



Keumars Afifi-Sabet

# Do we need to rediscover our work/life balance?

**Semi-permanent remote working means more blurred lines between work and home life**

**S**triking the right balance between your work life and personal life has always been one of the greatest workplace challenges, and it's one that's grown harder over time.

Emerging technologies have improved many things, including communication and access to data, but they've also made it more difficult than ever to switch off. Nevertheless, those boundaries have generally remained clear, with work consigned to set hours in a physical location away from home, sandwiched between a daily commute.

COVID-19 has all but wrecked our previous understanding of how to strike the ideal balance, with work invading our personal space, forcing many of us to adapt whether we were

ready or not. As time has passed, however, we can see that remote working has - for the most part - been a positive shift, with many employers deciding to offer it as a permanent option, or even as the default. Despite 82% of employees feeling they're either equally or more productive, working from home also represents the greatest threat to motivation. This is according to recent research from Adaptavist, which also suggests 60% of employees don't switch off work notifications outside of working hours, pushing them to be 'always available'.

## Blurred lines

With remote working surging in just the last few months, it could be tempting to see this challenge as a

more recent one. Stuart Duff, Pearn Kandolo's head of development and an expert on leadership psychology, however, sees this as an exacerbation of existing trends. "The lines between work and personal life were starting to blur before the outbreak of COVID-19, as more and more employees were requesting flexible and remote working," he says.

"When you go into the workplace, there are clear markers in terms of time that segregate our working and personal lives. At home, there are far fewer indicators that prompt us to stop working at a certain time."

CEO of PR firm Ballou, Cordy Griffiths, agrees that these trends have accelerated, due to the greater availability of technology, adding: "We became very aware of that at Ballou and took various precautions to ensure that our teams got proper downtime - banning WhatsApp as a way of communicating with each other was one of them."

As Griffiths recounts, many felt insecure about their jobs when the pandemic hit, so worked longer hours to demonstrate availability.

Duff spotted the same trend, adding that anxiety levels rose not only due to fear of job losses but also the unconscious pressures, such as receiving emails later in the evening or being the first to communicate in the morning. “Many employees will strive to go the extra mile, work an extra hour, and in doing so take on too many tasks,” he continues. “The only way to complete all of those tasks is to extend the working day, and it doesn’t take long for this to become an unhelpful routine habit.”

Continuing on this course, despite short-term productivity gains, may lead to a decline in productivity and potential burnout in the longer-term, according to Cate Murden, founder of the human behaviour-oriented business consultancy firm PUSH. “I learned this the hard way after being signed off from my media exec role of over 16 years,” she says.

“If you’re a workaholic or feel you can’t switch off your professional brain, your mental wellbeing will suffer.” This decline, Murden adds, manifests as a lack of concentration, frustration, and rising anxiety one may develop even by the thought of going to work.

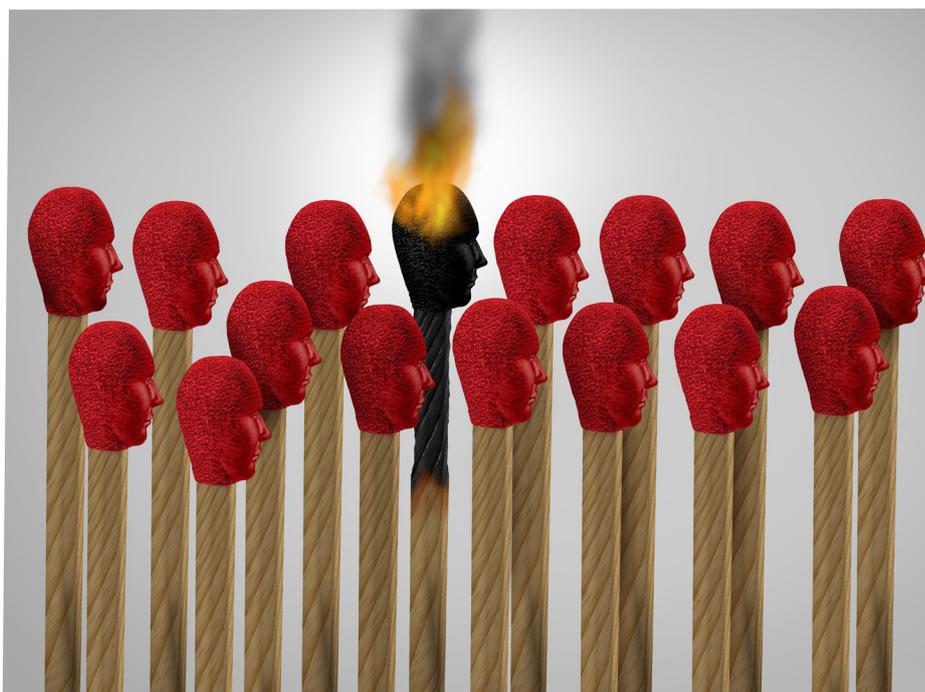
## Facing barriers

While the blurring of these lines may seem an unwelcome development, there are plenty of positives that have emerged.

The general 9-to-5 culture, for example, revolved around the need to be physically present in an office, but not everybody does their best work between those hours, and the greater merging of the two realms may actually benefit a significant portion of the workforce, according to author and entrepreneur Benjamin Drury, the Culture Guy.

“Personally I work better from 7am to 1pm and then I need a long break but can do some of my best work between 6pm and 9pm. After 9pm I’m done for, though, so my phone and my emails go off,” Drury says.

“If we allowed a blurring of the edges of work and life, if we expected



weekly hours delivered, but did not prescribe the specifics, then individuals working from home, can take a long lunch or have coffee with friends and then work later.”

While frameworks are certainly needed at times, people can generally be trusted, he adds. “I worked with one organisation who implemented unlimited holiday and fully flexible working times,” he continues.

“Both productivity and revenue went up, because if someone was at their desk, it was their choice, so they chose to do their job well.”

There are, of course, many people who will struggle with the freedom and need that clear distinction, so they will require the option of coming into the office to do their best work. Ultimately, it’s all about treating individuals like adults, and not resources, Drury stresses.

## Regaining control

This flexibility that the pandemic has given rise to can empower many among us to find our best rhythm. Whether you find the blurring of these lines a challenge, or you’re making the situation work for you, establishing a routine is critical to ensuring there is still an element of distinction. That way, you won’t allow yourself to get sucked into your work at the expense of your personal life, according to Murden. She suggests blocking out at least two 30-minute breaks per day

for walking, light exercise or perhaps meditation. This may encourage our energy and attention to fluctuate rather than staying static.

For Duff, it’s important to focus on what your priorities are, manage yourself, and make sure you maintain the best mindset possible to tackle your to-do list. “Your wellbeing and personal resilience should be a priority, as these will directly affect your energy levels, so it is important to switch off from work and allow yourself to recharge,” he advises.

“For example, one way to achieve this is to establish a clear cut off – close the door to your home office, shut your laptop and put it away at the end of the day. All this requires is determination and discipline, as well as a willingness to stop working at the right time.”

Employers certainly have a role to play too, and Griffiths suggests one quick-fix is to implement a rule that nobody should be messaged after hours.

“As the employer,” she says, “make it clear that you are not always on and you don’t expect other people to be either. If someone emails you at 8pm don’t reply, unless it’s urgent, until 9am the following morning. Replying after hours gives the impression that the employee is expected to be working the same hours as you. It’s the responsibility of an employer to respect these boundaries.”