



ADAPTED FROM GETTY

OUT-OF-OFFICE REPLIES AND WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT YOU

An automated e-mail response posted on Twitter unleashed a social-media debate about the importance of work–life balance. **By Stephana Cherak**

One weekend last October, I received an out-of-office reply from an academic faculty member: “I do not respond to e-mails on weekends. If this is an emergency, please call my mobile. If you do not have my mobile number, then you do not have a weekend emergency.” The tone, I felt, was telling – researchers are often under pressure to keep up with immense workloads and to stay on top of the changing world of science, while trying to protect their

life outside work from being invaded by faux emergencies or apparently urgent e-mails.

Indeed, in response to *Nature*’s 2019 biennial

“The struggle to balance work and life is a particular challenge for graduate students.”

PhD survey, only 37% of PhD students agreed that their institute supported a good work–life balance. Thirty-four per cent felt it failed to do so, and nearly 40% of respondents said they were unsatisfied with their work–life balance.

Researchers, including PhD students, senior scientists and graduate students like myself, are not the only ones facing pressure to work harder and faster. One 2017 survey (see go.nature.com/2rxh4rb) of workers in Britain, for example, found that nearly half said

Tales from Twitter

When I tweeted an out-of-office message in October that read: “I do not respond to e-mails on weekends,” the post went viral. So far, it has received 41,200 likes and more than 4,600 re-tweets — nearly 3.1 million Twitter accounts have interacted with the post. I’ve curated a selection of my favourite replies so far.

Lives aren’t controlled by e-mail

“I had a discussion with a busy academic recently about an international trip where she was unexpectedly unable to access e-mail and it was so backlogged by her return that she just ignored/ deleted all unopened mail. And then marvelled that the world really didn’t stop.” @JessicaRenee_83

“When I took parental leave recently, I didn’t respond to e-mails for almost an entire month. The world didn’t end. I’d gladly do it again.” @tomkXY

Honouring boundaries and timelines

“I haven’t quite reached this level of firmness in my boundaries, but I do know that my life has gotten much better since I decided that I don’t need ‘fastest/ best/ most consistent e-mail responder’ to be part of my professional legacy.” @popmediaprof

“I used one of these responders for years as a prof. Now I just take my sweet time to reply to e-mails and people learn. Their timelines aren’t my timelines.” @DoctorLindy

Do as I say, not as I do

“Fully support this. I also recommend adding a statement to any e-mails sent out of regular business hours to the effect of ‘this email is being sent out of normal business hours and I don’t expect an immediate reply’.” @runforbooze

“On weekends I respond to e-mails on my own timeline. Sometimes that means right away, but most times it means not until Monday. If a student reads too much into a quick reply and comes to expect that, I simply say that past performance is no guarantee of future results.” @Meteodan

And the winner is ...

“There is no such thing as an academic emergency.” @JLasaiane

their jobs require them to work very hard — compared with less than one-third in 1992 (see ‘Off balance’). When I tweeted the automated response in October, it went viral, suggesting work–life balance is an issue throughout the working world, not just in academia (see ‘Tales from Twitter’).

Forgoing work–life balance in order to be as productive as possible is tempting in academia, because those who are the most productive are also the most rewarded. Although hard work might be valued, it’s hardly the only factor in a successful career — numerous studies have shown that as we work more, the quality of what we do decreases. The scientific community should learn to value quality over quantity.

The struggle to balance work and life is a particular challenge for graduate students. They often find the line between the two becomes blurred with efforts to seem productive and important. Institutions have a responsibility to students and employees to protect their health; often this means helping people to manage their work–life balance. But the culture at science institutes can tend towards long working hours. As Meghan Duffy, an ecologist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, told *Nature* in 2017: “The idea that you have to put in long hours is pervasive. If you’re not working 60 or 80 hours a week, you’re not doing enough. It makes people insecure.”

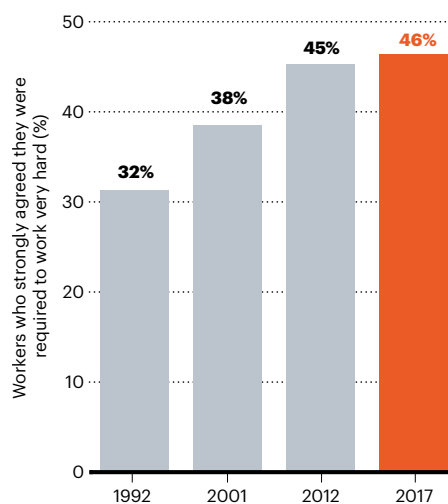
After receiving hundreds of comments in response to my tweet about the efforts people go to to maintain balance, I was prompted to reflect on my own techniques. Here are a few of the principles that I’ve adopted as I strive to balance work and other aspects of life:

Don’t rush, set your own pace. Graduate students often want immediate results. I thought the more courses I took or the more experiments I planned in one week, the earlier I might graduate. During my undergraduate degree I started arriving at university at 6 a.m. and leaving at 8 p.m. But, in graduate school, I soon learnt my studies were not a sprint, but a marathon. Make that marathon work for you. During my master’s degree I was also competing at a high level in athletics; this meant my course-work needed to be restructured so I could be successful at both. In every department there are resources to help you to personalize your programme. Take advantage of these opportunities, and don’t feel the need to align with the status quo — you can save yourself a lot of sleepless nights by planning strategically.

Ask for support. Academics often think the work they do should be perfect. This causes trouble: graduate students often neglect their lives outside work to strive for perfection. But as a student, you are expected to ask for help, assistance and guidance. Finding the confidence to ask for support from supervisors and mentors is beneficial and necessary for

OFF BALANCE

Nearly half of UK workers across all sectors say their job requires them to work very hard.



SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT SURVEY/CARDIFF UNIVERSITY/ UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON/ UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

growth. Academic studies can mean working alone, but it is important to remember that one of the most rewarding aspects of being a researcher is collaborating with others. Many would say that you are only as strong as those you surround yourself with.

Define your own personal balance. Graduate students often spread themselves too thinly, agreeing to spend longer hours in the lab or in

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front of a laptop at the expense of their time outside work. Although there are certain non-negotiable expectations and levels of professionalism required for a graduate degree, attaining these shouldn’t come at the cost of your health and well-being. Dedicate time to defining and finding your personal balance, and honour this throughout your career.

Always be kind. Academia has rough edges and the way that researchers communicate can often seem curt or unpleasant for someone who isn’t used to it. Seek to pursue your own acts of academic kindness. Perhaps thank colleagues more for their hard work — or even send a card. This might inspire others to shift their own behaviour and perhaps to be a bit more generous and compassionate. By being kind ourselves, we might help to make academia, as a whole, just a little bit kinder.

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