

## **Ask a silly question...**

Every so often, the institution in which I work sends out a staff survey, I think from a completely genuine wish to do all they can to promote welfare and well-being amongst us who work here. The survey received by academic staff this month, like many before it, seemed obsessed with the question of “work-life balance”. It is, when applied to academics, a concept that always confuses me. How are we supposed to separate ‘work’ from ‘life’?

Before I pursue this, let me get one thing clear. I am in no sense an ergomaniac (‘workaholic’) and I am not about to write one of those silly ‘you need to spend every waking minute in the lab if you hope to succeed’ polemics so frequently given to young scientists by their elders across the Atlantic. I do plenty of things beyond work: in no particular order I dance, I walk Scotland’s beautiful hills and coasts, I look after and cruise the now-75-year-old narrow-boat I have had since being a post-doc, I keep a small fleet of ancient vehicles on the road (my everyday car is now 30 years old, and the fun ones somewhat older), I build ridiculous electronic devices, I set radio stations up on mountains to talk to others similarly obsessed (and have literally written the book on this odd hobby – see links), dig for fossils and look up to the stars and, most importantly of all, I spend time enjoying the company of good friends. So no, I am not always in the lab and I don’t think anyone else should be. For quick bursts of enthusiasm, yes, but not dawn-to-dusk month-in, month-out. And I have nevertheless managed to blunder into a few interesting facts about how life organizes itself, and to report them in various research papers and books; one really does not have to be an ergomaniac to contribute something to the growth of science.

No, what baffles me is not that people are not in the lab all the time, but the idea that, for an academic at least, anyone can imagine that ‘work’ is not an integral part of ‘life’; to use an old-fashioned word, a vocation, a response to a voice within that says ‘I want to create’, ‘I want to understand’ or (for the medically inclined) ‘I want to heal’. When post-docs planning on an academic career come to ask me whether it is a sensible decision, I usually suggest a simple thought-experiment. Imagine, I say, that you take part in the Euro-Millions lottery and you hear you have won one of those massive jackpots of tens of millions of Euros. Do you say “Brilliant! I never have to work again and I can go off and buy a big villa on the Costa Bomba and laze about in the sun all day!” or do you say “Brilliant! I never need to write another <expletive> grant application and I can fund my lab to do all the really interesting experiments I have always wanted to!”. If your

immediate answer is the second one, you belong in academia; if it is the first, you may well be happier elsewhere where you can quickly make your millions anyway and retire to your favoured sunny place. Indeed, one PhD student with whom I had this conversation did take the advice, joined a far Eastern finance system, and had made his first million by the end of his first post-PhD year. Bright lad!

So that is the first objection to being asked to assess my “work-life balance”; work is such an integral part of life that my life, like that of most other academics, would be greatly diminished without it. If one needs more evidence for this, look at what academics do when they ‘retire’, and just how many research papers and books originate after they have finished officially ‘working’. And, at a logical level, clearly if one drew a Venn diagram to illustrate ‘work’ and ‘life’, the work part would have to sit within the life part anyway; none of us works when we are dead!

The second difficulty, even if the question were phrased as the balance between working life and rest-of-life, is in drawing the boundaries. A colleague recently told me about an idea she had – possibly a brilliant idea in my (inexpert) opinion – and toward the end of the conversation, when I (think) I understood the idea, I asked how she came up with it. It just came to her in the shower that morning. Was her morning shower work, then? Or rest-of-life? The modest ideas that sometimes cross my addled brain almost never come when I am trying to be creative (which simply does not work), but either when I am high on a mountain somewhere or, very commonly, when I am deeply involved in something else. Several times, when I have been in mid-battle with some ancient piece of machinery that seems hell-bent on being sent to the scrapyard to which its contemporaries disappeared decades ago, an idea for a new project, or a solution to a lab problem, has leapt into my head. I suspect at some level this is by analogy; my fighting with one very physical oily or solder-splattered problem has somehow got my brain thinking along somewhat abstract lines that it realizes can be applied to that other problem in the lab. Or it can be visual. I was recently looking through the site of a land-slip, combing over newly exposed plant fossils from a carboniferous forest; one moment I was looking at the boundary between the landslip and the normal strata and the next I was, in my mind’s eye, ‘seeing’ a pathology slide of a cancer, and in a more abstract ‘eye’ making a connection with a paper about measuring complexity I am working on with William Waites, and realizing that there may be a completely new, opposite-way-round-to-what-most-people-think, way of looking at cancer. Of course, finding out whether this is right and, if so, useful will depend on a lot more work (maybe it will turn up late in these blogs), but the point is that the

actual idea came on a Sunday afternoon solitary rural amble when I had no intention of doing any work at all. Not even looking at fossils; this was random chance built on random chance.

How, then, can I possibly give an answer about the balance between working life and the rest of life, even for a question better phrased than the current one? It is all fluid, all connected. We don't have a 'work brain' and a 'home brain'; we each have just the one lump of pinky-grey stuff in our heads, in which thoughts (whatever they are), memories, desires (whatever they are) and fears (ditto) all churn around and make connections when they will. "I" (whatever that means) do not control how these ideas awake and collide; if anything, they control me.

So I always end up, when faced with these survey forms, leaving the tick-box answers about work-life balance blank, and wishing it were possible to cram a reply such as this one into the boxes.

Much better, at least for academic staff, would be to forget all about the idea of a 'balance' of 'work and 'life' and the logical error it entails (back to the Venn diagram). Instead, ask people whether they feel their life as a whole is positive and fulfilling. Or, if the question really just means "do we work you too hard?", then just ask it that way. Although even that question is a bad one because, except for the modest demands of occasional teaching and marking, universities do not really 'work' academics at all; we 'work' ourselves because of that inner drive to know, to understand and in some cases, to heal.

Jamie Davies  
Edinburgh  
March 2019

Links:

- That book about mountain-top radio:  
[https://rsgbshop.org/acatalog/Online\\_Catalogue\\_Operating\\_DX\\_13.html](https://rsgbshop.org/acatalog/Online_Catalogue_Operating_DX_13.html)  
(scroll down to 'SOTA Explained').
- Or as an e-book, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B06Y1MX3CG>