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Balancing Acts: between Work and Life

In this chapter we try to convince you to have a life outside work. This is one instance in which we are not writing from the basis of our own personal expertise and experience. All three of us are hopeless workaholics with a poor work–life balance. However, as Jane said in introducing herself at the beginning of the book, we would like to help the next generation of academics to be differently pleased. So do as we say, not as we do.

What do we mean, ‘work–life balance’?

This much used phrase is a euphemism for something much more simple and straightforward: how much time you spend working or not working and how the quality of your non-working time is affected by your work practices.

People with a poor work–life balance (that is, people who work too hard and for too long) end up with broken relationships, disrupted family lives, physical and mental health problems and poor quality of life. No job is worth this. Research in the UK and elsewhere indicates that academics are much more likely to become seriously ill with workplace stress than a whole range of supposedly more stressful professional occupations. We are sure that this pattern would be replicated in many, if not all, countries in the world. The same group of workers are also renowned for the punishing length of their working week.

Don’t think you are immune from all this. Take positive steps now to redress the balance in your life and keep it that way.

Why do academics work too long?

Academic work has a number of inherent characteristics that produce a tendency to excessive and prolonged periods of intensive labour. First,

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the work itself and the standard that is expected are generally very poorly defined. When combined with a culture of competitive critique, this means that enough is never enough. Second, much academic work is subject to what Jane has called 'discourses of derision' in another context. That is, especially outside the 'hard' sciences, academic work can all too often be seen as of little or no value in a system where increasing emphasis is placed on the production of 'useful' knowledge. This derision often finds fertile ground among academics themselves, who either suffer from low self-esteem combined with compulsive over-achievement, or find it hard to see why anyone should pay them a salary to pursue the things they're interested in (or both). Third, academic work is frequently invisible, and tangible outputs such as publications give little indication of the actual value of the labour taken to produce them. Together, these characteristics serve to create a view of academic work, frequently internalised by academics themselves, that casts it as self-indulgent, useless and marked by long periods of time-wasting inactivity.

This poor understanding and perception of much academic work means that there is very little defence against pressure to do more and more and more and to do it better and quicker. When people protest or fall ill, the institutional response is all too frequently to place the problem firmly at the door of the individual. Thus people who cannot cope are deemed to be poor self-managers or time managers. University systems are marked by an abject lack of reflexivity in this regard.

Discourses of time management

We have already indicated the first discourse of time management and the one most often deployed against academics and, unfortunately, inhabited by them. This is the discourse of wasted time, poor self-organisation and lack of professionalism. In this discourse, academics are useless wastrels who simply don't know what a hard day's work is and spend way too much time doing nothing or watching daytime television. If you are not managing to keep up with your work, then it's entirely down to you and your inadequacies.

The second discourse of time management, and one that we would like to promote and inhabit, is one in which time is recognised as being

in short supply but in which we can take a certain degree of control and do something to ameliorate things.

There is a really fine line between these two discourses and it's treacherously easy to slip from one into the other in the twinkling of an eye. There is also a fine line between occupying the second discourse in a positive way and it being a way of not participating or being a good colleague. If you slip into the latter position, the second discourse can easily become an expression of bitter, negative sentiments and resentments. You need to understand that care and regard for yourself is not necessarily negative selfishness. Most people struggle with these balances and virtually none of us gets them right all the time.

We offer below some final handy hints (to ourselves as well as to you) on having a good work-life balance and staying sane. It is our New Year's Resolution to follow all of them, and, if we don't manage it, not to criticise ourselves too much for our failures.

Handy hints for maintaining a good work-life balance

1. Build work-free space and activities into your daily routines. These can range from going for a nice walk with your dog, having dinner with your partner, going to the gym or the swimming pool, spending time in your garden, reading a newspaper or a novel, playing computer games or whatever pleases and relaxes you. Don't ever be guilt-tripped into thinking that you can do such things only as rewards or treats for having done your work.
2. Place strict limits on your periods of work. You may have to relax them from time to time in order to meet important deadlines, but in the main you should keep to them and take time off in lieu if you break them. Always try to have at least one work-free day during a normal working week and preferably two. Remember, even God rested on the seventh day.
3. Most academics do at least some of their work at home. Whilst this can be quite nice it can also make it quite difficult to switch off from work activities. If you have the space, make sure that your work-at-home activities are confined to a comfortable and discrete space. About the last thing you need is your computer winking at you as

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you try to sleep, eat your dinner or watch television. If you can't afford this luxury then at least try to put your work away, cover your computer up and get on with the rest of your life at the end of your working day/week.

4. Try to organise your working time so that you can use it as efficiently as possible. For instance, make time for complex, demanding tasks in joined-up chunks rather than odd little bits. That way, you have more chance of achieving something and feeling able to have your day(s) of rest.
5. Given the impossibility of academic work-loads and your new resolve to have a good work-life balance, there will inevitably be things at work that you will simply not have time to do. You should be the person who decides what you are going to do and what you are going to leave undone. Your decision should be based solely on your professional judgement about what you need to do to be a good researcher and a good teacher. If you have to make the choice between completing an important research paper or filling in a form that will simply be filed and forgotten, it is obvious to us, and hopefully to you, which choice you should make.
6. When you are working, don't work so hard that you are left too exhausted and depleted to enjoy your non-working time. In the same vein, make sure that your working space (at home and in your office) is safe. Do not put up with non-ergonomic furniture that is likely to compromise your health in any way. It's no good having a good work-life balance if work has left you too unwell to enjoy the rest of your life.
7. Use at least some of your non-working time in a productive, enjoyable and creative way to look after yourself and your health. For instance, being an academic can be a very sedentary occupation, so getting a moderate amount of exercise can be an important and profitable way of spending your leisure time. But don't let this become a punishment either. If you are someone who needs time just to veg out, then take it.
8. We think that getting away from everything from time to time is a wonderful therapy. Do take proper holidays, even if it's just visiting friends and family rather than more expensive trips. Do not take your work with you. If necessary, get someone else to check your suitcase before you leave, if you are completely untrustworthy in

that regard. A complete break, even if it is short, is likely to be much more therapeutic than simply slacking off for a few days.

9. You need to enlist the support of your friends, family and partner in achieving a good work–life balance. Debbie often initially resents it when her partner insists that she has a day off from work. By the end of the day, however, she is grateful for this stiffening of her resolve. It's often the case that academics have other academics as partners and/or friends – after all, who else would put up with you? In one sense this can be quite helpful, as you have people around you who understand precisely what the pressures of your job are. In another sense, it can be quite problematic if you collude together to maintain a poor work–life balance. Whoever or whatever your friends/family are, you need to resolve how you will manage this issue.

And finally ...

This book has been about the various elements of an academic career, how you get the right mix of activities for you, get the jobs you want and how you can balance your work with the rest of life. Throughout, we have emphasised that, although you are part of a massive globalised system, you do have agency over your life and work and can make real choices.

Anne Gold, an academic at the University of London, has devised an exercise for academics designed to help them balance all the aspects of their work and the rest of their life. We think it might be good for you to do an adapted version of her exercise on your own or with friends. You'll need a very large sheet of paper (flip-chart paper is good) and some coloured pens.

Draw a series of buckets. Four of them should be labelled 'research', 'teaching', 'administration' and 'consultancy and practitioner work' in turn. These are your work buckets. In addition, draw the other buckets that best represent your desired life outside work. These might be labelled 'family responsibilities', 'leisure', 'friends', 'relationships', 'health', 'personal and household care and management' and so on. You decide.

In each of the buckets, draw a contents level indicating how full it is – anything from empty to overflowing. Then sit and think about whether you're happy with this distribution and what redistributions are both

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desirable to, and achievable for you. Address each bucket in turn, consider whether its contents are appropriate and think about strategies for emptying it or filling it up. That is, how are you going to redistribute your energies and efforts? It may be that the total volume of stuff in your buckets is too great. If so, draw one final extra-large bucket to put your unwanted surplus in. Label it the 'phucket bucket'.

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