



Work/Life: A balance, a blend or a myth for Barristers?

By Catherine Brown of [Skilful Conversation](#)

Whether you call it a balance, a blend or a myth, how do you manage to have a life and a busy professional career at the same time?

This is a topic that comes up a lot when I coach barristers, even if it's not the topic that the client thought they wanted to work on.

As with so many topics, there isn't a "one size fits all" solution.

Some people love sending emails at 3am. It's not me but it might be you. And part of achieving the work-life and private-life you want is working out what is right for you and where your boundaries are.

I love the work that I do but I also love to have time to socialise and to do nothing.

And there isn't a switch you can flick to ensure that your work-life balance remains perfect forever. It is a process and needs ongoing attention. Much as I'd love to, I can't offer you a quick-fix.

It is perhaps the only thing I have in common with the GB cycling team – I am a big believer in seeking out the "marginal gains" – those small changes which can have a big cumulative impact.

And the key changes I have made (partly through coaching) that allow me to do that are:

- Learning how to say no
- Maximising the productivity of the time that I spend working
- Diarising the fun stuff as well as the work stuff and the healthy stuff.

Here are the basic elements that make those 3 strategies work for me.



Saying No in your professional life (and/or at home)

Speaking as a former barrister, I know how hard it can be to say no.

The self-employment aspect feeds a myth that saying no somehow means we will never work again.

And that feeling lurks with me now in my own business.

But – pay attention – this is important: That simply isn't true.

I sent a no to the company I do some associate work for just the other week. And because I'm not perfect, I did a lot of soul-searching and hand-wringing and imagining of bankruptcy first.

The immediate reply was "Thanks for letting me know. Have a great weekend." The later reply was another offer of work within a matter of days.

The longer-term consequence is that I don't end up in the cold winter months travelling to somewhere I don't want to travel to, doing work that doesn't fit with my strategic objectives. And that has to be a win.

And, if nothing else, pausing to do some hand-wringing and catastrophising, stopped me sending an immediate yes.

Some of us are programmed – by society, years of practice and a fear of bankruptcy (or dismissal) – to say yes by default.

I don't have to think very hard to find examples of friends who are on all the committees, often chairing those committees and then the next time I see them, they are telling me about some sort of new commitment.

So, if saying "no" is too big a shift in your behaviour, too much of a leap to do in one go, instead try simply pausing before your default "yes".

For people who are used to saying yes, changing it to "no" straight away is often too much.



But you can work towards the same benefits by just stopping the immediate yeses. Pause, take a breath and, preferably, say you'll come back to them with your answer by a given point. Depending on the question, you might also want to ask for further information (why do they "need" it in 24 hours, for example).

Gradually, this will become your natural response instead of a yes that you immediately regret.

It will change your life and people will still instruct/employ you. I promise.

Maximising productivity

This is the subject of another blog. But, I can see how you might reasonably say you don't have time to read another blog right now so here is the headline: Cut out distractions.

And here is the thing you can do straight away – get real about how much time you are wasting on distractions.

The studies on this are many and various, and I am not sure that any one of them will directly apply to you as a individual.

But, for me, just reading that "some people" check their emails 15 times per day, or every 37 minutes was a bit of a wake up call. That's before I check Twitter, WhatsApp or the news.

Having an increased awareness of this, has really helped me to cut that down so that time spent working is working and my free time is then my own. Less time is wasted.

Again, many of you will benefit from starting small. So when you find time to read my list of tips of maximising productivity, don't use them as a stick to beat yourself with. Pick one or two and be kind to yourself as you try them on for size.

Safeguarding time for you, your friends and family, for the fun stuff.

Who better to turn to for inspiration on this than Ferris Bueller.

"Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."



So, if you are better at diarising work than you are at diarising fun – you are at risk of waking up one day and realising what you've missed.

I have also always been influenced by the memes and quotes you will have seen that tell you that people on their death beds tend not to rue the time they didn't spend at the office.

It is that attitude that allowed me to walk away from the Bar and to find something I loved doing more as well as to free up more time for me.

But that hard-working, over-achieving psyche runs deep. I still have to keep a very close eye on myself to make sure that I am giving my time to the things I actively want to give it to.

And **timetabling is a great way to do that.**

I don't just diarise work commitments, I actively carve out time in that diary for social commitments and, very importantly, if you are still learning on the saying no front, I also carve out time to do nothing.

I have frequent diary entries which say **"Safeguard for Self"** – an expression which I think says a lot about their importance.

Of course, sometimes I have to change those personal commitments, just as I sometimes have to change professional commitments. Any system I deploy to help me out has to be flexible to be workable. It has to work for me. I don't work for it.

The key is to have rules around flexibility and my rule is that I have to change a social commitment or a "Safeguard for Self" commitment, I replace it on a different time or date in the near future. It is not lost, it is postponed.

Without that rule, those valuable bits of life would be swamped by the professional commitments which, at least in my view, is the very opposite of balance.

Have a quick look at your diary, find some gaps for yourself and book them in. Safeguard them and do whatever you like with them – walk, read, lie on the sofa, lie in the bath. Whatever works for you.



I once had a personal trainer (there have been a few to be honest) who said that rest is when the magic happens. He obviously meant something to do with muscle recovery but it stuck with me for other reasons. He and Ferris both know what they're talking about.

Catherine Brown practised at Kings Chambers for nearly 15 years but now works as a Professional Coach and Trainer, helping lawyers and other professionals navigate the challenges in their careers and balance their professional life with their home life. You can contact her on cathbrown@skilfulconversation.com or visit www.skilfulconversation.com to sign up to her mailing list and receive similar strategies directly to your inbox.

You can find more tips on Productivity [here](#).