

Why it's now all about the **blend**

Forget striving for work/life balance, the hottest trend is 'living in the grey' – blending what you love with what you do for a living

INTERVIEW ANITA CHAUDHURI

Whenever people discuss happiness at work, it is only a matter of time before they mention the holy grail that is work-life balance. And like any meaningful goal, this is usually referred to in terms of a great quest, some kind of nail-biting mythic journey that might or might not end in success. But in an uncertain and fast-changing job market, what does 'balance' even mean, and do we really know anyone who has truly achieved it?

'I went down to three days a week in order to spend more time with my family, but I end up replying to emails from my boss six nights a week after the kids have gone to bed,' remarks Celia, a college lecturer with two children under the age of five. 'The thing is, I actually love my job. I'm not suffering when I'm responding to those emails, it's interesting and I like to feel my input is needed. Also, I have loads of friends at work, and they often text me with the latest gossip when I'm not around. Again, I really enjoy that. But I wouldn't say my life is at all balanced!'

There are plenty of statistics that indicate what percentage of our time is spent at work. But a more revealing one is this: on average, we now spend a sixth of our salary on work-related costs. Some of that goes on smart suits and train fares, but a lot also goes on lunches, birthday presents and nights out. For many of us, the office has become an integral part of our

social lives and it's where we meet many of our friends, not to mention romantic partners.

It's refreshing, then, to come across two American entrepreneurs who have started a social media movement aimed at changing fundamental attitudes about balance. 'Balance is, by its very nature, precarious – it's very difficult to achieve. The very concept just conjures up images of trying to balance a see-saw. How much time exactly should you spend on one thing or the other?' explains Maneesh Goyal, who runs events

marketing agency MKG. Earlier this year he founded Live in the Grey, a website offering 'inspiration, ideas and links to help you live,' with fellow marketing supremo David Munczinski. 'We launched Live in the Grey to inspire people to focus on blending work and play rather than balancing them,' says Goyal. He describes the 'grey' as

that fuzzy area between work and play. 'The goal is to mesh your work and personal life so that they permeate each other in a fulfilling way,' he adds.

He himself realised that he was not finding a career in public health fulfilling so began working at entertainment industry events for \$10 an hour to get a feel for the marketing sector. Fast forward 10 years and he has 70 employees and works for everyone from Google to Ralph Lauren to Evian. Although he has made a radical career change, he counsels against making massive changes overnight. 'It's OK to start small,' he says. 'Particularly when you're just starting >>>

«I actually love my job. But I wouldn't say my life is at all balanced»



>>> out, you need to be open to the idea that your career journey is going to have many different chapters. Your opening chapters are meant to be quite short, they're meant to be eye-openers.'

BLEND PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

The starting point for Live in the Grey's philosophy is to identify what you love doing. However, the approach is a long way from the simplistic career coaching wisdom of 'if your passion is baking, why not change career and run a cupcake business?'

'If you are working as an accountant, but you read baking blogs and invent cakes every night, find a way to integrate that into your workplace. It doesn't mean you need to become a baker,' says Goyal. 'For example, you could suggest to your boss that at the weekly meeting, you supply a dozen buns. Or if people hit a sales target, you could bake cakes as prizes. Not only is that going to be a treat for your colleagues, you'll discover that people will start to view you differently. They'll drop by your desk and ask about next week's cakes. That way you get to experience more of what you love and be seen for who you truly are.'

But Goyal stresses that the toughest part of this is actually having the courage to make the suggestion in the first place. 'No one is going to come knocking on your door asking you to bake or whatever,' he says. 'They probably have no idea it's even your passion. You have to take that risk.'

START WITH WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

Live in the Grey says it aims for Monday and Friday not to feel too different, which sounds quite a challenge. 'Ultimately, if the dread of a Monday morning is starting to seep in at about 3pm on Sunday, that is going to have an impact on your personal life, your fitness levels and how far you over-indulge in alcohol and other recreational behaviour. It's a sign you need to bring more of what you love to your job,' says Goyal.

'There is always a way. For example, if someone loves planes, but works stacking shelves in a warehouse, they might say to me that there's no way they have the skill or money to train as a pilot. Maybe not, realism does have to come into it. But they could perhaps focus on finding a job in a warehouse that serves the airline industry –that would be a start.'

LOOK SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE EYE

Goyal points out that many of us forget that we need to establish meaningful relationships with all those online friends and followers if they are to have any point at all. 'Social networks have become a numbers game, it's all about how many followers do you have, how many Facebook 'likes'. We believe online connections are only valuable if you look them in the eye,' he says. 'Who are these people? Are they mentors, role models, teachers, listeners or friends? Why are you connected to each person? You have to ask yourself how you can use these networks to benefit not just you, but other people too. You have to make yourself vulnerable, take some risks.'

EVERYONE MATTERS

Very often we fail to consider that the feelings and opinions of other people at work are important, particularly those who we see in unrelated or 'lowly' roles. 'We need to break down the barriers and see people first and foremost as human beings,' says Goyal. So yes, person A is the security guard or the secretary, but you should always relate to them as peers.

'They are still another human being, you should make it your business to know that their daughter is getting married in two months,' he says. 'Often we hold back our true selves when we're at work. You're not going to be productive in your business, whatever it is, unless you express yourself.' Similarly he suggests discussing work ideas with friends who are employed in an unrelated field, because the chances are they might have something we can learn from.

ACTIONS TRUMP INTENTIONS

Ultimately, to become happier at work, you have to *do* something. 'Identify those things you love doing so much that they don't feel like work to you,' suggests Goyal. 'For me, it was organising things, focusing on details and logistics. Then you have to do more of that. Ask yourself what is really holding you back? Sometimes we make our job the scapegoat for everything that's not working in our lives. It might just be that you haven't yet connected to the thing that really makes you fulfilled, and you might be able to find it and stay in the job you're in right now.'

For more information visit liveinthegrey.com



“Our lunch club is the only time we all sit down together during the week. We’re like a family, really”

Karine Aubry, 34, is a conference services manager at London South Bank University

The lunch club started totally by accident. I get a fruit and veg box delivered at home and one week in January I had lots left over, so I told my colleagues, ‘Don’t bring any food in tomorrow’ and I cooked ratatouille and soup and brought it in for everyone. One of my colleagues said, ‘Wow, that’s a great idea, we should do it once a month’, but it was so popular that we ended up doing it once a week.

There are six of us involved, and we take turns making healthy, homemade food. We’ve had lasagne, quiche, different types of soup – it’s great because we all get to try new things. One guy said that he didn’t like quiche so I made one but called it a tart and he

loved it! It’s quite economical too, and we often have leftovers that we can use the next day.

We’re a very busy team and we frequently eat at our desks, catching a break between meetings. This is one of the only times during the week that we sit down around the table together – we try to take the whole hour, and we try not to talk about work. We’re like a family really; we talk about what we’ve done at the weekend, showing each other photographs. We are sharing food but we’re also sharing ideas. One member has recently moved to London from Manchester, and she says it’s helped her to settle in. It’s brought us a lot closer together.