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Hartsfield
Planning

How to get a better work-life balance

How do you rate your work-life balance? If you feel work has a negative impact on your personal life at times, you're not alone. It's increasingly common for workplace pressures to spill over into personal lives, whether that's checking emails outside of working hours or worrying about tasks that need to be done.

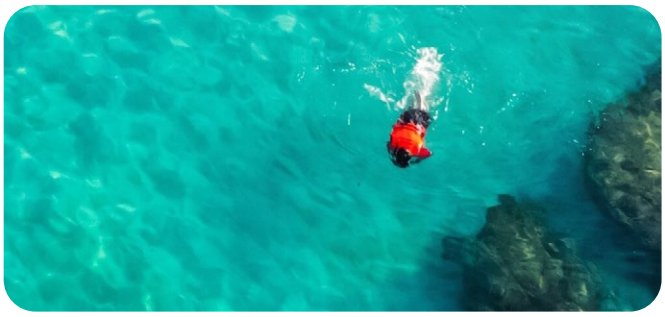
Not having a balance between work and personal life can harm wellbeing and lead to burnout. If you're unhappy with your work-life balance there may be some steps you can take to improve it and, hopefully, boost your overall wellbeing too. Striving for a work-life balance isn't something new, but research suggests work stress and expectations are increasingly having a knock-on effect on other areas of our life.

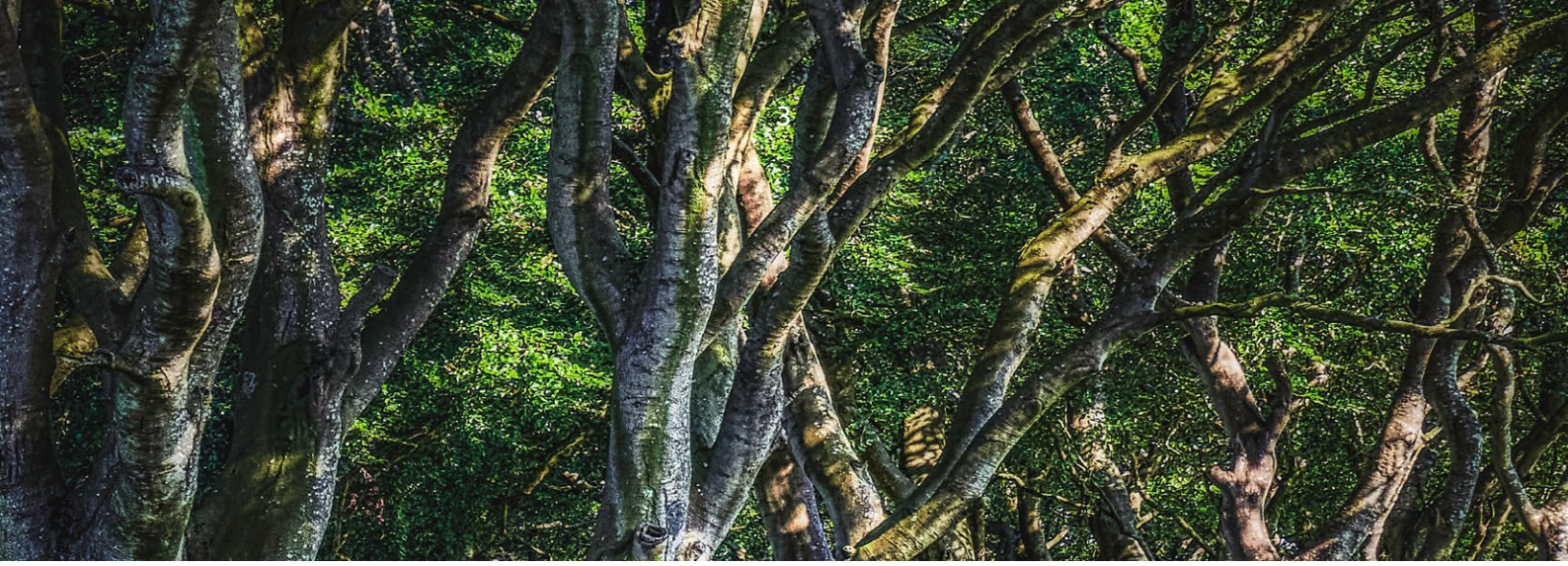
According to the CIPD, the professional body for human resources and people development, work has a positive impact on mental health for just a third (35%) of employees in 2020. This is down from 44% in 2018.

What's more, a number of employees said they were always or often at work:

- Exhausted (22%)
- Under excessive pressure (21%)
- Miserable (11%)

These findings were linked to 32% of employees saying their workload is too much in a normal week, and a quarter (24%) saying they find it hard to relax in their personal time because of work. With this in mind, it's not surprising that workers are looking for a way to adjust the scales to effectively balance working and personal lives.





1) Understand the work-life balance you want

The first thing to think about is the work-life balance that you want. There's not a single solution that will work for everyone.

Your work-life balance is simply how you divide your time and focus between work, family and leisure activities. But what is appealing to one person can be very different from what you'd like. If you think about the balance you have now, what would you like to spend more time on?

A positive work-life balance means you have time to dedicate to the different aspects of your life and can give them your complete attention when doing so. A negative work-life balance means you're not able to dedicate enough time to activities outside of work, but it can also mean you're unable to focus on other things even when you've stepped out of the workplace.

Signs of an unhealthy work-life balance include:

- Sleeping badly
- Feeling irritable
- Struggling to focus
- Not taking care of yourself
- Personal relationship suffering
- Anxiety
- Apathy towards work

If you recognise some of these from your day-to-day life, it may be time to reassess how you spend your time and 'switch off' from work. Understanding the work-life balance that suits you is essential for making progress.

Remember, there's no 'perfect' work-life balance and it's important to be realistic. Even when improvements are made, there will be days where you find work has a negative impact on your mindset, but this should be occasional rather than the norm.

2) Set clear working boundaries

Technology has brought many benefits to the working environment, whether that means it allows you to work from home or make it easier to connect with clients. However, it's also made it far more difficult to switch off at times.

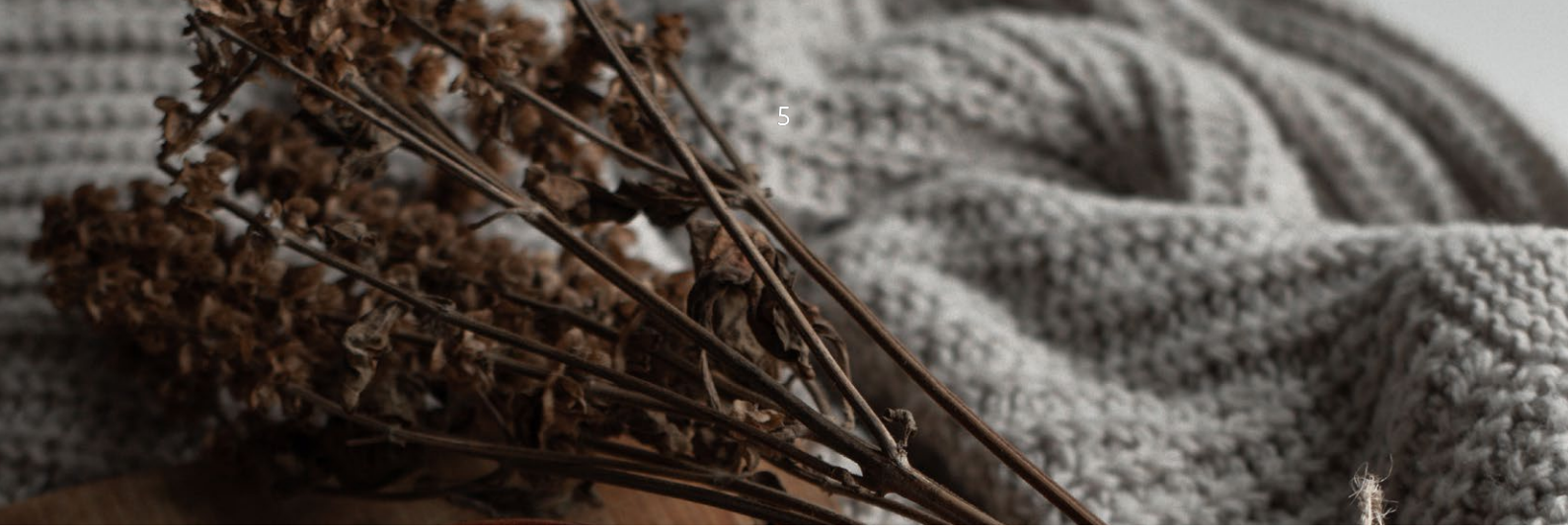
If you've checked emails at the weekend or taken work home in the evening, you're not alone. YouGov research found that 60% of employees that use email for work, check their inboxes while they're on holiday. This is despite the fact that eight in ten would prefer to 'completely switch off' when they're on holiday, rather than stay on top of what's going on in the office.

Staying in the loop or keeping on top of emails can help you feel more in control and lessen the workload when you head back to the office. But it's also a habit that can harm your wellbeing and seriously affect your work-life balance. Even a few minutes checking emails can mean that work has infringed on your personal life.

It's not just holidays where some employees find it difficult to 'switch off' either. Reaching for your phone during the evenings or when you're out with family can mean it's hard to create a balance between your work and personal life.

If it's something you do, setting clear boundaries can help. Taking work emails off your personal phone or not checking project updates outside of normal working hours are small steps that add up to improve your wellbeing. Being able to switch off in your personal life can make it easier to focus and boost productivity when you're working too.

Of course, there might be times where it's necessary to work out of office hours or be contactable. However, this should be an exception rather than part of your usual routine.



3) Explore flexible working options

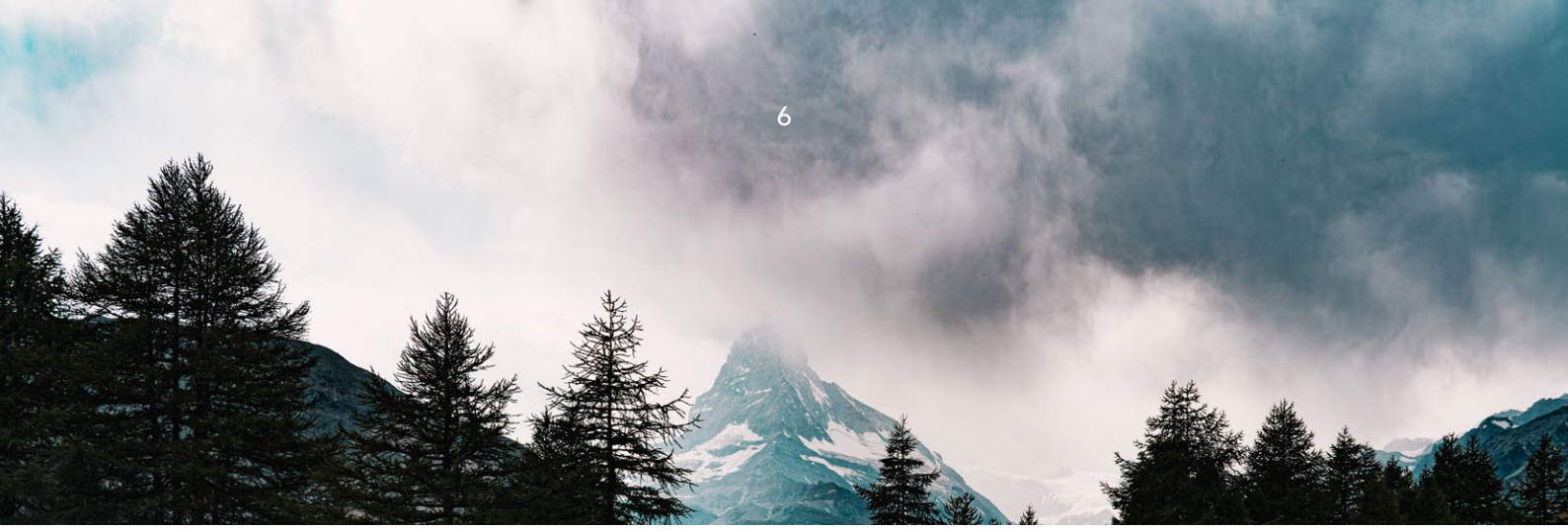
The coronavirus pandemic has been difficult for many businesses to manage, but it's also highlighted how flexible places of work can be, particularly for those working in an office environment.

Lockdown and social distancing restrictions lead to businesses assessing how they operate, with thousands of employees moving to home working for the first time. Research indicates that once the crisis has passed, working from home will become more common. It's expected the portion of people working from home regularly will increase to 37%, compared to 18% before the pandemic.

For some that have started working from home, an improved work-life balance has been one of the benefits. Without having to commute, for example, people are finding they have more time to spend with loved ones and on the things they enjoy without their productivity suffering.

Flexible working options aren't limited to working from home either. Flexible start times, compressed hours or part-time roles could help you create the work-life balance you want by freeing up time to spend on other aspects of your life. Three-quarters (78%) of flexible workers have said it's had a positive impact on their quality of life.

Flexible working may be a decision that's not entirely in your hands and may depend on your employer. However, growing evidence suggests employers are increasingly open to discussing different working patterns.



4) Prioritise your health

When we think of health, it's often physical health that we focus on. However, emotional and mental health is just as important. A poor work-life balance can affect all types of health, harming your overall wellbeing.

Two in three workers say they have experienced work-related health conditions in the last 12 months when asked. Anxiety and problems with sleeping were the most common issues reported.

If work is harming your health, for example, through excessive workloads, you may need to speak to your manager or human resource team to understand if there are any changes your employer can make.

However, there may also be steps that you can take outside of work. Ensuring you're eating properly, exercising, and getting a good night's rest, for instance, can boost your wellbeing. Steps to prioritise your health can leave you with more energy, allowing you to dedicate more time and focus to other areas of your life.

When asked how work is affecting life, stress is often one of the biggest responses from employees. Finding effective ways to manage stress can improve your health too. The above can help with this, but you may also find that practices such as meditation and mindfulness can support this.

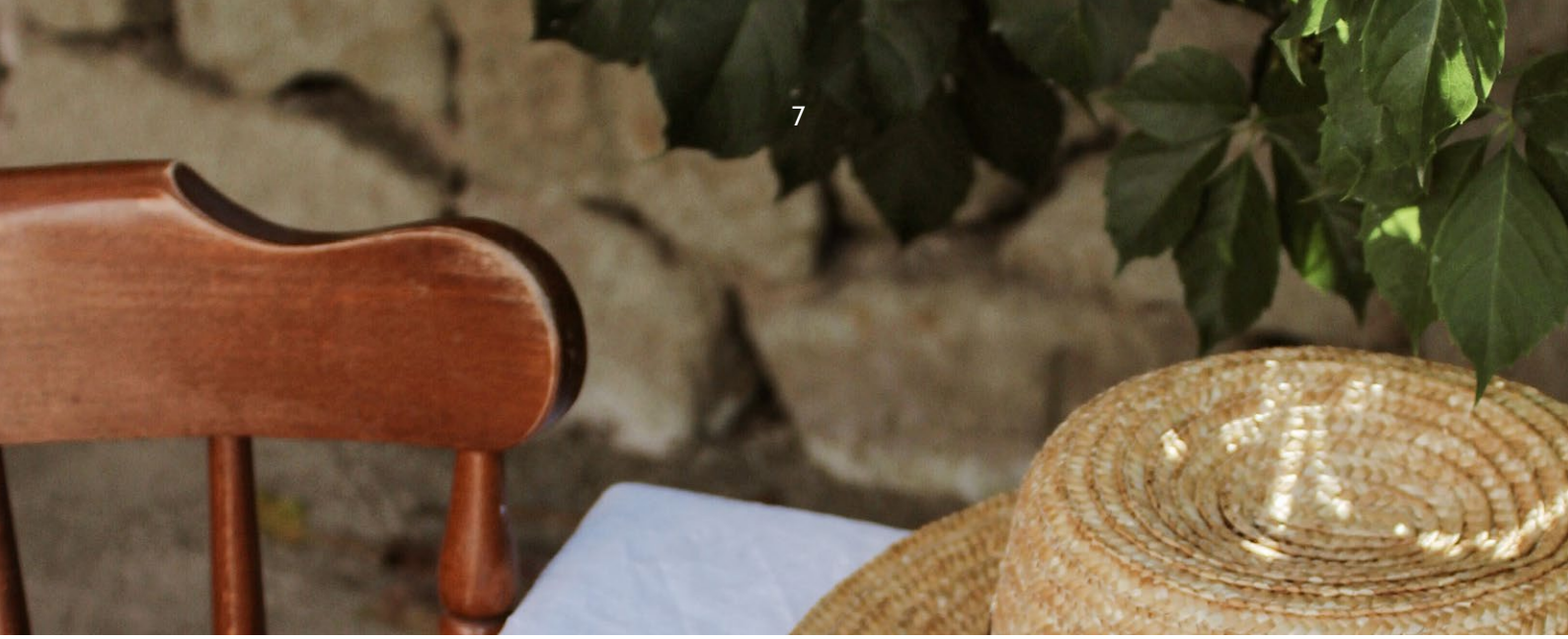
Prioritising your health can have a positive effect on your working life too. When we feel at our best, we're more productive, focused and creative. Making your health a priority is a win-win.

5) Make time for the things you enjoy and relationships

You wouldn't let leisure activities or relationships interfere with your working life. But all too often we let the opposite happen, whether working extra hours means you have to cancel plans or working commitments mean your focus is diverted.

Scheduling time for the things you want to do is part of the battle. While we often make a plan for how we spend our working day, it might not be something you often do in your day-to-day life unless you have a special event coming up. Setting out set times when you'll focus on a hobby, spending time with family and friends, or simply relaxing by yourself is important for creating a work-life balance that suits you.

Here, you should keep those boundaries you've set out in mind too. It might be tempting to reach for your phone to check emails when there's a lull in conversation, but try to focus on what you're doing.



6) Strive for financial freedom

While your financial situation isn't central to creating the work-life balance you want, having financial security can provide you with more options.

You may want to cut back your hours, swap to a position that allows home working but a reduction in salary, or take some time away from the workplace altogether to secure the work-life balance you want. In some of these cases, you'll need additional assets to make up a shortfall in income. This is where a financial plan can help you strike the right balance for you.

If you want to take steps that would reduce your income to improve your work-life balance, it's worth assessing your assets. While you may think some options aren't possible, you could be in a better position than you think. This is where working with a financial planner can give you the confidence to improve your work-life balance.

Saving and investing can also give you more options in the future. You may be happy with your current work-life balance, but will this be the case in ten or twenty years?

As life changes, the work-life balance that we want may do too. For example, you may want the option to work part-time once you start a family or the ability to retire early to spend more time on other areas of your life. In these cases, having assets you can fall back on are vital for securing the work-life balance you want. As you plan for the future, you should keep this in mind.

7) Make lifestyle goals

We often set out goals for our working life, perhaps setting out to secure a pay rise or undertake professional development to learn new skills. But how often do you make lifestyle goals?

Having a plan can provide direction and help ensure you spend time working towards the lifestyle you want. That may be spending more time on a hobby, visiting new locations or ticking off bucket list items with family. It's a step that can help set out your priorities and make the most of your time away from work. With more focus, you may find it easier to unplug from work when you're doing things that help you towards your goals.

You don't have to set out rigid goals or strictly schedule time. However, setting out to visit a new place with family once a month or spending a few hours a week to improve a skill can still give you a nudge to spend time on the areas you want without being inflexible.

If you find you focus on work because you're striving to meet targets or goals, lifestyle goals can help to bring some balance.

Your work-life balance and financial planning

Financial planning can help you create the work-life balance you want. Not only does it help create a blueprint for financial freedom, giving you more options, but the process of creating a long-term plan can also help you understand what's important to you and where your priorities lie.

If you'd like to discuss your lifestyle goals and how financial planning can support these, please contact us.

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