

Work-life balance: what really makes us happy might surprise you

By [Lis Ku](#)

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Finding the right work-life balance is by no means a new issue in our society. But the tension between the two has been heightened by the pandemic, with workers increasingly dwelling over the [nature of their work](#), its [meaning and purpose](#), and how these affect their [quality of life](#).



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Studies suggest people are [leaving or planning to leave](#) their employers in record numbers in 2021 – a “[great resignation](#)” that appears to have been precipitated by these reflections. But if we’re all reconsidering where and how work slots into our lives, what should we be aiming at?

It’s easy to believe that if only we didn’t need to work, or we could work far fewer hours, we’d be happier, living a life of hedonic experiences in all their [healthy](#) and [unhealthy](#) forms. But this fails to explain why some [retirees](#) pick up freelance jobs and some [lottery winners](#) go straight back to work.

Striking the perfect work-life balance, if there is such a thing, isn’t necessarily about tinkering with when, where and how we work – it’s a question of why we work. And that means understanding sources of happiness that might not be so obvious to us, but which have crept into view over the course of the pandemic.



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Attempts to find a better work-life balance are well merited. Work is consistently and positively related to [our wellbeing](#) and constitutes a large part of [our identity](#). Ask yourself who you are, and very soon you’ll resort to describing what you do for

work.

Our jobs can provide us with a sense of competence, which contributes to wellbeing. Researchers [have demonstrated](#) not only that labour leads to validation but that, when these feelings are threatened, we're particularly [drawn to](#) activities that require effort – often some form of work – because these demonstrate our ability to shape our environment, confirming our identities as competent individuals.

Work even seems to makes us happier in circumstances when we'd rather opt for leisure. This was demonstrated by a series of [clever experiments](#) in which participants had the option to be idle (waiting in a room for 15 minutes for an experiment to start) or to be busy (walking for 15 minutes to another venue to participate in an experiment). Very few participants chose to be busy, unless they were forced to make the walk, or given a reason to (being told there was chocolate at the other venue).

Yet the researchers found that those who'd spent 15 minutes walking ended up significantly happier than those who'd spent 15 minutes waiting – no matter whether they'd had a choice or a chocolate or neither. In other words, busyness contributes to happiness even when you think you'd prefer to be idle. Animals seem to get this insitinctively: in experiments, [most would](#) rather [work for food](#) than get it for free.



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Eudaimonic happiness

The idea that work, or putting effort into tasks, contributes to our general wellbeing is closely related to the psychological concept of [eudaimonic happiness](#). This is the sort of happiness that we derive from optimal functioning and realising our potential. Research has shown that [work and effort](#) is central to eudaimonic happiness, explaining that satisfaction and pride you feel on completing a gruelling task.

On the other side of the work-life balance stands hedonic happiness, which is defined as the presence of positive feelings such as cheerfulness and the relative scarcity of negative feelings such as sadness or anger. We know that hedonic happiness offers empirical mental and physical [health benefits](#), and that leisure is a great way to pursue hedonic happiness.

But even in the realm of leisure, our unconscious orientation towards busyness lurks in the background. A [recent study](#) has suggested that there really is such a thing as too much free time – and that our subjective wellbeing actually begins to drop if we have [more than five hours](#) of it in a day. Whiling away effortless days on the beach doesn't seem to be the key to long-term happiness.

This might explain why some people prefer to expend significant effort during their leisure time. Researchers have likened this to compiling an [experiential CV](#), sampling unique but potentially unpleasant or even painful experiences – at the extremes, this might be spending a night in an ice hotel, or joining an endurance desert race. People who take part in these forms of “leisure” [typically talk about](#) fulfilling personal goals, making progress and accumulating accomplishments – all features of eudaimonic happiness, not the hedonism we associate with leisure.



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The real balance

This orientation sits well with a new concept in the field of wellbeing studies: that a rich and diverse experiential happiness is the third component of a “good life”, in addition to hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

Across nine countries and tens of thousands of participants, [researchers](#) recently found that most people (over 50% in each country) would still prefer a happy life typified by hedonic happiness. But around a quarter prefer a meaningful life embodied by eudaimonic happiness, and a small but nevertheless significant amount of people (about 10-15% in each country) choose to pursue a rich and diverse experiential life.

Given these different approaches to life, perhaps the key to long-lasting wellbeing is to consider which lifestyle suits you best: hedonic, eudaimonic or experiential. Rather than pitching work against life, the real balance to strike post-pandemic is between these three sources of happiness.

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