

# Mission impossible?

Is there such a thing as a healthy work-life balance? Laura Powell goes on the hunt for that

**E**very day at 5.45pm sharp, Sir Brandon Gough put down his pen, picked up his coat and left the office. If any of Sir Brandon's colleagues at Coopers & Lybrand (now PwC) asked why he was leaving early he told them, as legend has it, that he had finished his work for the day and was going home to his wife.

But the late Sir Brandon also propelled higher and faster through the ranks than those colleagues, many of whom were still hunched over their desks four hours later. At just 44 years old, he was made chairman of Coopers & Lybrand, and he went on to build up the firm, steer it through a merger with rival Deloitte Haskins & Sells, and later served as chairman of Yorkshire Water (now Kelda Group).

As former ICAEW president Martyn Jones, who counts Sir Brandon among his role models, puts it: "Everything he did was very well thought out. He would say that it's about the quality of the time you use, so he was able to find that work-life balance. He proved that you don't have to work until late in the night to make a fantastic impression."

Yet Sir Brandon is also an anomaly. On the whole, Britons are a nation of workaholics. We spend 15% longer in the office than our EU counterparts. One in 10 of us checks our emails every day of the week, and one in five of us works through our holidays too. Most alarming of all, 5% of us log into our emails on Christmas Day, a study by PruHealth has found. This is great news for employers but what effect does it have on the other facets of our lives?

As Jodie Gill at the Chartered Accountants' Benevolent Association, says: "Accountancy is a very demanding, responsible job with long work hours and tight deadlines. It can be difficult to set a good work-life balance." This may be a challenge for ACA students balancing work and study with social lives, but even that is a dress rehearsal compared to life after qualifying when families grow, careers accelerate, and responsibilities grow.

In search of the solution, *Vital* asked five senior chartered accountants at the peak of their careers how they juggled successful careers with families, hobbies and dependents. With searing honesty, they describe how they found that healthy work-life balance. Or didn't, as the case may be.

## I CHOSE LIFE OVER WORK

CHRIS TAYLOR, CEO, ABU DHABI FINANCE

Just after qualifying I was seconded to Deloitte's corporate finance department in New York. Everyone there worked very hard; usually 18 hours a day. Ultimately, they were willing to sacrifice their personal and family lives for their work life. Brilliant though that career would have been, I decided there and then that it wasn't for me. I wanted to work hard but I also wanted to balance that with sports, hobbies, and investing time in family and friends. I'm lucky that I was honest enough with myself to say: I'm not going to be a partner in this firm because it isn't right for me. I don't want to give up everything for my career. I want balance.



## I PLAN MY WORK DIARY AROUND FAMILY LIFE

DAVID DORANS, CFO, YOUVIEW

A healthy work-life balance takes team work. When we met, my wife and I had a mature and open conversation about our aspirations for a family. I told her I wanted to take an active part in raising my children, so now we plan our working week around the school runs and I incorporate that into my work schedule. I try to arrive at work early and I have always worked fast and prioritised well, which helps. My wife and I also struck a bargain when we first had children: She would deal with any issues at night as I really need my sleep and, in return, I would do the cooking. We have very few night time issues now but I'm still cooking...

## I PUT MY CAREER FIRST

DAME MARY KEEGAN, FORMER HEAD OF GOVERNMENT FINANCE PROFESSION

I didn't have a work-life balance. Rather, my work was my life. It wasn't until I met my now-husband towards the end of my career that I stopped and came up for air to think about all the other things in life. But I don't have any regrets about not stopping to have a family. There were things I wanted to get done and I was never ready to stop. I felt that I would find it difficult to combine the way I worked with having a family and I couldn't work out how to do it. I started work in 1974 when things were a lot different, and I've since seen many women who have done it well, but it wasn't for me. I suppose I go all in. For many years, I was all-in about my work life. Now, having retired, I'm all in about my home life. That balance has suited me very well.

## I ASK FOR HELP

SUSAN ROBERTSON, CFO, VELOCYS

I would love to say there is a magic answer to finding a perfect work-life balance but, honestly, I don't think there is. At times, I probably don't get the balance right. Having teenage children with busy lives, it can be quite difficult being there enough for them. Add to that a demanding role and the pressures of travel, long hours and those essential meetings, which always seem to occur at inconvenient times, and it is quite a challenge. Having a very supportive partner and being able to pull off things as a team really does help. I am very lucky that my husband has had enough flexibility in his career (he is self-employed and works mainly from home) for me to rely heavily on his support. I am also a great believer in having the best help you can afford, keeping things simple so you don't overreach yourself, and trying to fit in some down time. It doesn't always work out though.

## HAVING A SUPPORTIVE PARTNER HELPED ME FIND THAT BALANCE

HELEN ROSE, COO, TSB

I encourage people to take a break because in the business environment today you have to operate in levels of high intensity for long periods. You can only do that if you take breaks. I spend my working week in London, and enjoy going to new restaurant openings and the theatre in the evenings. I also spend my weekends at my cottage in the Cotswolds gardening - it's my therapy. It's really important to get that balance right between working hard and taking time out. What helps is that my husband and I have a very equal relationship and each do our fair share of the chores. Marrying is one of your most important career choices; having a supportive partner is incredibly important.