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Work-Life Balance? How?

You hear it everywhere. It could be in an office environment, a casual lunch conversation, or at a cocktail party. It has become quite normal to listen to people say “I work 70 hours per week.” The really amazing thing is that it doesn’t sound like a complaint. Quite the opposite. People are actually bragging about working too much ... there is *pride* in their voice...

Of course, with all the technology available today, working hours are not limited to the office anymore. As workers leave the office they continue checking their email on their smart phones and tablets and all sorts of other gadgets and electronic devices. They do it on the subway, the train, or even as they are stuck in traffic on their way home. With the internet, tablets and laptops, employees continue to fine tune that presentation or report from their home, an airplane, a restaurant, a coffee shop . . . from anywhere. This very newsletter is being written 37,000 feet over the Atlantic. The most amazing thing is that in most cases nobody is forcing us to do so. We are imposing these crazy schedules upon ourselves!

So, how much do we work and how much do we rest? Before going further, some context is required. In the USA, most companies do not offer the generous vacation benefits offered by their European counterparts. On top of that, some of the most competitive economies in the world (Holland, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Denmark and the UK) have outlawed demanding more than 48 hours per week. In Europe, you just don’t see the 60 plus hours per week that have become so common in the USA.

There is another cultural dimension which makes a big difference here. While it is common for some workers to eat lunch at

their desk (for instance, in New York) while continuing to work, in other cultures (Latin, for instance) lunch may be a leisurely affair, taking an hour or more. We like the idea of the lunch break, disconnecting from work for a while. However, that comes at a cost: your work will still be waiting for you at 5 . . .

Finally, organization skills (or lack thereof) could determine shorter or longer hours at the office. Of course we understand that an exception is required during budget periods, an important promotion or campaign or any other special event.

Some months ago, as Facebook was preparing its IPO, the press was covering the transaction and there was a lot of attention paid to the fact that Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer, normally leaves the office at 5:30 p.m. to be with her children.

What about other parents—mothers *and* fathers? What about employees without kids? Are they expected to work longer hours? Do we really need to be checking our blackberries during dinner with friends and family members? Being passionate about work is really important. If that weren’t the case, it would only be a job. Where do we draw the line?

If you’re unhappy with the lack of balance between work and life, the following recommendations apply:

Get organized

Make the most of the time you spend at the office. Do you really need to attend every meeting in the building? Figure out what works for you and improves your productivity. Take advantage of the early morning hours when the phone is not ringing and the office is empty. If you have to go to a



meeting in another part of town, consider spending the whole day there, visiting colleagues, solving issues face to face (much better than email), and if possible, take public transportation: it allows you to check your electronic devices during office hours.

Improve your personal life, during the day

With all the technology available today, do you really need to go to the office? Working from home has its advantages, foremost traffic. Losing your commute can save more than two hours a day. Productivity requires rest. Many studies confirm that increasing the hours does not necessarily translate into productivity. Know your limits. Take the dogs for a walk. Play with your kids. Go to the gym. Have the discipline to both work and play.

Enjoy the freedom provided by the off button

Reduce your dependence on gadgets. Try it. Try the off button. If the world does not end try it for longer—during dinner, as you relax watching TV, at the movies, the opera, a flight, a meeting or while having an important conversation with a co-worker, or staff member. We've seen a jazz singer actually interrupt her performance and ask a group of businessmen who were conducting negotiations while she sang, to shut up, turn off their phones and enjoy her show. Or at least allow others to do so.

We understand that a lot of people complain about the amount of hours they spend at work . . . we are sorry this newsletter has focused on the other group, however we are sure that the above recommendations are valid for *both* groups. Give them a try. Let us know how it feels. Does it work for you? As for us, it's time to turn off our notebook and watch an in-flight movie . . .

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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