

Work-life balance & smart working

Tips and pointers from the ICAS Professional Development team.

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With a year of most of us balancing working from home, being at home and in some cases schooling and caring from home the need for a work life balance has become very apparent.

In the few minutes it will take you to read this help sheet, challenge yourself to think about your current working set up and to question if you are achieving a good work life balance (for example, not 'just checking in' on emails during weekend time, just because you can). There are some practical suggestions and steps outlined that can help you think about smart working and achieving a balance while we continue to have a more uncertain outlook for the future.

Work-life balance in a nutshell is the balance between work and personal life. It is usually achieved when you attain a satisfying life both inside and outside of work. Something that has never been more important now we are working from home, as we're literally working where we live! Work-life balance is something that affects everyone from young professionals starting out in their career, those nearing retirement, working parents and those who work part-time. Because of flexible working options and the adoption of home working full time, getting a balance between work and home is something that will only become more important.

In recent years, we have embraced advancements in technology, meaning we are more available to interact with colleagues remotely and have easier access to work even when we are not in the office. Our lives are filled with a blizzard of emails, phone calls, texts and social media updates. The challenge is how you sort through the vast quantities of information you receive and prioritise and act on that information so that you can improve your performance and enable you to achieve a good work-life balance.

Some practical steps that you can take to meet this challenge are outlined below, starting with how you can evaluate and improve your current working activity and then moving on to how to balance work and the rest of your time.

Setting goals and prioritising

To manage your working day more effectively, become clear about what you want to achieve by the end of each day/week/month. Set specific goals that reflect what you want to achieve. This will enable you to identify and focus on tasks which move you closer to your goals. If tasks do not move you closer to your goals, consider whether they are really necessary. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do these tasks add value to you and your organisation?
- What is the opportunity cost of performing this task?
- If you stopped doing this task, what is the worst thing that could happen?

At the moment, more than ever, thinking strategically about what work you are undertaking, being able to see what you are achieving, and meeting targets set for yourself will help to keep you motivated during such a time of change.

Develop your self-awareness

We all have different times of the day when we perform most effectively. Some people are more productive in the morning and feel that things just flow, but in the late afternoon their energy levels fall. Keep a diary for a week and note how you use your time and when you feel most productive. This will help you to identify how much time you currently spend on unproductive activities and what times of the day you are most productive. Leave easier tasks to times in the day that you work least effectively.

Focus

Technological advances have enabled us to multi-task and remain constantly connected. Although this can enable us to stay in the loop, thereby increasing control, reducing stress and increasing flexibility, it can also lead to chronic task-switching. We are biologically programmed to stay alert to changes in our environment. It is natural for us to react to every interruption – every email, text and voicemail alert. This causes us to constantly shift between tasks, never giving any of them our full attention. Each time we are interrupted, we lose the thread of what we were doing, and it takes time to re-engage with what we were working on. Have a think about what habits have you developed around email, text and voicemail alerts.

If you want to do a task to the best of your ability you need to focus on it. Forget juggling emails, calls and queries from colleagues whilst you are trying to complete an important task. If you have an important piece of work to get done that requires problem solving, creativity and new ideas, shut down your email, hide your phone and focus. Schedule times away from your desk/workstation and even if you only focus on a task for 30 minutes, you will be amazed at how much more you get done when you are not constantly fighting off distractions.

7 tips for smarter working

Once you have identified your goals, increased your awareness of your work patterns and practised focussing on important tasks, consider the following ways to work smarter:

1. Break down larger tasks into small, manageable chunks. Smaller tasks are less daunting to begin and are easier to delegate.
2. Consolidate tasks. Rather than checking email constantly, schedule in time to check it at certain times of the day.
3. Set deadlines for yourself and any projects you are working on. We perform tasks that do not have to be completed within a set time frame slower and less effectively.
4. Make sure you jot down any spontaneous thoughts or new ideas you have about a piece of work rather than storing them in your mind. This will save your mental energy.
5. Once you open and read an email, decide what you are going to do with it. Are you going to deal with it now, delegate it, bin it or schedule time in the diary to deal with it later?
6. Don't go to meetings you don't need to be at. Before attending a meeting ask what you are going to gain from the meeting and what value you will add.
Be aware of where you are focussing your time and energy. Focus your efforts on the things that you have control over and can do something about.

Get balance

To achieve work-life balance you need to lead a fulfilling life both inside *and* outside of work. Identify what is important to you and gives you a sense of happiness. Consider the following questions:

- What are your interests and passions?
- What do you love doing?
- What activities make you lose track of time?
- What would you love to try?

Schedule these activities into your diary after work. This will not only improve your work-life balance but will act as a motivator to finish work at a reasonable time. Take some time to look after yourself, read a book, listen to a podcast, go for a walk, exercise or anything that helps you to take your mind away from work!

If you follow the suggestions outlined above you will probably find that you deal with the volume of information you receive more effectively and your work performance will increase, giving you a sense of achievement, something that we all want to feel. If you effectively manage your working time, you will be able to get away from the office (or at the moment, tidy away your new home working area) at a reasonable time and have sufficient energy to do the things you want to do after work. This will hopefully lead to you having a good balance inside and outside of work.

Currently, with the challenge of social distancing and disruptive nature of COVID-19, looking after yourself, getting a good work life balance and considering your wellbeing has never been more important.

Look after your mental fitness

This is a particularly vulnerable time for everyone and having restricted access to the things we usually take for granted like seeing our friends and family which can have a knock-on effect to our mental health. It's particularly important therefore, that we look after ourselves and others.

It is also important to make sure you are taking care of your physical health. Make sure you are following government advice, while also taking the opportunity to go out for a walk once a day as well as trying to maintain your usual exercise while indoors.

For some ideas of where to find support with your mental or physical health then take a look at this article on [icas.com](https://www.icas.com).

Resources

CA Wellbeing – <https://www.icas.com/members/ca-wellbeing>

Mindfulness – <https://www.icas.com/members/professional-development/these-mindfulness-routines-will-improve-how-you-work>

Headspace – <https://www.headspace.com/>

Online courses – <https://www.icas.com/members/professional-development/free-online-courses-from-futurelearn>

Mental fitness – <https://www.icas.com/members/ca-wellbeing/wellbeing-matters/jonny-jacobs-ca-on-keeping-your-balance>

Mentoring – <https://www.icas.com/members/mentoring>

Coaching – <https://www.icas.com/members/professional-development/pd-specialist-qualifications-and-programmes/leadership-coaching-programmes>

Disclaimer:

This help sheet is designed to assist members with an important issue of general application and is not intended to be a definitive statement covering all aspects of this area. No responsibility for any person acting or refraining to act as a result of any material in this help sheet can be accepted by ICAS.



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