

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

A WORKSHOP FOR
ACADEMIC
LEADERS



Jeffrey L. Buller



EXERCISE 1: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Read each statement below and check which description on the scale to the right applies best to you.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I feel like I have little or no control over my work life.					
2. I hardly have time for my hobbies or interests outside of work.					
3. My loved ones frequently complain that I don't spend enough time with them.					
4. I often feel anxious or upset because of what is happening at work.					
5. I never use all of my vacation days.					
6. I eat lunch at my desk.					
7. I often work all day with hardly any breaks.					

Read each statement below and check which description on the scale to the right applies best to you.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
8. Most days, I feel overwhelmed and overcommitted.					
9. Most of the time, I feel exhausted.					
10. I feel guilty when I can't find time to do something – for work or outside of work.					
11. I never say no to taking on a task at work.					
12. I frequently think about work even when I'm not working.					
13. I usually work longer hours than my schedule dictates.					
14. When I have an obligation outside of work that I need to do during my normal work hours, I fear I'm slacking off.					
15. I procrastinate.					
16. I feel like I could be working much faster and more efficiently.					
17. I hardly have enough time to sleep, exercise, or take care of myself otherwise.					
18. I feel like I need to work harder and longer in order to prove myself at work.					
19. My life feels disorganized and frantic.					
20. I feel like in order to accomplish anything, I have to do it all by myself.					

When you have completed this inventory, turn to the next page to see how to score your results.

SCORING EXERCISE #1

Count the number of times you checked boxes in each of the following columns.

Response	Number of Times You Checked It	
Strongly Agree		} Add the Strongly Agree and Agree numbers together to total: _____
Agree		
Neither Agree Nor Disagree		} Add the Strongly Disagree and Disagree numbers together to total: _____
Disagree		
Strongly Disagree		

Results:

My Strongly Agree and Agree total is much larger than my Strongly Disagree and Disagree Total – It’s quite possible that you overwork yourself. Let’s dive head first into this work-life balance workshop and see if there are things you can do to improve this situation.

My Strongly Disagree and Disagree total is much larger than my Strongly Agree and Agree Total – You seem to have a good handle on your work life, and you’re not feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the job. So, thanks for attending but I may not have much helpful advice to offer you. On the other hand, you’ll be a great contributor of additional ideas during this workshop!

My two totals are rather close to one another – You seem to be somewhat balanced. Good job! There’s still some room for improvement, however, so as our workshop continues, focus on those specific areas where you checked “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.”



EXERCISE #2: PART A

Rank order the following items 1 through 12 on the basis of how much time you spend per week on each one. 1 = I spend the most time on this. 12 = I spend the least time on this.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| ___ Work/School | ___ Friends |
| ___ Personal Maintenance | ___ Commuting |
| ___ Leisure/Hobbies | ___ Home Maintenance |
| ___ Family | ___ Spiritual Life |
| ___ Volunteering | ___ Health and Fitness |
| ___ Self | ___ Sleep |

EXERCISE #2: PART B

Rank order the following items 1 through 12 on the basis of how much time you *would* like to spend per week on each one. 1 = I would like to spend the most time on this. 12 = I would like to spend the least time on this.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| ___ Work/School | ___ Friends |
| ___ Personal Maintenance | ___ Commuting |
| ___ Leisure/Hobbies | ___ Home Maintenance |
| ___ Family | ___ Spiritual Life |
| ___ Volunteering | ___ Health and Fitness |
| ___ Self | ___ Sleep |

How Do Your Rankings Compare?



EXERCISE #3

Based on Exercise #1, my current state of work/life balance seems:

- Excellent
- Good
- Satisfactory
- In Need of Improvement
- Poor

Based on Exercise #2, in order to do (even) better in the area of work/life balance, I need to reduce the amount of time/energy I devote to these things:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

and increase the amount of time/energy I devote to these things:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



EXERCISE #4

What is work and what is not work for you? Try to come up with at least five examples of each.

Part A. I consider these things to be work:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Part B. I consider these things *not* to be work:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Common Reasons Why People Find It Hard to Say No

According to Kerry Ann Rockquemore, President and CEO of the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity

Technical Errors

- You literally don't know how to say "no" in a manner appropriate to the context.
- "Yes" is your default response (and you feel must have an extraordinary reason to say "no").
- You have no idea how much time "yes" takes.
- You haven't recognized the connection between the time required to fulfill "yes" commitments and the time you feel you're missing for truly important activities.
- You don't have a clear and consistent filter to help you decide when to say "yes" and when to say "no."

Psychological Blocks

- You're a pleaser (i.e. you're more concerned about people liking you than you are about meeting your own goals).
- You're trying to be super-professor or superstar worker (i.e. trying to do a little of everything but not doing any one thing well).
- You're a perfectionist.
- You feel overly responsible for things that aren't entirely your responsibility.
- You believe everything will fall apart unless you do the work.
- You're overcompensating and/or trying to prove you belong.
- You always put other people's needs before your own.

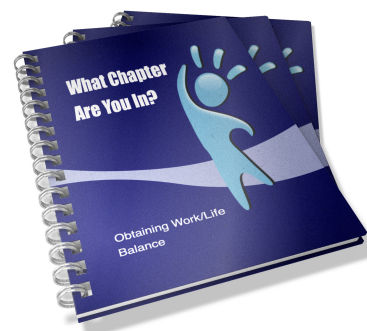
How To Say No

Idea #1: Create an Informal "No Committee"

- Ask 2-3 colleagues to work with you as an informal "No Committee"
- Whenever you get a request to take on additional duties, don't commit immediately
- Take the request to your "No Committee"
- They are to either:
 - a. Recommend that you should agree, giving you reasons why
 - b. Recommend that you should say "no," giving you reasons why

Idea #2: Think in Terms of "Career Chapters"

- Think of your career as a book with many chapters
- Each chapter has a theme or focal point, such as "The Assistant Professor Chapter" or the "Mid-Career Staff Member Chapter"
- When new responsibilities are offered to you, ask yourself, "Does this assignment fit the theme of my current chapter?"
- If it doesn't, say "no"



EXERCISE #5

WHY IS IT HARD FOR YOU TO SAY NO?

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I feel guilty when I say <i>no</i> .					
I don't like being perceived as rude, impolite, or uncooperative.					
When I'm put on the spot, I can't think of a good reason for saying <i>no</i> .					
I hate being perceived as the bad guy (or a bad person)					
I like to make everyone happy.					
I don't like being thought of as someone who doesn't work hard.					
I like being regarded as a "lifesaver" or "hero."					
I don't like doing things that risk my job because any job is better than no job at all.					
I'm afraid of disappointing other people.					
I like being the "go to person." I pride myself on being dependable.					

Exercise #6 How Assertive Are You?

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I am able to say <i>no</i> when I don't want to do something.					
I ask for help when I need it.					
I question matters when I'm confused.					
People who know me best would probably say that I express anger appropriately.					
People who know me best would probably say that I express annoyance appropriately.					
I offer my opinion when I disagree with others.					
I look people in the eye when I'm talking to them.					
I speak up regularly in meetings.					
I believe that I speak with a generally confident manner.					
In conversations with others, I defend my opinions to my own satisfaction.					

Exercise #7 Finding the Right Timeframe

DIRECTIONS: All of us have different timeframes for work/life balance. On the continuum below, pinpoint where you personally would find the greatest relaxation and refreshment.

- *A three-day weekend more frequently?*
- *An entire month or longer less frequently?*
- *Something in between?*

I would prefer to have

A three-day weekend every few weeks.

SOMETHING IN BETWEEN

An entire month or more off every few years.



HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY #1

Transforming Aggressiveness Into Assertiveness

Cross N. Truculent reports to Pliant N. Tractable at Confrontational State University. Because of a series of budget cuts, everyone in Pliant's area has had to take on additional responsibilities. Because student recruitment and fundraising are important to this area, Pliant has assigned everyone in the office a number of activities that will require them to attend a few events on the weekend and in the evening during the coming year.

The next morning, Cross shows up in Pliant's office, tosses a print out of the work schedule for the coming month onto Pliant's desk, folds his/her arms, and leans angrily toward Pliant. "What the hell is this?"

"It's the new work schedule," Pliant replies. "We been talking about it at our meetings for the last few weeks. Since we couldn't replace Mark or Alexandra when they left, all of us have to take on a few more duties. And unfortunately, that means fundraising events in the evening every now and then and student recruitment events on a few weekends."

"Well, I'm not doing that," Cross declares categorically.

"Look, Cross, if each of us just does a few of these events ..."

Cross interrupts Pliant. "Show me in my contract where it says I have to work evenings and weekends."

"I doubt if any of our contracts says exactly ..." Pliant attempts to respond.

"I said, SHOW ME IN MY CONTRACT WHERE IT SAYS I HAVE TO WORK EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS," Cross responds again, raising his/her voice.

"All of our job descriptions say, 'And other duties as assigned,' Cross. This is just one more of those duties."

"Well, you're even more incompetent than I thought you were if you assumed you could just order me around like this." Cross tightens his/her folded arms, narrows his/her eyes, and leans back defiantly.

"There's no need to get personal, Cross, it's just that we ..."

"This IS personal, and you know it, Tractable," Cross replies. "I've got young children at home and, for what you're paying me, I can't afford extra child care simply because you won't do the job we're paying you for."

"I actually am doing the vast majority of these events by myself, Cross. There's just a few of them that I can't make or that require several people."

"Not my problem," Cross says, turning and starting to leave the office. "You can expect a formal grievance on your desk within an hour."

After reading this case, reflect on it (or discuss it in small groups), considering the following questions:

- **What did Cross N. Truculent say and do that is appropriately regarded as aggressive, not assertive?**
- **How could Cross N. Truculent have made his or her case assertively, but not aggressively?**
- **Would an assertive style probably be more effective in this case?**



HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY #2

Making Tough Choices

If you regard your position as primarily that of a faculty member, read and reflect on case study # 2.1. If you regard your position as primarily that of a staff member, read and reflect on case study # 2.2.

Case Study #2.1

Dr. Anita Massage has been working as a faculty member in the Department of Neurological Arts Management for five years. This field is her passion, but she is going up for tenure next year and is starting to feel the pressure. Her department chair has also been urging her to work towards improving the results of her teaching evaluations, which have been satisfactory but not stellar, and there have been several student complaints that she seems disorganized, unprepared, and at times even sleepy during her classes. Additionally, she has been working part-time as an indoor cycling instructor both to keep herself in shape and to help pay off her \$40,000 in student loans.

What recommendations would you give to Anita that might help her achieve her career goals while also providing more balance in her life?



Case Study #2.2

Manny Peoples is a coordinator in the office of financial affairs. Due to severe budget cuts and lay-offs, Manny has had to take on duties and responsibilities that would normally be divided between three other full-time positions. His working extra hours to accomplish all of these tasks is getting in the way of being able to spend time with his small children at home. Meanwhile, his elderly mother has been coping with a long-term illness, and Manny has no other family nearby to help take care of her. For the past ten years, Manny has also been involved in the Rotary Club, and everyone tells him that he'd be a shoo-in for president next year. He gets great satisfaction from the Rotary Club and thinks that he's be a great president.

What recommendations would you give to Manny that might help him achieve his life goals while also providing more balance in his life?

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY #3

Getting the Timing Right

Imagine that you're a dean and that two of your department chairs, Dale E. Problems and Sarah Tonin, have each come to you with a similar set of complaints: They're feeling overworked, their level of job satisfaction has plummeted, they're experiencing increasing anxiety and self-doubt, and their families are complaining that they "never see them" anymore. Each believe they need better work/life balance.

Dr. Problems says, "My days are just crazy. I seem to be working from the time I get up until the time I fall asleep, exhausted. I assumed that, as a department chair, I'd put in my required office hours from 8:00 until 5:00 and then my time would be my own. But it hasn't worked out that way. I need some relief from my responsibilities. Can you help me?"

Dr. Tonin says, "You know that, for me, my work has always come first. One of the reasons why I accepted this position as department chair is that I wanted to build up my retirement fund. I love to travel, and my plan is that, after I retire, I'm going to go see the world. But in the meantime, the work just seems to be eating me up. I need some relief from my responsibilities. Can you help me?"

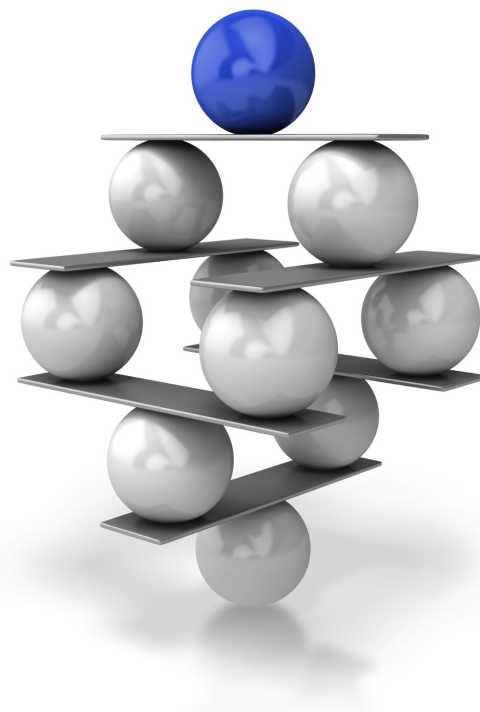
While you're sympathetic to the concerns of both department chairs, your budget simply doesn't have the resources to hire additional assistant chairs or even to provide release time for other faculty members to assume some administrative duties of these two chairs. You do have a small fund of non-recurring funds that you could use to help, but you couldn't do anything more than allocate a maximum of ten thousand dollars for each chair on a one-time-only basis. How might you use these funds, coupled with advice of choosing the right time frame for work-life balance, to help Dr. Problems and Dr. Tonin, two highly valued chairs that you would hate to lose?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Materials for Further Study

- Anderson, J. (2006). *A weekend to change your life: Find your authentic self after a lifetime of being all things to all people*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- Arnold, C. L. (2014). *Small move, big change: Using microresolutions to transform your life permanently*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Berry, J. F. (2010). *Organize now! A week-by-week guide to simplify your space and your life*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Home.
- Berry, J. F. (2011). *Organize now! Your money, business & career*. Blue Ash, OH: Betterway Home.
- Berry, J. F. (2011). *Organize now! Your money, business & career*. Blue Ash, OH: Betterway Home.
- Berry, J. F. (2013). *Organize now! Think & live clutter-free*. Blue Ash, OH: Betterway Home.
- Brantley, J., & Matik, W.O. (2007). *Five good minutes at work: 100 mindful practices to help you relieve stress & bring your best to work*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Burn, S. M. (2015, September 7). How's your work-life balance?: The importance of work-life balance and how to achieve it. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/presence-mind/201509/how-s-your-work-life-balance>.
- DeCoursey, M. (2017). *Balance me: A realist's guide to a successful life*. Stilwell, KS: Realist Books.
- Ferriss, T. (2007). *The 4-hour workweek: Escape 9-5, live anywhere, and join the new rich*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

- Grace, M. (2018). *How to not always be working: A toolkit for creativity and radical self-care*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Henderson, J. M. (2017, October 17). Four secrets of people who have achieved work-life balance. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jmaureenhenderson/2017/10/17/four-secrets-of-people-who-have-achieved-enviable-work-life-balance/#57cd119e6757>.
- Jonat, R. (2014). *Do less: A minimalist guide to a simplified, organized, and happy life*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.
- Leeds, R. (2000). *The zen of organizing: Creating order and peace in your home, career, and life*. Los Angeles, CA: Park Slope Press.
- Leeds, R. (2008). *One year to an organized life: From your closets to your finances, the week-by-week guide to getting completely organized for good*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Leeds, R. (2009). *One year to an organized work life: From your desk to your deadlines, the week-by-week guide to eliminating office stress for good*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Leeds, R. (2012). *The 8 minute organizer: Easy solutions to simplify your life in your spare time*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Lockett, K., & Mumford, J. (2009). *Work/life balance for dummies*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Pollan, S. M., & Levine, M. (1996). *Lifescrpts: What to say to get what you want in 101 of life's toughest situations*. New York, NY: Hungry Minds, Inc.
- Reille, A. (2017.). *5 secrets to preventing stress in higher education administration*. <https://forms.aweber.com/form/47/795929447.htm>.
- Schulte, B. (2015, May 5). Millennials want a work-life balance. Their bosses just don't get why. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/millennials-want-a-work-life-balance-their-bosses-just-dont-get-why/2015/05/05/1859369e-f376-11e4-84a6-6d7c67c50db0_story.html?utm_term=.e0fcabe8b5e1.
- Scott, S. J. & Davenport, B. (2016). *Declutter your mind: How to stop worrying, relieve anxiety, and eliminate negative thinking*. Cranbury, NJ: Oldtown Publishing LLC.
- Smith, M. J. (1975). *When I say no, I feel guilty*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Vavrichek, S. M. (2012). *The guide to compassionate assertiveness: How to express your needs & deal with conflict while keeping a kind heart*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Webb, C. (2016). *How to have a good day: Harness the power of behavioral science to transform your working life*. New York, NY: Crown Business.



HEALTH

Give Up on Work-Life Balance

Despite the pressure to have it all, many workers still feel they are failing both in the office and at home.

OLGA KHAZAN MAY 30, 2019



DIGITALVISION / GETTY

Brigid Schulte has baked Valentine's Day cupcakes until 2 a.m. and written articles until 4 a.m. In 2014, when she wrote *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, a book about the hunt for work-life balance, Schulte was a reporter for *The Washington Post* and a mother of two young children. Her unforgiving schedule had no free time and left her constantly torn between her family and professional life.

"I have held what I hope were professional-sounding interviews sitting on the floor in the hall outside my kids' dentist's office," Schulte writes. At work, she would get started on an article only to have to take a break to call her kids' school. At night, she would wake in a panic thinking of all the stuff she didn't get done. When she

described her time troubles to a fellow reporter, the reporter said, “I don’t know how you single mothers do it.” Schulte has a husband.

“It was madness,” Schulte, who is now the director of the Better Life Lab at New America, told me recently. “I felt like I couldn’t even breathe. I felt like work was totally demanding. I always felt behind, that I wasn’t doing enough. At home, I felt like I couldn’t be the kind of mother that I thought I should be. I felt like I was falling apart at the seams.”

When I read Schulte’s book, I found myself nodding along vigorously. My career as a journalist similarly requires odd hours. I’ve timed calls from PR people to coincide with my commute home, since that’s the only “free” time I had to talk. On a recent cross-country trip to see my parents, I spent a day doing my work expenses. Constant pressure in my profession has made me go to great lengths to minimize how much labor I perform outside of work. I once made my boyfriend pay me for the hours I spent booking flights and hotels for our vacation.

The reasons behind this “madness,” as Schulte put it, are familiar, and they’re not specific to journalism. American workers—especially those in white-collar professions—are working longer hours. Women are often the default chore-doers and child-tenders, even in relationships that strive for egalitarianism. The solution from career gurus has historically been to try to squeeze both work and life into the overpacked Tupperware that is your day. Check emails during the kids’ swim meet, they say, or pick up a hobby to “take your mind off work”—and take up even more time you don’t have.

Busy workers have been trying and failing at these types of hacks for decades. This fruitless cycle suggests that work-life balance is not independently achievable for most overworked people, if not outright impossible. Balancing work and life “is such an act of subversion, of resistance, that it’s really difficult for individuals to do,” Schulte said. “The fear is you’ll be overlooked by your overworking bosses and seen as a threat by everyone else.”

In the end, the pursuit of balance can itself be exhausting: After an arduous

workday, people feel as if they “should” dice up vegetables and Instagram their smiling toddlers. In fact, some researchers think that rather than beat yourself up striving to balance work and life, it might be better to simply embrace the imbalance.

To many Americans, reading the research on work-life balance would feel like reading their own diary. The people most stricken by work-life-balance issues are, perhaps expectedly, dual-earner families, says Marcus Butts, a management professor at Southern Methodist University. That is, both people in the house have jobs, so there’s no one whose job it is to exclusively manage the household.

Melissa Milkie, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto, has found that people with college degrees have more “work-nonwork interference” than those with less education. Having the freedom to “make their own hours” doesn’t necessarily help Americans who work long hours, either. In a study, Milkie and her colleagues found that people who work more than 50 hours a week actually have *more*, not fewer, work-life conflicts if they set their own hours—a concept called “schedule control.” Rather than a salve, “schedule control may be indicative of ‘work that never ends,’” Milkie and her co-authors write. Another study states it plainly: “The most consistent family characteristic predicting [work-life] imbalance is being a parent. The most consistent work characteristic predicting imbalance is hours worked.”

Wealthy workers’ long hours of course don’t mean they have it tougher than poor workers do. While people in low-income professions are less likely to work more than a standard 40-hour week, this can be due to a lack of job opportunities. The overwork of the professional class, meanwhile, does seem like more of a choice. The relationship between a person’s satisfaction with her job and the number of hours she works appears to form a U-shaped curve: One study found that satisfaction dips upon working more than 40 hours, only to rise again after 55 hours. Some of that overwork might be driven by passion. Then again, Corporate Stockholm Syndrome is apparently a thing, so maybe at some point you come under the spell of your corporate captors.

Many of these people are salaried employees, so they're not earning overtime. Why work more hours than you get paid for? "Employers are greedy institutions. They want as much time as they can get," Milkie says. This can be especially hard in creative professions, where the sign of a job well done is nebulous and subjective. ("If we all hated our jobs, it would be much easier to create work-life balance," a worker once told Schulte.) In professional jobs, employees feel a sense of competition with one another. And one way to compete is to outwork.

This culture of overwork has well-known personal consequences. Working more than 55 hours a week raises the risk of heart attack and stroke. People who work longer hours tend to be more anxious and depressed, and their sleep suffers. Long hours aren't even good for performance: As Schulte wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, research has shown that people's IQ actually drops 13 points when they're in a state of tunnel-vision busyness.

Long work hours affect romantic relationships, too. In heterosexual partnerships, women seem to suffer more than men do. One study found that women whose male partners worked 50 or more hours a week were more stressed and felt their relationships were of lower quality than those partnered with men who worked 35 to 49 hours. But men partnered with women who worked long hours "report no differences in stress, time adequacy, or relationship quality."

Technology has been offered up as both a cause of work-life imbalance and a potential solution. Smartphones often take the blame for work bleeding into the evening, yet Butts says certain elements of remote work can actually be beneficial. Attempting to work 60 hours each week directly from an office desk can be brutal. "Being able to attend to after-work emails after the kids go to bed allows you to set up for the next day," he says. "One of my colleagues calls it 'parking downhill'" — setting yourself up to have the easiest workday possible. "Without tech, you couldn't have that."

Butts says that if you can, you should try to "segment" between your work and nonwork lives. But for jobs in which that's not possible, he advises that the best way

to think about your life is as “one big pie.” Busy people who see work and nonwork as two separate spheres tend to get angry when one bleeds into the other, Butts says. One coping mechanism might be to view your life as a seamless, worky fever dream. As unappealing as that sounds, at least you’re not surprised when it extends past 6 p.m.

Of course, these types of mental tricks demand even more of the employee, rather than the employer. Most studies and experts say work-life balance only changes when bosses want it to. It’s simply too hard for one rank-and-file worker to remold an office’s culture. A research team that Schulte is working with recommends that managers leave work on time and send out notes reminding workers to schedule their vacations.

If your work won’t change, though, it can be difficult to justify your insane hours to your family and friends. It’s tough to explain why you can’t go to happy hour, you can’t make it to dinner by 6:30, you can’t be offline for an entire weekend, you can’t, you can’t. In *Stretched Too Thin*, another book about busy women, Jessica N. Turner recommends scheduling time for friends on your calendar just as you would schedule a meeting or doctor appointments. “Much of my time spent with friends happens over coffee before work and during hourlong lunch breaks,” she writes. She also recommends “being okay with imperfection,” which might include allowing people to come to your house when it’s not very clean.

The other option is to take the ethos of imperfection to its most extreme degree—to give up on the idea of balancing work and life entirely.

Silicon Valley has promoted the idea that you should spend all day and all night crushing it at a start-up, only to return to an adult dorm where you sleep the barest amount necessary to keep your company alive. Brad Stulberg, the author, with Steve Magness, of *The Passion Paradox*, told me that creative jobs tend to be all-consuming, almost like a socially sanctioned addiction. But “the conventional definition of work-life balance is doing equal things in equal proportion,” he said.

“I need to be the perfect husband or wife; I should exercise; I should go to happy hour.”

For people who work a lot of hours, even trying to achieve work-life balance can be a source of imbalance itself. (Several years ago, I took up baking in an attempt to gain work-life balance, then realized I was usually too tired to bake after a 12-hour workday. Now I hate baking.)

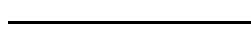
Stulberg recommended seeing balance in terms of “seasons,” rather than hours in every day. “There might be a season where you’re writing a book, and that’s the thing,” he said. “There might be a season when you’re starting a family.” There will probably be fewer productive hours at the keyboard during the family season, and fewer boozy brunches during the book season, and that’s okay.

Schulte told me that her work-life balance only changed after she took some long, soul-searching walks with her husband in which they renegotiated their at-home duties. She gave up on having a picture-perfect home life. Now certain things around the house are her husband’s job, and if he doesn’t do them, they just don’t get done. If her daughter needed to go to the orthodontist, Schulte would say simply, “‘It’s Dad’s month.’ And I had to be okay with it if my daughter missed her appointment one month.”

At work, letting balls drop is risky; it can get you fired. Most people can’t simply tell their boss that it’s a co-worker’s month to handle something. “In a really demanding and competitive environment, to say ‘I’m not gonna go after that big story’ is the kiss of death,” Schulte admitted. She suggested that journalists (or graphic designers, or dancers, or enter your this-was-my-dream-so-why-am-I-so-tired profession here) try to get more buy-in from bosses so they can put their long hours toward projects that truly excite them. “When the shit train comes by”—that is, the tasks no one wants to do—“tell them, ‘Okay, I can be diverted to do this, but then this other big thing that we all want is gonna take me longer to do, so what do you want?’” Schulte said.

She encourages women, in particular, to take time away from work and use whatever flex time their employers grant them. Many men she knows seem to have no compunctions about taking time for themselves. Women, she said, should start behaving similarly.

Schulte admitted that she's not "some guru that's figured it all out," and it's not likely that there will ever be one. Sure, there are isolated tales of bosses who insist that their employees go home on time. But if you don't work for one of those bosses, the best way to achieve balance might just be giving yourself permission not to have it. Maybe you should go easy on yourself for ordering pizza multiple times a week and catching up with friends while you're running errands. The break you give yourself might be the only one you'll get for a while.



We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

