



IS YOUR WORKING LIFE TURNING YOU INTO SHREK?

BY SUZANNE JACOBS - JANUARY 2014



SUSANNE JACOBS SAYS DON'T LET POOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE BECOME THE NORM

This month I've been intrigued and saddened by a television advert trying to persuade us to book our summer holiday. The ad's main character is an ogre. The first scene pictures him getting home from work when his family are in bed, followed by him getting a restless night's sleep. The family depart for their holiday destination the next morning and, after a few days of time together, some sand, sun and TLC the ogre predictably turns back into the human he really is – husband, father, individual.

What saddened me was the recognition that the working lives of so many have reached a point where holiday advertisers feel that the ogre set up will resonate with the majority of its target audience.

Interestingly, the ogre's family shows a 'traditional' structure of the father working, giving us an assumed picture that the mother stays at home. However, more often than not it is both adults in the family working and desperately trying to juggle everything, with this frenetic pattern broken only by two obligatory weeks in the sun. A drinks manufacturer used a similar approach recently in their advert aimed at reducing unhealthy lifestyles by suggesting we live life more like our grandparents – more breaks, family/regular meals, less hours spent in the office, etc. Another reflection of how work consumes life today.

Work is good for us. Evidence has long since shown that having meaningful work supports good psychological health, but as the saying goes, "you can have too much of a good thing". Research I've conducted, and studies by others, reveal a direct link between well-being and motivational drivers such as choice and autonomy. Not being able to balance our priorities can lead to a perceived lack of choice and often a sense of being out of control, which places our brain into a threat state severely compromising our capacity to think. In the long-term this threat state plays havoc with workers' health both psychologically and physically. As psychological health is the key predictor for performance, bar none, our work and thus the organisations we work for are not gaining but in fact suffering from more and more hours spent in the office – and so do our families who live with our ogre selves.

To sustain the physiological and cognitive energy so vital for productivity, innovation and decision-making, we need to take regular renewal breaks. Without doing so health and performance take a nose dive. A two-week holiday once a year with a bit of time off at Christmas for good behaviour does not suffice. In fact those working long hours at break neck speed up to the point of a holiday do not relax but instead crash. They often find themselves with colds or similar because of the impact on their immune system, only then to recover and find relaxation just in time to start all over again.

I appreciate that our limping economy has played a significant part in the issues around working hours but it is not entirely to blame. Workplace culture and our own beliefs about what is acceptable at work and for the lifestyles we lead are the main culprits.

We need to urgently adjust our approach to work if we are to ensure sustainable performance and support economic recovery – and avoid becoming ogres ourselves.

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