

Balance in the Age of COVID: The New Meaning of Spending More Time at the Office

In use in the U.S. since the 1980s, the concept of work-life balance is not new to our generation or exclusive to one profession, but dates back as far as 1800s when work hours for women and children were restricted. More than a century later, in 1938, the

Fair Labor Standards Act was put into effect, establishing a 44-hour work week.

Then, jump forward a half century, the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1980s brought work-life balance back to the forefront.



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Although hardly a new-fangled concept, the Coronavirus pandemic has again brought work-life balance back to the spotlight of the work force, as many people are working remotely with 24-hour access to work, and trying to juggle the demands of family.

While working from home does have its benefits, the transition can be arduous and finding balance within your life is likely more challenging, yet even more essential. If COVID-19 has left you feeling exhausted, overworked, and stressed, here is some guidance on ways you can manage your work-from-home environment, while juggling professional and personal commitments, setting limits, managing expectations, maintaining mental and physical well-being, and having beneficial communications with colleagues.

Stick to It!

Create a schedule and stick to it in order to establish boundaries and create structure and predictability. Even if your schedule isn't during regular office hours, it will keep you on track and eliminate the urge to be online 24/7. As a person who is most comfortable with structure, this has been particularly helpful for me and has allowed me a sense of normalcy and productivity. It gives me sense of control when so many things in life are not out of my control.

- Include time for self-care. Pause and take time for yourself so you are equipped to meet the demands of the day.
- Go to sleep and get up to start your day at a reasonable time. Avoid sporadic sleep schedules or getting in a habit of staying up too late and sleeping in.
- If your job allows flexibility, find a routine that works best for you, your family, and your professional success.
- Start and finish your day the same way each day so when you are off the clock, it creates a barrier causing you think twice before resuming work during off hours. I.e., close down your computer, leave your phone behind, clean off your workspace, close the door to your home office, etc.).
- Dress for success just like you would if you were going into the corporate office. When you are dressed for the part, it helps put you in the right frame of mind and can change your work performance.

Claim your Real Estate

With space at a premium due to entire families being stuck at home, it is important to carve out a workspace that is physically separate from the rest of your life. Creating your own "professional space" does not have to be difficult and doesn't need to be a separate room with a door, but something that allows you to instinctively switch into work mode when you are in that space. Living with my teenage children has taught me that oftentimes, nothing is sacred, which reinforces the importance of having my own designated workspace, which is off limits to others enables me to work effectively, efficiently, and dive into work mode.

Be cognizant of the fact that the quality of workspace is vital to productivity. Therefore, when setting up your remote workspace, consider:

- Replicating your office (ie., if you are used to two monitors, put two in your home workspace, etc.).
- Arm yourself with the tools you need. (ie., notepads, pens, calculators, a filing system etc.).
- Get an ergonomic chair as you will be spending a great deal of time in it.
- Communicate with your family that this is your space and off limits to them.

Break Away

Don't underestimate the power of a short walk, doing jumping jacks, stretching, or just reading a magazine. Working from home lends to all sorts of distractions. Add to that the constant news about the pandemic, and lack of focus can become an issue. Taking time to walk away from your work throughout the day can help you both mentally and physically and can help you:

- refocus and re-energize,
- increase productivity and creativity,
- restore motivation,
- improve memory and mood, and
- Eliminate stress.

It is easy to get engulfed in your work and forget to or not want to step away long enough for a short break. I find it helpful to set a reminder on my calendar or on my iPhone to prompt me to get up and move three or four times a day. It also helps remind me to make sure my children are taking breaks from online school and in turn, it is a mechanism to teach them healthy habits.

The Expectation Revelation

For most of us, we are learning to navigate the intricacies of working from home and we are experiencing unprecedented challenges. As a result, it is mutually important for leadership and staff to manage expectations in order to adapt to the new landscape and have a clear vision of the goals at hand.

- **Management** – Managers are often pulled in many different directions supporting different roles with diverse demands. During a crisis, it is crucial to support employees in a way that lends to a positive and consistent experience while setting a team up for success by clarifying projects, scope of work, deadlines, and deliverables.
 - **Foster a culture of open communication** – Effective communication will help build an innovative and happy team. Schedule virtual team meetings, as well as individual calls with each team member to help prioritize roles and keep the conversation going.
 - **Be Authentic** – There is a reason why people trust you and you have risen to this position in your career. Tap into your natural persona, which has allowed you to be a great leader and don't change your style now. Instead, remain honest, don't hide bad news, and if you don't know the answer to something, say so.
 - **Lead by example** – There is no roadmap for leaders in the face of a pandemic so prepare to be flexible, adaptive, and willing to make difficult decisions. In addition, build PTO and take "recovery time" to recharge, thus, encouraging employees to do the same.
 - **Be a team in and out of the office** – Touch base with employees to and discuss the challenges they are facing as they juggle remote work and the demands of family. When an employee knows their supervisor cares about them as a person, it builds loyalty and drives engagement.
 - **Resource your team** – Make sure your team has access to adequate remote working tools in order to successfully do their job. Employees cannot be expected to fulfill all of the responsibilities of their job if they don't have the sufficient tools.

- **Employees** – Under even the best of circumstances, employees can feel frustrated from the lack of clarity from their supervisor. Add to that a pandemic and a shift to working remote, and the lines become even more blurred. In addition, employee expectations of their boss are sure to change in the new environment, making it just as important for employees to have realistic expectations with their managers as well.
 - **Embrace the ever-changing work environment** – Accept yourself and the current situation, knowing you are doing the best you can in a difficult situation.
 - **Ask questions and provide and receive feedback** – Don't accept the feeling of wonder, but be influential and have a voice. Ask questions so you are clear on what is expected of you. Let your supervisor know what works for you under the new circumstances and allow them to give you their two cents.
 - **Ask for help** – With the vast number of layoffs during the pandemic, many people are taking on a heavier workload, working longer hours, and trying to keep up with new demands. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance from a member of your team if you feel overwhelmed or unsure about things. Remember we are all in this together.
 - **Be flexible and patient** – *Don't expect your supervisor to have all the answers to your questions.* Keep in mind they are also adjusting to the new normal and likely won't have all the answers you wish for.
 - **Don't be afraid** – Just as you are juggling new challenges both personally and professionally, so is your supervisor. Be open with your superiors about the obstacles you now face, which will allow them to be supportive and adjust expectations accordingly.

My experience has been that whether you are a manager or employee, the above guidelines aren't mutually exclusive, but can apply to all levels of professionals and are also beneficial in your personal life with your family and friends who are also traversing this new terrain.

The Positive Prerogative

The coronavirus continues to spread, some states are shutting down again, people are quarantined, and the fate of the school year is unknown. With all the gloom and doom in the news, keeping a positive and optimistic mindset can be challenging, but can go a long way in handling these difficult times.

- **Remember this will not last forever** – This is a difficult time, but it is just that.
- **Practice gratitude** – Reflect on the things you are thankful for and share them with your loved ones.
- **Lend a helping hand** – Find ways to help others.
- **Limit time watching the news** – As the news continues to be heavily focused on the negativity in the world, cut back your time watching or reading the news.
- **Stop and smell the roses** – Take time to enjoy all that your surroundings have to offer, such as nature, animals, etc.
- **Be creative** – Use any extra time to your advantage and take up a hobby that allows you to escape the day-to-day stresses.
- **Move your mind** – Get at least 30 minutes of exercise a day to help release endorphins, which help trigger positive feelings in your body.
- **Don't forget to laugh** – It is often said that laughter is the best medicine and let's face it, laughter tastes and feels much better than most medication.

The bottom line is that emotions are contagious so choose your thoughts, activities, and company wisely. Although we are human and will experience a multitude of emotions during this pandemic, I have found that choosing to be positive, albeit at times more difficult than others, has not only helped to lift myself up,

but has also helped give my children, friends, family, co-workers, and even complete strangers, hope.

Let's keep championing each other, and the next time you catch yourself worrying about work, the world, and where life is headed, consider taking some of these steps.