

Spinning plates?



Laura Horton offers advice on achieving harmony between work life and home life

Anyone who knows me or who works with me knows that I am a huge advocate of achieving an equilibrium between work life and home life. I spend time planning my own working hours and holidays to ensure that I am committed to my business while still having time to enjoy with my family. A stressed-out Laura is not a productive Laura, so both sides of the coin are equally important to achieve a healthy balance.

I have worked in dental practices and I am still GDC registered – I know the reality of

working in a practice, how tough your job is, and how hard you work. It is so intricate and the level of detail is unreal; it's exhausting. On top of that, you own a business and you do need non-clinical time as well, it's too much. This is why so many dentists are burning out at 40 and it's a shame.

As humans, we are all starting to understand that, while work is essential and achieving career goals is important, what is the point of a life spent purely working? Many of my clients now have a top priority of getting a better work life balance

for themselves – so many more dental professionals are seeking this way of life rather than working like crazy all the time.

Believe it or not, I've got clients where we've reduced clinical hours to just 29 per week. What would you say if I told you they are now more productive and they earn more in those 29 hours than they were in a five-day week? This is all because they have their head in the game for the right amount of time. So, how do we do it?

Focus your attention

There are numerous areas of our lives including health, money, career, personal development, home life, family/friends, social life, love, etc, and trying to keep every part nourished and healthy is a bit like spinning plates. You might find that your career and bank balance are flourishing, but your health and home life needs some extra attention.

So, how do we focus on the right areas? I like to use a technique called the wheel of life as it provides a visual representation of what needs a little more attention. There are some free online tools that will help you create your own wheel of life in a matter of seconds, such as www.wheeloflife.noomii.com.

It is important to understand that while we can get a better balance, there are often things that will have to give from time to time. For me, my social life takes the impact as my family and my work need my time. I am sure (I hope!) one day that will change but for now I don't mind saying that actually you can't have it all.

Start at the beginning

If you had the chance to go back and plan your career, what would you want it to look like? Start by deciding how many weeks holiday you want each year and then take action – plan it and take it out of the diary so that you know you have regular breaks – these are so important. You don't need to book anything just yet – you might even use the time to simply be at home – but blocking it out of the diary well in advance is key.

Then take a look at your working week and ask yourself whether it is really working for you. How much time do you want to spend in surgery? How much time do you need for non-clinical work? How many locations are you willing to work in? It's all about getting organised and being really comfortable with the decision that you make. Don't do what others expect you to, do what's right for you. It's a big thing to get the hours in the business right, there are processes to go through, but it can be done.

Holiday planning

I love a two-week holiday, who doesn't? However, the idea of taking two weeks out of the practice and away from the business is terrifying to many practice owners and/or managers, let alone associates who rely on the income. This shouldn't be the case and successful holidaying all comes down to excellent planning. No, I'm not talking about finding your perfect holiday hotspot and selecting flights with good times (that bit comes later!), I'm talking about diary management.

By the end of June 2017 I had planned my diary until January 2019. 2019 was planned by June 2018 and I am planning 2020 as I write. How far ahead have you planned your diary? While you may think I sound crazy, doing this means that everyone I work with knows not to book any meetings or client visits for me during this time. In addition, my husband is able to align his holidays with mine, and because we have promised not to stray from these plans we end up with time off together as a family.

Forward planning is crucial for gaining that all-important balance and ensuring you get those well-earned breaks that you truly deserve. Getting the time blocked out in your diary well in advance means your team can plan for your absence to ensure everything runs smoothly, and you won't have to cancel on patients in order to fit something in at short notice.

A joint decision

A happy home life means planning your work with your family in mind. If you have a husband, wife, or partner then it is important to discuss what will work out best for all of you. If you know you need to attend courses or exhibitions during weekends, plan those into your diary and don't sway from this decision. If lots of your weekends are currently filled up with work events you are not going to achieve a good work-life balance; re-evaluate which ones are most beneficial and only attend those.

With more and more dental events popping up than ever, it really is difficult to get past that fear of missing out. However, think about what you will actually miss... a special offer or a great lecture? Are these really more important than time with friends, a day spent with your partner, or taking the kids on a trip out?

Learn to say no

Whether it's to a weekend event, to an appointment during your scheduled holiday,

to some training during the evening, or to a project that you can't manage on top of your existing workload, understand that it's ok to say no. If you think something will affect your work-life balance, then don't do it for the sake of others. Saying no will simply mean an alternative solution will be found, saying yes will be a betrayal to yourself – and potentially your loved ones if it eats into your family time.

Leave work at work

At the end of the day, type up a list of things to do tomorrow, save it to your desktop and then turn off your computer. Watch it turn off. This simple act is the moment that defines the end of the working day and the beginning of home time.

When you are at home, be present. If you simply cannot ignore emails then schedule half an hour per evening to check and reply as required. For example, at 8.30pm once the kids are in bed. If something is urgent then people will find another way to get hold of you! Be just as strict during weekends too, your family deserve your attention more than your phone does.

Make it work for you

Working all hours until you are physically and mentally exhausted is no longer the benchmark of success. Doing this can cause harm both to yourself and to the practice. A fresh, rested, and mentally alert you is far more beneficial to everyone, including yourself!

At Horton Consulting, Michael and I constantly remind business owners that the beauty of owning a business is that it needs to work for your life and we truly believe that. Take the time to re-evaluate where you are and re-design the business to meet your own needs. This will allow you to achieve the life you deserve. The same goes for associates. Being self-employed means you have the same decisions to make – is the business doing well, do you need a break, is the patient base sufficient to meet your needs. Look after yourself, and business will take care of itself. ♦

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Laura Horton worked has worked in dentistry for 21 years and has an unrivalled passion and enthusiasm for treatment coordination, business and team development. In 2008 Laura left her full-time practice management role. Ever since, with her years of experience and vast amount of knowledge, Laura has been working with dental practices to help them successfully reach their true potential.