



Burnt out?



If your work/life balance is starting to tip in an unfavourable direction there are ways to stop school from taking over completely, says Kevin Harcombe...

I am willing to bet this year's budget surplus, admittedly – in these straitened times – just 27 pence, that 9 out of 10 teachers reading this article will have given a hollow, even bitter, laugh at the words 'work/life balance'. More printable comments might include "What's that when it's at home?" or "What life?!" Courage, mon brave, as someone once said in a dodgy French accent – work life balance can be achieved with a little planning and a lot of resolve. So, if your favourite song is *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now* and you keep a sleeping bag in your classroom "to save travelling time", read on!

Why is it important? People are any organisation's greatest expense and biggest asset. If they are too tired to be effective or in danger of burning out they undermine the whole organisation as well as themselves. Moreover, if potential recruits see burn-out in others they will go and do something they perceive as less demanding – like bomb disposal. Some teaching graduates never take up a post and, of those that

do, 1 in 5 leave after only four years in order to "have a life". This is a waste of investment and talent. Teacher workload gets little sympathy from non teachers – nor should it. The problem of balancing work and life is not unique to teaching. Don't gripe about it – take action!

Take Fridays off

Staff work better when you respect their right to a home life. My favourite management guru is Sir Gerry Robinson, who leaves work at 5 o'clock every day and believes Friday is for golf. Wearing garish trousers and hitting a small ball with a stick is not my thing, but the Friday off – once in a while – is an achievable dream. He also advises managers to take the hours they spend in meetings and halve them. My own staff meetings never last more than one hour, often less, and in report writing season they are ditched altogether. Even better, why not devote 1 in 4 staff meetings to "staff wellbeing", with things like wine tasting on the agenda.

Work to live

The macho culture, from business, that long hours equal value for money and duty done is fallacious. Fewer hours spent more fruitfully and leaving you fresh for the next challenge are much more effective than a 12 hour day running from crisis to crisis like the proverbial headless chicken. What about your duty to your family and to

yourself? (Family meaning anything from you + partner + kids, to you + goldfish). Your "me" time is important to you and those around you. Cherish it. I unashamedly work in order to live, though if I entered the lottery and won it I'd probably still work a few days because I actually think it's a great job.

Make time for yourself

5 WAYS TO STOP WORK TAKING OVER YOUR LIFE...

- There will always be more to do than there is time to do it. So prioritise. If something is not going to have a positive impact on the children – their learning and their safety – you almost certainly shouldn't be doing it.
- Always take a lunch break – if you're tired, hungry and bursting for the loo you will not be effective.
- Heads – set an example to the rest of your staff – do a good job and go home at a reasonable time. Empower other people (see last issue's article on distributed leadership).
- Note down the top three barriers to a healthy work-life balance and plan how you intend to address them – and by when!
- Don't check your e-mails every five minutes – it's a work avoidance tactic and they are seldom absolutely urgent – twice daily is fine. Kate Moss or Johnny Depp will understand if you don't reply straight away!

Don't check your e-mails every five minutes – it's a work avoidance tactic



The Perfect pow-wow

HOW TO HOLD A SUCCESSFUL MEETING

- 1 Beforehand ask, "do I really need to meet – will a note do?"
- 2 Always finish before the allotted time
- 3 The allotted time should never exceed one hour
- 4 Cut the crap – the "interesting" anecdotes, the digressions, the going round in circles after a decision has already been made
- 5 Make meetings businesslike. Never hold them in staff rooms with comfy chairs, classrooms are a much better bet
- 6 Afterwards ask what the meeting achieved. If the answer is nothing, very little, or, worse,"I don't know", you have just wasted an hour or so of your and everyone else who attended's life!

A Ferrari would be fun but a Ford Focus gets you there just as well

Bin it

DON'T GET BURIED BY LETTERS AND EMAILS, FOLLOW THE FOUR DS...

1. Do it – straight away
2. Ditch it – I count it a good day when most of my mail can be filed in the bin
3. Delegate it – don't try to do everything yourself
4. Delay it – some things which initially seem problematic resolve themselves after a few days

Watch the clock

Do a time log (whoever says I haven't got time to do a time log is on detention!). You may arrive at school at 7.30 but what do you actually achieve before the children turn up? If you spend half an hour chatting to colleagues about last night's TV and drinking coffee, that's cool – a good way to ease yourself into the day. But it isn't work so don't count it as such. Divide the day into 15 minute or half hour chunks and carefully and truthfully log how you spend it. Reflect on the value of the things you have done and identify which have given you the most (and least) professional satisfaction and which have had the most positive impact, the idea being to plan to eliminate the negative or wasteful. Could those 15 minutes fighting a losing battle with a temperamental photocopier have been delegated to someone who knows how to sort the darn thing? Were the three hours you spent planning well spent? Was it not fine after one hour? Sometimes things don't have to be absolutely perfect, just good enough: a Ferrari would be fun but a Ford Focus gets you there just as well.

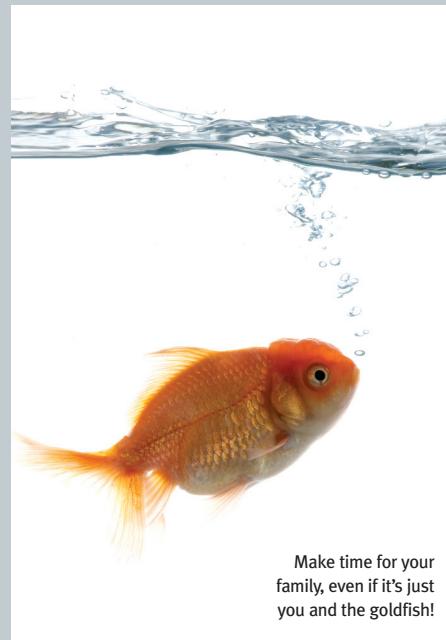
Plan your days in a diary, allotting time to each task and review at the end of the week how well you kept to it, what barriers got in the way and how you might remove them. Beware being ambushed by Time Thieves – people who distract you from your core purpose ("Can I see you for five minutes about the quality of the sausage casserole the children had last week?").

How balanced are you?

1. HOW MANY HOURS A WEEK DO YOU SPEND WORKING?
 - a) 36
 - b) 46
 - c) too busy to count but may I have a set of keys so I can come in at weekends, please?
2. HOW MANY WORK-FREE WEEKDAY EVENINGS AT HOME DO YOU HAVE?
 - a) 5
 - b) 3
 - c) "Can you explain 'work-free', please?"
3. WHICH HOMECOMING SCENARIO BEST DESCRIBES YOUR OWN?
 - a) You arrive home at 5.30 and sit down to chat leisurely with your family (or goldfish) before eating
 - b) You arrive home at 7.00 but relax knowing you have no more work to do tonight.
 - c) You arrive home after everyone else (and the goldfish) is asleep – and the milkman hands you a pint on your way into the house.

HOW DO YOU RATE?

MAINLY AS – Congratulations you have a good work life balance. Is your name Gerry Robinson?
MAINLY BS – Not awful, but promise yourself to get home an hour earlier on two days each week
MAINLY CS – You are an incorrigible workaholic and your goldfish is scouring the "bowls to rent" ads, prior to leaving you.



Make time for your family, even if it's just you and the goldfish!