take an ice bath after a hard game or have a massage, so they can perform at their best in the next match. So, why do we think it should be different for workers?

To find more of a work-life balance, we need recovery time. Just as there's an air lock in a spaceship when the astronaut moves from one area to another, we can introduce this type of airlock into our own lives. It

used to happen naturally as people travelled to and from work, but with many operating from home, the recovery time when moving from one mode into another tends to get missed. Make it a habit to take action to mark the end of the working day and the start of leisure time. A recent

study involving 20,000 people in England showed that spending two hours a week in natural surroundings had a tangible impact on overall life satisfaction. This benefit was gained even if you just sit and enjoy the peace and quiet in a park or garden.

It's time to reframe our expectations about work-life balance and think of it as work-life integration to help manage our time and energy in future.

QUICK TIPS TO MASTER THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- **Turn off email audio alerts**
The sound from alerts could make you feel pressured to respond. Turn it off and you will notice the difference fewer interruptions have on concentration.
- **Mark the end of the day**
Make it a habit to go for a walk or at least some type of action to make the end of the working day.
- **Move messaging apps off your home screen**
Many people have also tried temporarily deleting messaging apps from their phone, such as Slack or WhatsApp, when on holiday.
- **Add your working hours to your email signatures**
'I'm not available on Fridays' can go a long way and act as a clear indication for others not to expect an immediate reply from you.
- **Manage time availability on calendar apps**
Even businesses that operate across multiple time zones can set intentions as to when they are available to others in different countries.
- **Create 25-minute chunks of concentrated focus time**
Also known as the pomodoro technique, it involves breaking up your day into 25-minute chunks separated by five-minute breaks.