



Wisdom of the Crowd

Our resident Agony Aunt offers guidance on the key questions bothering early-career researchers, with additional advice crowd-sourced from Twitter. In this edition: Work-life (or, life-work) balance!

BY RACHEL HARRISON

While conducting some highly scientific research in preparation for writing this article (read: googling the phrase “phd early career work life balance” and scrolling through the results while watching *Making a Murderer* Season 2 on Netflix) I was slightly alarmed to notice that the titles of many blogposts and news articles on the subject included phrases such as “is it possible?”, or simply consisted of the words ‘PhD work-life balance??’. It didn’t fill me with confidence when embarking on writing an article giving tips for achieving work-life balance, to first read a number of articles suggesting that such a thing doesn’t exist.

So, given that work-life balance in academia is so elusive that some appear to doubt its very existence, how does one go about achieving it? I have some ideas of my own, but also took to Twitter to

crowdsource some good tips.

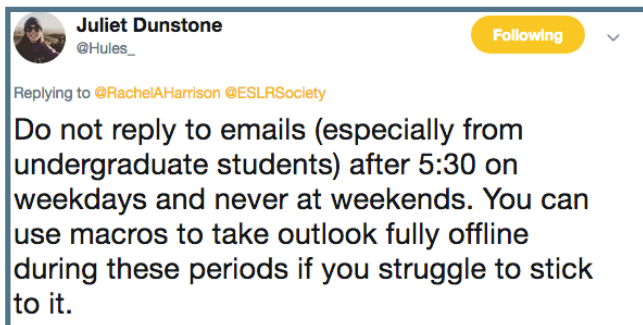
Personally, I think one of the keys to achieving a balance between life and work is successfully separating the two. What does this mean? Try and keep your work out of your life – no evenings spent half-reading a new publication and half-watching *Strictly Come Dancing* with your flatmates or family. In the immortal words of Ron Swanson, “Never half-ass two things. Whole-ass one thing”. This advice holds especially true if one of the things you are half-assing is your leisure time.

If you have an office or desk at your research institution, *use it*, or find a cubicle in the library, or construct a designated work-space at home. A designated work-space can definitely be your kitchen table. It probably shouldn’t be your sofa or your bed. “But, Rachel!” I hear you cry, “I know

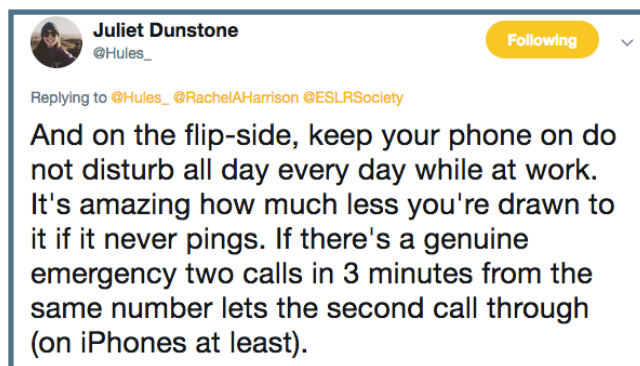
Agony Aunt

Work-life balance

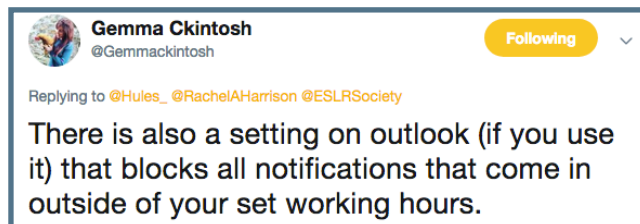
for a fact you wrote whole sections of your thesis in bed with *Gilmore Girls* on in the background!” *Shhhhh. I’m older and wiser now. Do as I say, not as I did.* Creating physical separation between your work and non-work spaces makes it far more likely that you’ll successfully leave work behind at the end of the day and take a proper break. It also makes it more likely that you’ll *do work* when you’re *at work*. If you find that you struggle to leave work behind, I find that making a list of tasks for the next day is helpful. About 10 minutes before leaving for the day, simply write down a list of things you’d like to achieve the next day - a paper to read, emails to reply to, an analysis to run - and leave it on your desk for the morning. Not only do I find that this helps me get off to a more purposeful start the next day (time to start ticking things off the list!), the act of writing out the list also seems to take some of the anxiety out of leaving work with tasks still unfinished.



Work-life separation came up repeatedly on Twitter. Juliet (@Hules_) suggests that you don’t reply to emails after 5:30pm on weekdays or at all on weekends – and both Juliet and Gemma (@gemmamackintosh) point out that Outlook can be adjusted using macros or settings to take it offline outside of work hours or block all notifications outside working hours. Juliet also highlights the flipside of this rule – putting your phone on do not disturb during the workday to reduce distractions. Liz (@LRRenner) recommends that you don’t spoil your holiday time by taking academic books along. As someone who has carried academic books, unread, around multiple countries over the last few years, I heartily agree. Grab something at the airport bookshop and relax.

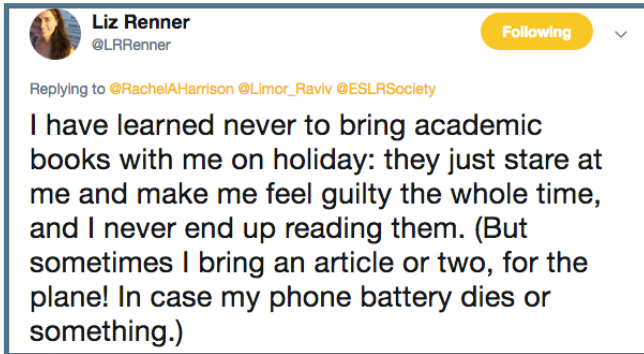


Both Juliet and Liz also point out that, aside from promoting a better balance for yourself, following some of these tips for separating work and life can also help you to set a good example for others. Replying to emails from undergraduates (or others earlier in their career than you are) at 11pm on a Saturday sets two expectations – one, that you’re available at all times, and two, that it is normal for researchers to work at those hours. Of course, one of the benefits of being an early career researcher is that it may offer you greater flexibility in terms of working hours than other careers. If 11pm on a Saturday is your best time to reply to emails, add a short disclaimer – “My work pattern means that you might be receiving this email outside of standard working hours. I don’t expect you to reply outside of standard working hours; Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm”. You can also use apps like Boomerang to schedule emails; so even though you wrote your response at 11pm on Saturday, it won’t get sent until 9am on Monday. As Liz points out, your supervisor’s expectations can have a big impact on whether you can achieve a good balance. If you’re currently applying for PhD or postdoc positions, ask around and make sure that their expectations are reasonable and that they will work for you.

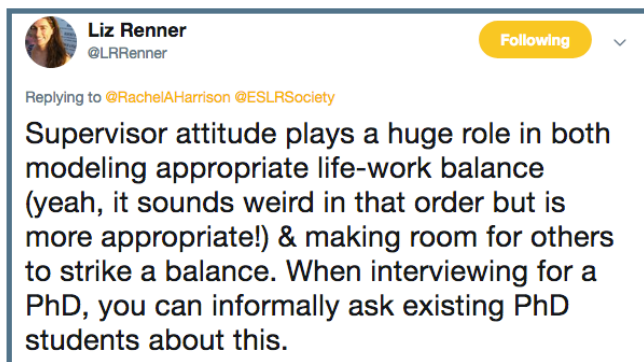


I once knew a PhD student whose supervisor strolled around the office at 9am each day to check

that everyone was there - that sort of structure and accountability might be just what you need, or it might sound like the stuff of nightmares. In either case, good to know in advance!



There's a lot more to be written on this subject, and I feel like I've barely scratched the surface.



There are as many ways of achieving a good work-life (or life-work) balance as there are people attempting to do so. Everyone has different goals and different commitments, and so what works for one person may not work, or may not be feasible, for the next. Still, I hope that some of these tips will work for you, or at least prompt you to think critically about your own work-life balance and make some intentional choices to achieve the best balance for you. □

If you have some tips for achieving a good work-life balance, advice on other aspects of being an early-career researcher, or a question you'd like to see answered using the Wisdom of the Crowd, email me at journalsec2@eslrsociety.org or drop me a tweet at @RachelAHarrison

Announcements



Fellowship call

The Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse (IAST), interdisciplinary Institute, welcomes applications from researchers from a large range of disciplines, including Evolutionary Biology. We seek candidates with a strong research background in their own discipline, but willing and able to develop research projects drawing on IAST's substantial interdisciplinary resources, including particularly the proximity of strong groups in economics (Toulouse School of Economics, TSE). We are open to a variety of research methods, including theory, field and laboratory experiments, observational field work, and the analysis of large secondary data sets. All research interests relevant to the broad study of human behavior are welcome, but interests close to those already developed at IAST will be given special consideration, including theoretical models of evolution, the family, sexual selection, evolution of cognition. Anticipated start date: September 1st, 2019. For information and applications visit iast.fr/apply.

