

Work/Careers

juggling act gives us enough time to fit in most of a week's work.

Given that my family is all now at home more or less 24/7, apart from the time allowed for exercise in the UK government's guidelines, things are going to have to change. In future columns, I will try to chart the changes I go through and identify what, if anything, has worked in balancing home, career and personal life. But I'll also aim to share the things that haven't. I'm already keen to write about the loss of identity I've felt with closing my lab, how I'm trying to maintain a healthy relationship with social media, the challenges of remote supervision and how to make the tallest Lego tower to win the school competition. In addition to my home family, I still have a responsibility to my work family – the students and staff members who work in my lab – and I'm still working out the best way of maintaining contact and keeping the science going.

One of the things I love about academia is the predictable patterns. The year starts in October; grant opportunities come and go. Having never really worked full-time anywhere other than academia, not counting the summer job in the refrigerated warehouse, the idea of doing anything different is terrifying. But here is an opportunity, unsought. Maybe we can all try different ways of working and being with our families. Then again, it might just be awful. Like everyone else, I'm still working it out.

WEEK TWO TO BE A SCIENTIST



For me, one of the biggest things to come to terms with, as I'm locked down in the United Kingdom, is not being able to go to my lab or my office. I realized the extent to which I was missing work when I told my children to get the ice cream from the freezer in the lab, actually meaning the garage – my subconscious speaking volumes.

Shutting the lab down came as a bit of a shock, despite the warning signs from other countries' responses to the coronavirus outbreak, and the increasingly grim news from the epidemiology modellers downstairs. I'd done some preparation the week before – mostly

making plans with my PhD students and lab technicians about where they might best see out the next few weeks (at home with family or in their London flats). But there were several unanswered questions causing me angst:

- What were my lab-facing team members going to do with their time?
- What was I going to do with my time?
- Who was going to water my office plants?

The real challenge, though, is deeper than working out what to do with my and my teams' working hours. It revolves around personal identity. So much of how I see myself is tied up with what I do as a job. I am a father, a husband, a brother. But I'm also a scientist and an academic. One of the great things about being a scientist is the close overlap between job and personal interests. But there can be times when the close relationship between science and self gets out of kilter and science takes over. There are waves of intensity, normally peaking around the time of grant deadlines, when I can think of little else.

Now, however, I'm in new territory. Not having a lab to go to will have an impact on more than just work productivity. It isn't necessarily just lab work that will be affected – I am the first to admit that I am not in the lab itself very much during the week. Like most principal investigators, I spend much of my time working on the leadership, funding and administrative tasks that spring up around wet-lab work – but the proximity to it and the interactions with my team in the lab are all part of the job. Working from home occasionally was an excellent way to get a piece of focused thinking done, but the appeal soon disappears when it is the only option.

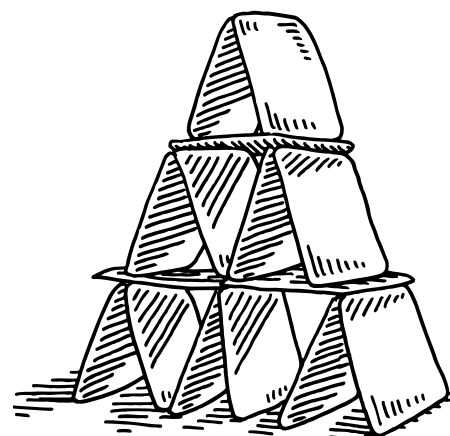
On reflection, I would, in part, link my identity as a scientist to the discovery of new things, or at least living vicariously through the work my wonderful team does. In her fantastic book *Lab Girl*, Hope Jahren describes the moment she made her first discovery and how this led her to an academic career. When I was doing my BSc, my supervisor pointed out that I was seeing down the microscope. It wasn't anything spectacular, but it was enough to get me hooked. These little moments of discovery are hard to achieve from my home office.

On deeper reflection, it isn't only the discoveries that drive me, but the story-telling that builds from them – stringing individual discoveries into an epic scientific tale. As my team would attest, there isn't always a solid plan at the beginning; the science builds organically from one point to the next. Each experiment leads to the next: a thread running through them from beginning to end. When your approach to planning work depends on the experiments, it is bloody hard to plan the next step without the experiments.

I need to remind myself that the current situation is temporary, if open-ended. I have had a similar challenge before: in parallel with doing my PhD and postdoc, I was an officer in the Army Reserves for ten years, and when I left, I had the feeling 'if I am not an army officer, what am I?' Turns out, it wasn't such a big deal, I was still me, even if I wasn't marching up and down the parade square. I imagine the experience was not dissimilar to retiring – which is probably why so few academics do actually retire.

And of course, I'm sure that once I'm back in the lab, the excitement will fade with the first failed polymerase chain reaction.

WEEK THREE SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER



For the record, the three people whom I would choose to be stuck with in the same house for 4 weeks (and counting) are my wife and two children (aged 10 and 12), and if it was just a prolonged holiday with no responsibilities, it would be wonderful. Unfortunately, we all still have work to do – whether it's grants to write or a space-exploration school curriculum to study. I've enjoyed spending more time with the children since lockdown began, but being in the same space as them for four weeks has required even more juggling.

I had thought that being a working parent was tough under normal circumstances: it involves a lot of planning. My wife and I try to keep our diaries coordinated and outsource the tasks we can, by getting help from my wife's personal assistant, our cleaner, childminders and our kids' school. We are very fortunate that we normally have this support, giving us the time and space to focus on work and the more fun aspects of parenting.

You might be reading about people who seem to be effortlessly balancing the house-of-cards of home-working and homeschooling: up with the YouTube fitness coach Joe Wicks; story time with the author David Walliams; a quick trip to the virtual zoo, while baking, cleaning and grant writing. The reality for me is rather different.

Let me tell you about last week:

Monday – got up at 7 a.m., worked for 2 hours. Cooked breakfast, dodged in and out of a videoconference while answering questions from my 10-year-old about the planets.

Tuesday – carefully mapped the space-exploration curriculum into 30-minute blocks, with gaps for enrichment. Stuck to the timetable for 15 minutes of the first period.

Wednesday – bought more Wi-Fi routers, and downloaded many apps.

Thursday – began to find a pattern that worked, by creating a more flexible timetable for each child, with more breaks for electronic leisure for everyone (adults included).

Friday – had half a group meeting, failed to turn my laptop camera on throughout, which was lucky because I was also trying to teach Year-8 physics and make a papier-mâché space rocket at the same time.

Saturday – oh God, the weekend is just the same as the week, but now there aren't even school timetables to follow.

Sunday – gave up; ate biscuits; drank wine.

Monday – rinse and repeat.

This is a really challenging time to be a parent. It is challenging to be anyone. The systems that most of us have just about got in place are disrupted. We are in a time of feast or famine. Some scientists are able to go to work and are busier than ever, dropping everything to develop diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics. And then there are the rest of us with nowhere to go, and either having nothing to do or desperately trying to squeeze work into the quiet time between the beginnings and ends of children's TV programmes. And it isn't only work: some of us are seeing way too much of our families, and others nothing at all. The current situation is not normal for anyone.

My new role as homeworker and homeschooler has certainly confirmed a few things. I love my kids, but I do not want to be their teacher. I am very grateful to the people who put all that time and effort into educating children around the world, particularly mine. I am hoping that my life as a teacher of small people will be short-lived. I do some teaching, but it is minimal and is for adults who mostly want to be there – and I have control over the subject matter. I am now a slave to the school curriculum, having to answer questions on subjects that I pushed out of my brain the minute I finished my last exams on them.

If it helps, here are some things that worked: splitting the day into two blocks of 6 hours, so one person works morning and one afternoon, is better than alternating four chunks of 3 hours; curiously, it is also better than one day on, one day off. With older children, some things can be done in parallel – I can send e-mails while they are doing work set from school. Structure helps everyone – we have a timetable for holidays as well as school days. You don't have to do all of the free online

activities: if you didn't like ballet before lockdown, there is no reason to watch it now. But we've found that taking some exercise is crucial for venting our frustrations.

Ultimately, I am very grateful to my two classroom assistants Mr I. Pad and Miss X. Box, who have delivered sterling and consistent service throughout.

PS, For those of you who were worried, I have found a source of bread flour.

WEEK FOUR CREATURE COMFORTS



Like most people's, my working life at the moment is far from normal. It's not so much the working from home – it's the never leaving home. I miss the familiar surroundings of work, especially my plants. I have lived in my current house for 10 years; I have worked at Imperial College London for more than 20 years, 15 of which have been on the St Mary's campus in Paddington in Central London. And since I moved out of London to live, I've almost certainly spent more time at St Mary's than at my house (minus sleeping). Working from home and the new routines it requires have had a massive impact on my ability to concentrate.

As I have written before, a large chunk of science is creativity. This needs time and space. In the good old days, working from home meant retreating from the endless stream of meetings and interruptions, and having some space to think about work. Now, working from home is very different. When I am not making papier mâché rockets and supervising homework club for my children, there is still plenty to do. This is made much trickier when work has to contend with the sounds of something more fun than work or the smell of chickpea and chorizo soup rising from downstairs, the robin that has made our garden its home, or basically any excuse to leave my desk.

My natural response is to get distracted. Modern life exacerbates this: the ding of the phone, the notification from Twitter, the e-mail

envelope. My normal strategy is to get all of that out of the way and then focus on the work in hand – usually by allowing myself a timed 'block' of distraction before working. This varies: before writing this article, I tried to make a sourdough loaf (which turned out denser than a neutron star), watched the music video for 'Acquiesce' by Oasis and checked my son's progress in the video game *FIFA 19* (who needs real sport when you have the emotional journey of a 12-year-old trying to win a key game?). As you can see, sometimes it takes more than the five minutes I'd usually allow. However, the work blocks are now much shorter because my wife and I are rotating between work and childcare – trying to fit 50 hours of work into 20 hours – and so starting each block with 5 minutes of faffing is eating into work time. Yes, the simple solution is not to get distracted, but that is easier said than done.

It's not as if distraction was impossible when I had access to an office – there was always a member of the team to chat to, and Oasis music videos were still within reach. But there, I had worked out ways to stay focused. I could reward myself for an hour of work by getting a treat, such as a cup of tea. But this, too, is affected by being at home all the time. Previously, I could leave the house pretty messy because I knew I would not have to see it for the rest of the day, and therefore not worry too much about it. Now, to have a cup of tea in one of my too-frequent breaks, I end up emptying the dishwasher, which is always full.

I am, for what it's worth, beginning to develop some approaches that help. I've accepted that there is going to be some faffing before I get going: using my limited stock of willpower on breaking long-established habits is wasted energy. I try to cut access to my phone, ideally by leaving it in another room, but at least out of sight and reach. I try to keep my weekday routine approximately the same as before, specifically having a shower at as close to normal time as usual. I am an inveterate list maker: I have daily, weekly, monthly to-do lists. All are dauntingly long at the moment, but they still help to provide some structure and a clearer sense of what I can do with the time available. This means saying no to more things – I'm sorry to report that my contribution to peer-reviewing has been minimal of late.

In the end, it comes down to accepting that I cannot get as much done as I would if I wasn't stuck at home. But there is a positive trade-off: I am getting to spend a great deal more time with my children, which has been a real gift. One of my favourite lockdown stories is of a dog that strained its tail by wagging it too much because its owners were home all the time. Let's just say I'm glad my kids don't have tails.

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