

Work-Life Balance Is a Cycle, Not an Achievement

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Summary. Research has definitively shown that overwork isn't good for employees or their companies — and yet, in practice, it can be hard to overcome unhealthy work habits and reach a more sustainable work-life balance. To explore what it takes for busy professionals to make a change for the better, the authors conducted a series of interviews with mid- and senior-level managers at two global firms. They found that while the majority of respondents assumed working long hours was inevitable, a significant minority of them were able to resist this pressure and achieve a healthier balance through a process of increasing awareness, conscious reprioritizing, and implementation of public and private changes. The authors go on to emphasize that to achieve lasting change, you must

view this process not as a one-time activity, but as a cycle in which you constantly re-evaluate your evolving feelings and priorities, and adjust your work and life choices accordingly. [close](#)

Despite the resounding evidence that working long hours can be harmful to both employees and employers, many professionals still struggle to overcome their assumptions — and their deeply-ingrained habits — around work hours. What does it take to free yourself from these unhealthy patterns and reach a more sustainable, rewarding work-life balance?

To explore this question, we conducted almost 200 in-depth interviews with 78 professionals from the London offices of a global law firm and an accounting firm. We spoke with an equal number of men and women, and most of the interviewees were between 30 and 50 years old, with at least one dependent child, and in either middle or senior management roles.

The majority of the interviewees described their jobs as highly demanding, exhausting, and chaotic, and they seemed to take for granted that working long hours was necessary for their professional success. However, about 30% of the men and 50% of women in our sample appeared to consciously resist working long hours, describing a variety of strategies they developed for maintaining a healthier work-life balance. While the details of every individual case differed, our study suggested a common mental process that consistently helped this group of professionals to change the way they worked — and lived — for the better.

At a high level, our research showed that achieving better balance between professional and personal priorities boils down to a combination of reflexivity — or questioning assumptions to increase self-awareness — and intentional role redefinition. Importantly, our research suggests that this is not a one-time fix,

but rather, a cycle that we must engage in continuously as our circumstances and priorities evolve. This cycle is made up of five distinct steps:

1. Pause and denormalize.

Take a step back and ask yourself: What is currently causing me stress, unbalance, or dissatisfaction? How are these circumstances affecting how I perform and engage with my job? How are they impacting my personal life? What am I prioritizing? What am I sacrificing? What is getting lost? Only after you take a mental pause and acknowledge these factors can you begin to tackle them.

For instance, after several years of intense focus on her career, Maya*, a senior associate at a law firm, described feeling like she'd hit rock bottom. It was only at this point that she was able to recognize the toll her overwork had been taking on her family — and on her own mental and physical health:

“I was working quite long hours ... it was a horrible sort of period ... And I think for me, that was the key point. I thought, I am not doing this anymore, this is ridiculous. So, I think from then on, I have taken a real step back.”

Similarly, legal partner Kate told us that following the birth of her son, she experienced a major mental shift. She recognized that while the idea of “[I] must work, must work, must work” had been “indoctrinated into [her],” she was now aware of the “clash” between this idea and “where [she] was now” as a mother. This life-changing event was the impetus she needed to take a step back, become aware of the mismatch between her current situation and her personal priorities, and begin to denormalize her habit of working long hours.

Of course, the professionals we talked to all led very busy lives. Many of them explained that they didn't normally have the time or the energy to stop and reflect, and even expressed gratitude for the reflection space that the interview process itself allowed them. But while it's often a major life event — such as the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one — that catalyzes these realizations, it's possible to take a pause and start rethinking your priorities at any time. And although some professionals may be fine with long work hours, taking the time to think through these questions and acknowledge the tradeoffs you've made (whether intentional or not) is helpful for anyone looking to discover alternative ways of working and living.

2. Pay attention to your emotions.

Once you've increased your awareness of your current situation, examine how that situation makes you feel. Ask yourself, do I feel energized, fulfilled, satisfied? Or do I feel angry, resentful, sad? For example, one respondent described his realization that his current work-life balance (or lack thereof) was engendering some pretty negative emotions:

“You feel resentful and bitter that something that fundamentally isn't that important to the essence of life is stripping valuable time and minutes away from you ... it's accentuated even more when you see someone who has lost their life or someone who has been told here's how much time remains on your clock.” (Tobias, Audits Director)

A rational understanding of the decisions and priorities driving your life is important, but equally important is *emotional* reflexivity — that is, the capacity to recognize how a situation is making you feel. Awareness of your emotional state is essential in order to determine the changes you want to make in your work and in your life.

3. Reprioritize.

Increasing your cognitive and emotional awareness gives you the tools you need to put things into perspective and determine how your priorities need to be adjusted. Ask yourself: What am I willing to sacrifice, and for how long? If I have been prioritizing work over family, for example, why do I feel that it is important to prioritize my life in this way? Is it really necessary? Is it really inevitable? What regrets do I already have, and what will I regret if I continue along my current path?

Our priorities often shift faster than our day-to-day time allocation habits. The interviewees that described a more positive work-life balance intentionally reprioritized how they spent their time in a way that lined up with their true priorities. One participant described how he still saw himself as a professional, but redefined that professional role to be more inclusive of other valued roles, such as that of parent:

“The more I really understand what’s important in life — and it’s not really work — it’s, you know, understanding the relative importance of work. I still get a lot of satisfaction and stuff from work, but it used to be everything to me, and now it’s less than half to me.” (Dan, Audits Director)

4. Consider your alternatives.

Before jumping into solutions, first reflect on the aspects of your work and life that could be different in order to better align with your priorities. Are there components of your job that you would like to see changed? How much time would you like to spend with your family, or on hobbies? As one respondent illustrated, improving your situation takes time and experimentation:

“And it has taken me probably up to now, like my son is now two [years old], to get to a point where it’s evolved into ‘this is how it works’ [working more balanced hours], and it has taken that sort of length of time, probably longer than I wanted it to, but it’s there now.” (Michael, Audits Director)

5. Implement changes.

Finally, once you’ve recognized your priorities and carefully considered the options that could help you improve, it’s time to take action. That can mean a “public” change — something that explicitly shifts your colleagues’ expectations, such as taking on a new role that’s designed to be less time-demanding or allows for a compressed-week model — or a “private” change, in which you informally change your work patterns, without necessarily attempting to change your colleagues’ expectations.

In our research, we found that both public and private changes can be effective strategies, as long as they’re implemented in a sustainable manner. For private changes, that might mean self-imposing boundaries (such as choosing not to work on evenings, weekends or during holidays — and sticking to that decision), or turning down demands typically associated with your role (such as new projects or travel requests, even when you feel pressure to take them on). For public changes, rather than simply telling your supervisor that you want more time off or more flexible hours, securing support from key mentors, partners, and coworkers — or even better, formally applying for a new internal position or a flexible working scheme — is likely to result in more lasting change.

Importantly, the five steps outlined above are not a one-time activity, but rather a cycle of continuous re-evaluation and improvement. Especially if you’re under the influence of an

overpowering culture of long work hours, it's easy to slide back into "business as usual" (whether that's a conscious or unconscious decision). In our interviews, we found that for people to make real changes in their lives, they must continuously remember to pause, connect with their emotions, rethink their priorities, evaluate alternatives, and implement changes — throughout their personal and professional lives.

**Names have been changed for privacy.*

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