

The secret to creating a great work life balance

Is your life
off balance?

How to manage
your time

An expert's
view

Finding your work life balance

Work life balance can be difficult to achieve when you run your own business, especially if you're a one-man band. The buck stops with you and it can be hard to switch off.

But many people go into business to improve their work life balance and to have more control. According to research by the [Federation of Small Businesses \(FSB\)](#), 69.4 per cent of small business owners started up so that they could have greater independence and freedom in their working life.

But it's not easy. The FSB research also shows that many small business owners work very long hours - 22 per cent of respondents said they worked more than 60 hours a week.

And thanks to technology, it's easier than ever to stay connected to your business - making it harder to switch off in the evening and at weekends.

The beauty of running your own business is that you make the rules. Everyone's work life balance is different. Once you work for yourself you can break out of the normal routine and make your work fit into your lifestyle.

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Work life balance

Is your life off-balance?

Increasingly, entrepreneurs achieve a balance by integrating work and home rather than ruthlessly setting boundaries. Being your own boss means you can make time to watch your kids in a football match or a school play more often than you might if you had a nine-to-five job. But this flexibility works both ways - you're more likely to have to catch up on work in the evenings and at weekends.

While many people have good intentions, work can start to take over. It's important to make sure you're not slipping into bad habits. Burn-out is a real issue for small business owners who have to juggle many different tasks. Overwork and stress can impair your judgement and make you less effective at work.

So it's vital to ensure you make time to do things that help you recharge - spending time with family and friends, getting regular exercise and focusing on outside interests from time to time.

13%

of business owners say they don't achieve a good work life balance

60%

admit spending more time holding their mobile device than their partner's hand

Is your life off-balance?

If you answer yes to most of these, you might need to rethink your work life balance.

01.

Do you spend more time talking to your work-related contacts on Twitter than you do with your real-life friends?

02.

Do you sometimes forget important family anniversaries?

03.

Is your diary only full of work commitments?

04.

Have you given up sports and hobbies you used to love?

05.

Do you sometimes forget to eat lunch?

06.

Do you find it hard to be parted from your phone and laptop - even late in the evenings and at weekends?

07.

Does your family see what you do as a constant intrusion?

08.

Do you sometimes go days without knowing what's in the news?

09.

Do you always talk about work at social functions?

10.

Do you spend holidays searching for a Wi-Fi connection?

How to get the balance right

Make your own rules

The joy of working for yourself is that you are in control. You can work in a place and at a time that suits you. If you are a consultant working from home, for instance, you might find you do your best work in a local coffee shop. If you've got children, you could work until 3pm so that you can pick them up from school. There is no one-size-fits-all approach - every person is different and every business has different demands.

Set boundaries

Even if you are comfortable blurring home and work, it's important to set some limits. You could make a particular time every week for a family outing, exercise or a hobby.

Work, rest and play

You've got the work part covered, but are you getting enough sleep and doing regular exercise? It's important to look after number one. After all, the business depends on you - so you need to be in good physical and mental shape. Long-term stress can lead to poor decision-making. At worst it can cause depression, high blood pressure and even increase your risk of heart attack and other diseases. Look out for signs of burn-out such as irritability, sleep problems and an inability to switch off.

Remember why you're doing it

Money is not always the main motivation for starting a business. But once it's up and running, you can easily become focused on financial success above everything else. That's understandable. But it's worth reminding yourself why you set up your business in the first place. Happiness, control, professional satisfaction, flexibility - these are often key drivers for small business owners but it is easy to lose sight of them. Making small tweaks to your work and life balance can help to make sure you get all the things you were searching for when you first became your own boss.

Schedule everything

Put everything in your diary. So if you have promised your family that you'll be home for dinner, write it in the diary. If you like to run or cycle regularly, put that in the diary too. If you schedule it, it becomes a priority. If you see non-work activities as optional extras, there's much less chance you'll fit them in.

90%

of small business owners admit to taking work home

91%

of business owners said "they work weekends"

63%

of people check their work email every 1 to 2 hours whilst at home or at weekends

53%

of people said they often deal with business issues during family gatherings and meals

57%

of owners give priority to their business over their physical health

Ask for help

Running your own business is a big responsibility and most small and micro-business owners have to take on a whole variety of different jobs. Add in family responsibilities and you can quickly become overwhelmed. The answer is to ask for help. You could delegate one aspect of your business to an outside expert such as an accountant or a marketing consultant, or you could take on an intern. At home, you need to make sure you've got the support of your family.

Take short breaks

Time out does not have to mean whole days off. Even a five-minute walk around the block will refresh you. Giving your mind a rest is vital. Sometimes what you need to do your job better is to get away from your work for a short while.

Taking a holiday

If you are the business, taking a holiday is extremely difficult. So it's no surprise that many business owners see Wi-Fi as an absolute blessing. But if you want to benefit from your break, it's important not to operate on a business-as-usual basis when you are away. Check in with email and calls by all means - but try to schedule this for a specific and limited time so that you get the most out of your holiday.

Catching up out of hours

When there aren't enough hours in the day, small business owners often leave certain jobs for the weekends or evenings. Try to make this the exception rather than the rule if you want to have regular time off outside work.

Analyse your working habits

Try logging your hours and look at what you do when. Are you spending too much time on non-core activities or on tasks that you could delegate? Perhaps you are spending too much time helping clients that don't add much to your bottom line.

You could delegate one aspect of your business to an outside expert such as an accountant or a marketing consultant.



17%

of business owners
claim to work more than
11 hours a day

22%

report an average working
week of 60+ hours

How to manage your time

Don't take on too much

If you overbook yourself, you'll find yourself constantly fire-fighting. Not every opportunity that comes your way is good for you and your business. Learn how to say no.

Prioritise

Treating everything as top priority is impractical and exhausting. Make a plan and set realistic deadlines so that you can work smarter, not just harder.

Create effective systems

Investigate how some tasks that you do regularly can be done more efficiently. A good [accounts software package](#) is a real time-saver.

De-clutter

How much time do you spend every day looking for things? If you are drowning in papers, sort them out.

There's an app for that

There are lots of apps to help you manage your time. [Record Keeper](#), for instance, is great for keeping information on your costs and income, your tax and your expenses. Also, [Remember the Milk](#) is good for to-do lists, [Tap Forms](#) holds all your passwords securely and [Dropbox](#) allows you to manage all your files.

Do one thing at a time

Checking your email every time it pings is very disruptive. Have clear periods when you ignore emails or texts so that you can get work done that needs your total concentration.

Don't be a perfectionist

Good enough is often better than perfect. It means you can move on to the next task.

Make lists

Keep a note of all your tasks in one place, rank them in terms of importance and assess realistically how long they will take.

Watch the time

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that as long as you are working, you're making progress. But some tasks can eat into your day. Watch social media, for example - it's a great way to market your services but you need to be disciplined about how much time you spend on it.

Finish the job

Don't let lots of unfinished tasks hang over you. Try to complete tasks and move on - it's a more efficient use of your time and it's much more satisfying.



An expert's view



"Work life balance means different things to different people," says **Ian Sanders**, author of **Juggle: Rethink Work, Reclaim Your Life** and the forthcoming book **Mash Up**.

Balance depends on what your personal drivers are, he says. "A lot of people set up businesses because they are passionate about what they do - so working on Saturday mornings or in the evenings may not be a problem for them. It's your life and your balance - you have to do it your way."

"But being too focused can be unhealthy," he cautions. "You've got to know when you are so stressed that you are not being productive anymore. You need to make sure you are spending time with your family and looking after your own physical and mental health."

Work life balance is no longer about working nine to five though. "It's hard to separate work and non-work, especially when you are a micro-business or a one-man band," says Ian. "But what you get is more flexibility. You might be able to pick your kids up from school. But then you're likely to be sitting on the sofa at ten o'clock with the laptop on your knee."

Thanks to technology, the boundaries are blurring between work and home. And that allows business owners to manage their businesses 24-7. "For instance, my iPhone is my office," says Ian. "I can work anywhere."

Social media is also blurring these boundaries. "My clients often ask me whether they should have separate Twitter accounts for business and personal use," says Ian. "For many small firms, the owner is the brand, and it makes sense for them to have one Twitter presence."

Holidays can be difficult, says Ian. "On holiday, I check emails every day. I think a lot of business owners like the fact that they can stay connected."

"On one of my best holidays, I could only access the internet on the hotel computer so I caught up with work for half an hour a day and had the rest of the time off," he says.

Ian recommends creating a personal dashboard where you set out the things you want in life and the reasons why you are doing them. "You should write down all the things that are important to you, whether it is making money, creative stimulation, spending time with your kids or playing tennis. These are your definition of happiness and success. Then you can monitor this regularly to see how you are doing."

It's your life and your balance - you have to do it your way.

An expert's view

10 ways to improve your work life balance

01.

Create your own personal definition of success

02.

Set some boundaries and stick to them

03.

Schedule time with family and friends

04.

Take regular exercise

05.

Find ways to switch off mentally

06.

Watch for signs of burn-out

07.

Investigate ways to work smarter

08.

Take regular short breaks

09.

Get some perspective by talking to a mentor

10.

Remind yourself why you set up in the first place

To find out more go to:
sage.co.uk/discover

