

Reclaim your time: finding the right work-life balance

Stop trying to find the time for the things that give us pleasure in life — and start making that time. Check out these savvy ways to actively create the type of meaningful, fulfilling life that eludes so many of us.



This report was selected especially for you by Falkenberg-Poetz & Pidhirniak Wealth

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Key takeaways

- Time with family, regular vacations and exercise are not just “nice” activities — they can actually fuel your professional success.
- Identify any activities that you simply do not have to do — and eliminate them from your list
- Commit to nonwork actions that recharge you — and do them (no ifs, ands or buts).

The “work first, life second” mantra guides far too many of us these days. From driven entrepreneurs to ladder-climbing professionals to overcommitted parents, we often find ourselves filling up our time with commitments to gain more money and greater status.

One result: little to no time for family, friends, spouses, self-care and other vital parts of living our best lives.

Compare how you prioritize your professional commitments with how you prioritize activities such as the following.

- Date night with your partner
- Children’s sporting or other events
- Getting together with friends from outside of work
- Exercise

If you find yourself consistently putting work or professional projects at the top of your list and then attempting to find the time for “the other stuff,” here’s some advice: stop looking to find that time — it doesn’t exist.

The good news: you can make the time to create a meaningful, fulfilling life and finally find the work-life balance that eludes so many of us. Bonus: by putting your life and family first, you might even end up more financially successful!

So says Craig Ballantyne, a high-performance business coach and author of the Wall Street Journal bestseller ***Unstoppable: How to Get Through Hell, Overcome Anxiety, and Dominate in Business and Life***.

The keys to success and peak performance aren't what you think

The more you work and the more effort you put into a project, the more successful you'll be — right?

Maybe not. Consider this.

- For men and women, a 25-hour workweek led to top cognitive performance. Working more than 55 hours per week resulted in the worst cognitive functioning among workers.¹
- People who took fewer than ten vacation days per year had a 34.6 percent likelihood of receiving a raise or bonus in a three-year period, while employees who took more than ten vacation days had a 65.4 percent chance of receiving a raise or bonus.²
- Employees reported managing their time better, being more productive and feeling happier on days they exercised than on days they skipped the gym.³

The message this research suggests: if you prioritize your rest, recovery and downtime as much as you do your working hours, you can be more productive and enjoy greater success. Time with family, regular vacations and exercise are not just “nice” activities — they can actually fuel your peak performance.

Add through subtraction

To reclaim your time and rebalance your life, you must realize that the things you don't do can be just as important as (if not more important than) the things you do. Rather than trying to add the newest, latest “secret to happiness” into your life, look for ways to trim existing fat.

Example: make a clear list of boundaries and parameters that determine what habits and activities you will and will not allow into your life. This means creating a comprehensive plan to eliminate — or at the very least, significantly reduce — everything in your life that is not serving your highest vision. Here are some examples.

1. Eradicate what you hate

To reduce work hours and reclaim control of your schedule, stop doing the work that you hate. There will always be aspects of life that you don't enjoy but have to do. However, there is a fundamental difference between necessary evils and unnecessary tasks that drain your mental and emotional reservoirs.

- **At work.** If there are certain weekly meetings you have or reports you produce that aren't necessary or that could be done less frequently, lobby to make those changes. This is easier to do if you're an entrepreneur calling the shots, of course — but you can also pursue these changes within the company you work for by enlisting other senior co-workers and supervisors. You may be surprised by how much control you can exert over your workload and professional commitments.

¹ Shinya Katitani, Colin McKenzie and Kei Sakata, Use It Too Much and Lose It? The Effect of Working Hours on Cognitive Ability, Panel Data Research Center at Keio University, March 2017.

² Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan, The Data-Driven Case for Vacation, Harvard Business Review, July 13, 2016.

³ J.C. Coulson, J. McKenna and M. Field, Exercising at work and self-reported work performance, International Journal of Workplace Health Management, September 2008.

- **At home.** List the most time-intensive tasks in your personal and family life. Of those, determine which ones you hate to do and could outsource to others, and which ones you could eliminate from your life entirely. Would freeing up the time you work on your landscaping enable you to accomplish what you most want in life? Do you have to attend every event or say yes to every birthday party your child is invited to?

Pro tip: even if you can't eliminate everything you hate, you can probably reduce the frequency with which you have to do those tasks. That alone might save you two to three hours a week as well as many more hours by protecting your emotions and willpower from the "energy vampires" in your life. The end result can be more energy, motivation and enthusiasm to tackle the rest of your day.

2. Stop doing things no one should do

We all take steps in our lives, our careers or our business that just don't generate meaningful results and don't need to happen. And yet, so many of us are "people pleasers" who can't say no to an "opportunity," an event or a request for a favor. Ask yourself: what obligations have you taken on in your professional or personal life that are unproductive and don't need to be done at all?

Bonus. Ask your family or team to audit their activities in this way. Chances are, everyone around you is doing something that if they stopped doing it would not hurt outcomes — but would save them a ton of time.

Identify these activities and eliminate them. And invest those extra hours into work that matters — or take that time and invest it in yourself (e.g., finally getting to the gym) or time with others (e.g., spending time with your kids).

- **At work.** Eliminate those "meetings to schedule meetings about scheduling meetings." Instead of surfing the web when you're bored, get up and take a walk or do deep-breathing exercises.
- **At home.** Stop checking your email or social media "just one more time" 15 minutes before bed. And should you really watch that second, third or fourth episode on Netflix? Another time trap: cleaning the house before the cleaners come because you don't want the cleaners to see the house when it's not clean!

Non-negotiables: build walls, boundaries and bumpers around your time

Once you taste success in a business or personal endeavor, it can quickly become addictive. Suddenly, there are more milestones to hit and a list of reasons why you can't possibly take time off to enjoy your accomplishments.

Sound familiar? If so, you need what Ballantyne calls non-negotiables: nonwork activities that excite and recharge you. Examples may include promising your spouse a weekly date night every Tuesday at 6:00 p.m. — or investing in a professional guitar teacher and scheduling in-person lessons every Wednesday at noon.

Without these types of non-negotiable boundaries in your career, you risk getting stuck in a pattern of perpetual workaholicism with no end in sight. Without these non-negotiables in your life, you can find yourself mired in an endless list of tasks and to-dos without ever making time for the things that really count.

The reason: we tend to not take promises we make to ourselves seriously, preferring to negotiate with ourselves when it comes time to take the actions necessary to bridge the gap between what we want and how to get it. For example, have you ever said anything like the following statements?

- “I know I said I was going to exercise today, but I just feel so tired ... I think I’ll skip it today and do it tomorrow.”
- “I know I should be a better partner and prioritize time with my significant other, but I just have a lot on my plate right now, so we’ll skip date night this time and do it next week.”

To break this pattern, you must realize that you are not the “lawyer” of your life — your job is not to defend different positions and exonerate criminal (or, in our cases, counterproductive) activities. Instead, you are the dictator of your life. Non-negotiables are not things you “should” do. They are things you must do, no matter what. Once you’ve set them, there is no more mental negotiation.

The following are two of the biggest benefits of setting these non-negotiables in your life.

1. You eliminate the need for discipline.

If you are strategic with your commitments, they can become cornerstone habits that make everything else in your life easier. Some examples of non-negotiables include:

- I never, ever hit “snooze.”
- I never miss my children’s soccer games.
- I meditate for ten minutes per day.
- I eat five servings of green vegetables every day.
- I drink 16 ounces of water within the first hour after waking up.

Ask yourself: what are the things you struggle with most on a weekly basis, and how can you intentionally set non-negotiables to eliminate that struggle and make success automatic?

Example: if you struggle with binge eating late at night, setting two non-negotiables such as “I eat at least four meals with 30 grams of protein during the day so that I can stop eating at 7:00 p.m.” and “I do not keep junk food at my house” may make success more likely.

2. You set up bumpers to keep you out of the gutter.

Do you and your partner or family members talk about the dates or adventures you want to go on together — but it’s always “just talk”? That is what happens when we don’t schedule our commitments to what we want beyond our professional lives.

The solution: put your commitments on the calendar and set up painful consequences for failure. If your non-negotiable is a date night every Wednesday at 6:00 p.m., for example, let everyone know that you will not be available during that time and why — this creates pressure to keep your word. Or buy a huge mason jar and agree to put \$5 into it anytime you or your spouse talks about work after 8:00 p.m. (And agree to donate the money.)

Such non-negotiables can serve as bumpers to keep your life (and relationship) out of the gutter — just as bumpers at the bowling alley help keep the ball moving toward the pins.

The upshot. You need to intentionally design your life so that you have nonwork non-negotiable activities you enjoy doing. Without them, you will default to work mode and find a way to stay “busy” — even when it doesn’t serve you.

Make a list of all the hobbies for which you wish you had more time, all the people with whom you want to connect on a deeper level and all the things you want to learn. Then create your first round of non-negotiables. Try to come up the following.

- One health non-negotiable (“I will do some sort of physical activity for 45 minutes at least three times a week.”)
- One relationship non-negotiable (“I will take my spouse/partner on a date night every Thursday at 5:00 p.m.”)
- One business non-negotiable (“I will take business calls and meetings only after 11:00 a.m. so I can devote the first two to three hours of each day, when I do my best thinking, to top business strategies.”)
- One personal non-negotiable (“I will wake up no later than 6:00 a.m. every day.”)

Take action now

No one else will fight for your time and energy as well as you can — it’s up to you. Ask yourself if it’s time to make some key changes in your life to reclaim your time and strike the right balance between work and life. Both your loved ones and your bottom line might thank you if you do!



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