

Living the WORK- LIFE BALANCE

Thought it was just a myth and you'd be a slave to your job, until retirement? Not necessarily, say the women who've cracked having a life, as well as a career

Words Jill Foster

Work/life balance: the Holy Grail, or yet another stick to beat ourselves with? Surely the phrase should have any harassed woman reaching for a glass of Merlot at the end of a frantic day? Google it and you get over seven million results. Everyone, from Gordon Brown to the TUC, is busy telling us how to achieve it.

But what does it mean? Work/life balance may be held up as the ultimate dream for working women everywhere, but can you honestly say you know anyone who has it nailed? Is it even remotely achievable? While, for most of us, it rarely feels like it, these women say it does exist. Whether single or married, mums or not, they have one thing in common: they're all busy. And, somehow, they've managed to strike the perfect balance between earning money and having a life. Here, they share their practical tips on how you can, too.



Make a date for everything

KEDGE MARTIN, 42, is CEO of WellChild, a UK charity for sick children. She is married to Stephen, 52, and the couple have two children, Venetia, 13, and Guy, 11. They live in Gloucestershire.

Four years ago, I was working 70 hours a week, seeing very little of my family and having no time to myself. One morning, as I sat on the train, which I had managed to catch by the skin of my teeth, I wondered how it was that I was neglecting my own kids, while running a charity

helping other children. It was then I decided I needed some work/life balance.

Now, I work at home on Fridays – not only to have the space to think and work without interruption but, much more importantly, to do the school run. I can drop off and collect the children, which allows for the most valuable moments, chatting

to them in the car. Although I still work long hours, I am rigorous about diarising my children's key moments. Everything, from their birthdays to school plays to dentist appointments, goes into the diary in advance – I block these times out and they're immovable appointments.



Stop being tied to your mobile

ARACELI CAMARGO-KILPATRICK, 28, is a creative director for NubaStar, a creative production agency. She is married to Marcus, 39, and lives in East London.

‘Until a year ago, I used my mobile for both work and personal calls, and was constantly stressed by work issues, during my private time. Because I’d feel lost if I didn’t have a phone on me at all, my answer was to buy a pay-as-you go emergency phone and only give the number to family and friends.

It means that, in my time off, I can turn off the work phone, leave it at home, and take the other one with me. On the work phone, I always make sure I leave a daily voicemail message, saying where I am and when I’ll respond to messages. It means I can relax and enjoy myself, while any client who rings me thinks I’m on the ball and professional, by leaving such up-to-date messages.’



Do the boring stuff online

SARAH DREW, 34, is general manager of theladders.co.uk, a senior careers service for executives. She is single and lives in North London.

‘Running a website means I’ve learned lots of time-saving techniques from the internet. Now, I save at least two or three hours every week, which means I can focus my energy on doing things I enjoy.

I always do my food shopping and banking online. My family live on the south coast and, rather than buying tickets at the station on a Saturday, I book them on thetrainline.co.uk and they’re delivered to my door. I often fly to New York, to meet with my CEO, so check in online at BA.com, to avoid queues at the airport.

I even use the internet for my social life. I never traipse around Blockbuster or Waterstones, but use Amazon.co.uk or Lovefilm.com. And I book dinners through Toptable.co.uk – it saves me ringing around restaurants to find a free table! ☛

Keep one day a week just for you

REBECCA GOURVISH, 30, is a nutritionist for Healthy Direct, and runs her own nutrition clinic, rebeccagourvish.com. She is married to Tim, also 30, and they are expecting their first baby. They live in Winchester.

Tim runs a café and works all day on Saturdays, so it makes sense for me to run my clinic on the same day. We keep Sundays just for us, making time for a walk, or a visit to the local farmers’ market. In the afternoon, we might meet friends for a pub lunch and then spend the evening, just the two of us.

I’m lucky, because I’ve also found that the secret to work/

Splash out on real luxury

CHRISTINA DE MERCADO, 33, is a designer at clothing label Frank Usher. She lives with her husband, Scott, 37, and son Benjamin, three, in North London.

‘My job involves lots of travelling and meeting deadlines. I love it, but I’ve been known to work past midnight and at weekends, too. Recently, we had a small dry sauna fitted in our flat. It cost a lot – just over £3,000 – so it’s definitely a luxurious treat, but it’s worth every penny. It’s the only place where I can totally unwind. I go in for 15 minutes, come out and take an ice-cold shower, then return for another 15 minutes and cold-shower again. I feel amazing afterwards. It has done wonders for aching muscles and my skin just glows. The sauna helps me sleep, which is important, because I get up early to spend time with Ben before dropping him at nursery.’

life balance is to make sure you do something you love – that way, it doesn’t feel like work. I’m passionate about health and nutrition so, even if I’m working hard, I’m doing

what I love. Cooking fresh meals is essential. I try to plan what to cook for the week on a Sunday night, and cook extra portions to freeze.

Don't try to do it all yourself

ANTONIA CHITTY, 37, is the author of *Family Friendly Working* (White Ladder Press, £9.99) and mum to Daisy, six, and Jay, two. She combines writing books with running her own PR business, ACPR. She is married to David, 39, and lives in East Sussex.

‘When I went back to work after I had Daisy, I thought working four days a week would give me some sort of work/life balance. I was wrong. I felt like I was doing a bad job at work, trying to fit five days work into four, and wasn't spending enough time at home, either. So, I set up my own business.

Based on my own experiences and those of the working parents I interviewed for my book, my biggest tip is don't try to do it on your own. If you feel your life is out of balance, get some advice. Talk to friends and find out what works for them. Speak to your employer about how you could alter your hours. Work out what is important to you and focus on that. Clean the house less often, or realise that it won't hurt to have beans on toast one night a week. And practise having fun. When work is trying to take over, make sure you play with the kids, or meet up with friends.’

Ask the experts

LAURA MACHIN, 38, owns her own life-coaching company. She lives with her husband, Steve, 46, in Leicestershire.

I had a successful 15-year career in human resources,

but I wasn't finding it fulfilling any more. Although I didn't physically bring work home, I found it difficult to unwind and I'd lie awake at night, worrying.

I'd always enjoyed the coaching part of my job in HR, but had never experienced

it from the other side, so I decided to give life coaching a go. I knew I wanted a better work/life balance but, like many women, I didn't know what that meant.

Talking to a professionally qualified life coach is very different to talking to a partner or friend. A coach is non-judgemental, and helps you to learn for yourself how to work towards your goals. I realised that it was possible to fulfil my dream of moving to the country, starting my own business and getting a dog!

As I'd got so much out of the sessions myself, I decided to train and qualify as a coach, while I was still working in HR. Combining the two was hard work, but very satisfying. Now, I've got my own company, my husband and I have moved to the country and I've got a golden retriever, called Bailey.

Fear can stop people from changing their lives. Life coaching made me see I was brave enough to make those changes.



Start early

KIM JOHNSON, 40, is founder of children's design and manufacture company littlehelper.co.uk. She is married to Sean, 39, and they have one daughter, Aimee, four. They live in South Yorkshire.

‘I make full use of the breakfast club at Aimee's school. I get her washed, dressed and take her to the school at 7.45am, and I can be back at home, working by 7.50am. I get more done in that one hour, before the phones start ringing, than in the rest of the day.

I also colour-code my diary: red for me time, green for Aimee time and blue for work. Only last week, I looked at the diary and realised there was hardly any red, so I put the balance right and had a night off. Every two weeks, Sean and I hire a babysitter, so we can have time together as a couple. It's important that you're not only a mum, but a wife and a friend, too.’

Learn to talk

NADIA FINER, 29, is the founder of the community website, moretolifethanshoes.com. She is married to Robin, 35, and they have a one-month-old son, Jacob. They live in Hertfordshire.

‘Because I work from home, I used to feel that, if I went out to meet people, I was wasting precious time. But, since I got pregnant and was forced to slow down, I've discovered the opposite can be true. Recently, I was

worried about the sponsorship side of my business. Feeling stressed, I went for a coffee with an old friend. As we got talking, it turned out he had looked after sponsorship in his old job – I had no idea! Now, he's helping me out, which has saved me loads of time.

Now, I make sure I chat to at least one person every day – you never know what time-saving opportunities might come your way.’