

BLURRED LINES

WORKING FLEXIBLY HAS OBVIOUS ADVANTAGES, BUT INDISTINCT BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HOME AND WORK MEAN WE NEED TO LAY DOWN SOME GROUND RULES

Words: **ABBY DRIVER**

As those of us who have carved out a flexible work/home lifestyle for ourselves will know, it's not all cups of coffee in the garden and five o'clock finishes. "I live in a beautiful rural location and running my own business means I can be here instead of sitting in traffic," says Helen Campbell. "I feel like it gives me around two hours more each day. But I don't work a conventional week. I work flexibly across the seven days and use the evenings for networking, meetings and writing."

Helen is one of the 4.8 million people in this country who works for themselves. And they aren't just freelancers and business owners; over half of all employees now work flexibly, too. Then there are students, parents of young children, wannabe authors – the list goes on.

In order to become flexible, work and life become enmeshed. It becomes harder to untangle yourself; life gets a bit messy, and boundaries become blurry. "Work can colonise every aspect of your life," explains Dr Gail Kinman, professor of Occupational Health Psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, "even if you're not doing your job, you might be spending more time thinking about it." Few of us walk out of the office or shut our laptops at a certain time and finish work for the day. Our phones sit on the kitchen table pinging away while we're cooking, eating or catching up with our families, an ever-present distraction that's hard to ignore.

This can have a huge emotional impact on us. "People feel guilty because they feel they're not really doing the best job they can in terms of work and also in terms of being a responsive family member," says Gail.

ROUTINE WORKS

Whether you prefer clear-cut lines between work and life or near-total integration, we all benefit from some kind of boundary. The mechanics of when you work doesn't matter as much as establishing some semblance of routine. First up is your time. "The best thing to do is try and make a weekly plan on Sunday. When doing this, pay attention to your own diurnal variation; are you a lark or an owl? Respect that. Because it's very hard to change;

it looks like it's pretty biological," explains Linda Blair, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Key to Calm*.

While set hours might sound at odds with flexible working, some semblance of routine will create division between your work and life. "I always stop working at 5.10pm every Friday, an old tradition that harks back to when I was working in London running a small PR agency. We listened to Radio 2 and they always played the 'Mahna Mahna' song from The Muppet Show at 5.10pm every Friday, which meant the start of the weekend. Now it's time to relax with my husband," says Helen.

HOMEWORK

Working from home obscures the boundaries even further. Home – your sanctuary, a place to retreat from the world – becomes your workplace. "I read about somebody who advised wearing a coloured hat when you're working and your family are around," says Gail. "It's kind of semi-serious because your family need to know when you're 'Mum' and when you're working."

Carving out a physical space is a slightly less eccentric way to achieve this. Whether it's a dedicated office or a designated corner, Linda says it doesn't matter where, just avoid sofa-bed-desk hopping and stick to the same spot. The cues – the colour of the walls, the location of the clock – will all trigger 'work' and you'll be much more likely to get work done and, crucially, leave it behind.

Once you've decided on your boundaries you need to make them clear. The advent of technology means we all want everything now. Lynnette Peck found this when she launched her online shop, Lovely's Vintage Emporium. "I get messages and queries constantly, regularly at midnight. I hadn't thought about how to run a business and take a holiday – it's pretty much impossible and I now mostly go on long weekend breaks instead."

SWITCHING OFF

Managing other people's expectations as to when you're available is crucial, whether you're employed or working for yourself. "Every time we open our email our blood pressure and heart rate rise in anticipation. It's a little bit like gambling," says Gail. The answer? "Work out what

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