

## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Work-life balance is important because it affects the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. After all, people need time and energy to participate in family life, democracy, and community activities. They also need time outside of work for rejuvenation, and to develop and nurture friendships and their "non-work selves."

Work and family are considered the primary domains in a person's life. The interface between the work and family domains of life is studied across psychology subfields (e.g., clinical, developmental, social) and by other disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, family studies, economics, women's studies). Industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists are interested primarily in how interactions between work life and family life, or more broadly the nonwork aspects of one's life, influence important individual and organizational outcomes. Work-life or work-family balance refers to the extent to which an individual is able to meet the often competing demands associated with work and nonwork roles. The terms work-family and work-life are often used interchangeably; but family sometimes refers more specifically to familial roles (e.g., spouse, parent), whereas life may refer more broadly to familial roles and other nonwork roles (e.g., church member, community volunteer). Because most research has focused on the interface between work and family roles, the term work-family is used here.

Workplaces that support employee wellbeing and allow time for employee recovery are part of creating a sustainable workforce where employees don't become burned-out and ineffective. In contrast to "engaged" employees who display on-the-job energy, involvement, commitment, and a sense of efficacy, "burned-out" employees are exhausted (often physically, mentally, and emotionally), cynical (have negative attitudes about the job, management, and coworkers), and lack efficacy (don't feel like their job or their efforts matter). Burnout has a number of workplace causes, including work overload (unsustainable workloads with no opportunities for recovery). Other sources include lacking control over your work or workplace, unresolved workplace conflicts, and perceptions of unfair workloads, pay, or evaluations. In most cases, managers and other organizational leaders have at least some power to prevent employee burnout by addressing these sources.

Many people struggle to find balance between the demands of their jobs and other parts of their lives—things like spending time with friends, caring for children and other loved ones, staying healthy, and pursuing personal interests outside of work.

Here are **17** ways to bring more balance into your life, even if you can't change how many hours you work.

**1. Stop feeling guilty about taking breaks.** If you feel a nagging sense of guilt whenever you take a break, you're less likely to enjoy the time off or feel recharged when you return to work. Breaks may feel like wasted time, but in the right doses they can make you more productive and focused, research suggests. One recent study found that employees with the highest levels of productivity don't work longer hours than anyone else—they just took more breaks (around 17 minutes for every 52 minutes of work).

**2. Make break time more worthwhile.** Take stock of how you're spending your breaks. Are you doing things that actually make you happy, help you stay healthy, or strengthen your social relationships, or are you just acting out of habit? There's nothing wrong with watching cute cat videos if that's what helps you relax, but it's easy to fall into the trap of mindlessly perusing facebook and other social media sites, which research suggests tends to reduce happiness. Being more deliberate about how you spend your breaks can make them more valuable.

**3. Make work time more efficient.** It's also useful to take stock of how you spend your work time. How much of it is spent on essential tasks that only you can do versus tasks that could be delegated? Are there ways to streamline routine tasks or reduce the number of minor decisions you need to make every day? Many people find it useful to set aside designated time for important projects, especially those that don't have a concrete deadline and may otherwise fall through the cracks. And when you need to focus, temporarily turning off phone

and email alerts can help (research suggests that even just the sound of an alert coming in can be just as distracting as actually using your phone).

**4. Beware of “work inertia.”** When you’re in a good flow, it can be hard to stop. Work inertia may help you get things done, but it can also disrupt meals, delay sleep, or make you chronically late. Perfectionists are more vulnerable to work inertia due to high personal standards and a desire to see tasks through to completion before moving on. But sometimes it’s necessary to pause and return to a task later, when you’re more refreshed, even if it extends the timeline. While marathon work sessions are sometimes necessary, there are other times when the work can wait and nothing disastrous will occur.

**5. Cut down your commute time.** In the U.S., the average total daily commute is around one hour, though for many people it can be much longer than that. It’s hard to achieve work-life balance when you spend three plus hours stuck in traffic each day, and research suggests that long commutes can deliver a big blow to happiness. If you’re contemplating a move, don’t underestimate the commute factor—not just how long it is, but also how stressful and attentionally demanding (e.g., multiple transfers, unsafe roads). But at the same time, don’t let the commute factor outweigh quality of home life—sometimes it is worth having a longer commute if it means coming home to an environment that makes you happy.

**6. Make your commute more enjoyable.** Even if you can’t change your commute length, consider how you can make the most of the time. For example, you and your partner or a co-worker could listen to the same podcast and then discuss it when you see each other next. Or, if you take the train, you could use the time to catch up on personal emails and phone calls. Even just singing along to the radio can be worthwhile—research suggests that it increases feel-good brain chemicals like dopamine and oxytocin, reduces stress, and boosts your immune system.

Finally, keep in mind that quality may matter more than length—sometimes it's worth taking the longer, scenic route if it's more relaxing.

**7. Establish non-negotiables.** When you think of all the things in your life that are important to you, work-related and non-work-related, what are the things that you absolutely cannot sacrifice (or could only sacrifice under rare circumstances)? For example, in my work, one non-negotiable is getting students' recommendation letters in on time. That will always take precedence, because another person's welfare is at stake. Other non-negotiables may include attending important family events, being there for a loved one who is sick, or getting regular exercise. Not all non-negotiables need to be temporally rigid—for example, it may not be realistic to exercise every day, but you could make a commitment to exercise at least three times a week. Being clear and upfront about non-negotiables can help us structure our lives to make room for the things that matter most, without letting others' down. If an employer is not comfortable with your non-negotiables, that may not be the right place for you to work.

**8. Set communication boundaries.** One study found that around half of all employed adults surveyed checked work email on evenings and weekends, while on vacation, and when home sick. Blurring the boundaries between work and life may feel like it increases productivity, but over time it can contribute to work-life conflict and burnout. Unless you're in a profession that requires you to be on call 24/7, one good way to enforce non-negotiables is to set explicit boundaries regarding your reachability outside of work hours. To communicate your boundaries, you could include a statement in your email signature about when you check and don't check email and how quickly people can expect to receive a response. If you stick to your policy, people will learn to work around it (and hopefully won't expect a response at 2 a.m.)

**9. Consider choosing quality of life over salary.** Contrary to what many believe, research suggests that beyond a certain salary level (~75k/year), money doesn't buy happiness. In some cases, it can buy greater stress. If you're in a position that makes the kind of work-life balance you want impossible, it may be worth considering taking a pay cut—or even pursuing a different career altogether—to enable you to focus more on other aspects of your life, provided that the pay cut doesn't create financial stress. Rather than striving to “have it all,” which is arguably impossible for men and women alike, decide for yourself where your priorities are and what makes you most fulfilled. There is no one right formula for everyone.

**10. Advocate for policy changes that can help everyone find more balance.** A final way to find balance is to strive to change workplace culture and policy on a broader scale. For example, flexible work schedules can give employees more control and autonomy, and research suggests that this policy can increase productivity: People with flexible schedules take fewer sick days, experience less work-related impairment, and are more committed to their jobs. The problem is, most companies don't offer flexible schedules, and those that do tend to be selective in whom they offer them to, potentially breeding resentment among colleagues. People are more likely to be willing to pick up slack for their colleagues when their colleagues are also willing to pick up slack for them—whether that slack is the result of family obligations, health problems, caregiving responsibilities, or other commitments. If only certain kinds of outside commitments are seen as legitimate and work-life balance becomes zero sum (i.e., one person's balance is another person's burden), morale can suffer and support for lopsided work-life balance policies may wane. When we work towards balance for everyone, we are more likely to be able to enjoy it ourselves.

**11. Reducing Work-Family Conflict.** Research has examined the impact of employers' family-friendly initiatives on employees' work-family conflict, job attitudes, and outcomes. Many family-friendly policies focus on creating greater flexibility in work schedules, including reduced or part-time hours, flextime,

compressed workweeks, and job sharing. Other programs potentially provide opportunity for meeting family demands and balancing work and family, including sick leave, maternity and paternity leave, lactation programs, child care and eldercare, tele-work, concierge services, and informational resources and referrals.

**12. *Set boundaries and work hours.*** Set boundaries for yourself and your colleagues, to avoid burnout. When you leave the office, avoid thinking about upcoming projects or answering company emails. Consider having a separate computer or phone for work, so you can shut it off when you clock out. If that isn't possible, use separate browsers, emails or filters for your work and personal platforms.

**13. *Set goals and priorities (and stick to them).*** Set achievable goals that you are passionate about, with respect to your career, health and relationships. Think about what tasks are most important for achieving a healthy work-life balance and prioritize them. Make your workday as productive as possible by implementing time-management strategies, analyzing your to-do list and cutting out tasks that have little to no value.

**14. *Make time for yourself and your loved ones.*** While your job is important, it shouldn't be your entire life. You were an individual before taking this position, and you should prioritize the activities or hobbies that make you happy.

**15. *Take a vacation.*** Sometimes, truly unplugging means taking vacation time and shutting work completely off for a while.

**16. *Prioritize your health.*** Your overall physical, emotional and mental health should be your main concern. If you struggle with anxiety or depression and think therapy would benefit you, fit those sessions into your schedule, even if you have to leave work early or ditch your evening spin class.

**17. *Find a job that you love.*** Although work is an expected societal norm, your career shouldn't be restraining. If you hate what you do, you aren't going to be happy, plain and simple. You don't need to love every aspect of your job, but it

needs to be exciting enough that you don't dread getting out of bed every morning.