

HOW 168 HOURS ON YOUR TIME SHEET MAKES FOR WORK / LIFE BALANCE

By Sally Dyson



As a long-standing fan of Allison Pearson's "I Don't Know How She Does It," I was intrigued to discover a riposte from time management guru, Laura Vanderkam, under the title "I Know How She Does It." I had to read on. Vanderkam's thesis is that the path to contentment is via time sheets.

Having expended a considerable amount of my own professional effort trying to persuade lawyers to stop billing by the hour, a blog on the virtues of time sheets may seem out of place. Indeed, I am not advocating a return to time-based billing but I have always extolled the benefit of knowing how you spend your time in order to make better use of it, rather than just letting time run away with you - which is what happens when you start the clock ticking and have no-one to tell you that you have spent too long, until the client refuses to pay the bill.

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Vanderkam's time sheets are different. Each sheet lasts for the full 168 hours that make-up a single week. Time recorders note how every single hour is spent. When Vanderkam's subscribers completed these time logs, she and they discovered a number of surprising things.

Surprise No.1: You probably don't work as much as you think you do

Most people work far less than they claim. Research by John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey found that, if a person believes that they work 80 hours per week, it is more likely that they actually work for 55 hours per week. The average American works considerably less, generally clocking-up just under 35 hours per week. Even Vanderkam's guinea pigs, who each earned over \$100,000 per year, placing them in the top 4% of female US earners, worked on average 44 hours per week – although few would have known that at the start of the exercise. To extrapolate from that, working 44 hours per week and sleeping a healthy eight hours per night, leaves an astonishing 68 hours for other things - rendering the concept of a "full-time" job a misnomer.

Surprise No. 2: Work life balance may be all in the mind

All the submissions that Vanderkam received showed people making time for family, hobbies or fitness. Vanderkam maintains that you can choose to be happy or you can choose to be miserable but the former is genuinely preferable. When confronted by the hard evidence that you have yourself compiled of the hours you spend in pleasurable activities, it is hard to maintain the common mantra that you have no life outside work.

Vanderkam is insistent that we should (quite literally) count our blessings and squeeze a little happiness and relaxation into snatched minutes and half hours that are there for the taking. This is not meant to imply that you can't love your work – but most people need some time away from their desks to charge their batteries and for domestic joys and responsibilities. There are simply more hours available than most people realise.

Surprise No. 3: Parents working outside the home may spend as much quality time with their children as those who stay at home ostensibly to be with their children

This finding is just as relevant for fathers as for mothers but Vanderkam's statistics were obtained from working mothers only. There can be few people who are not aware of the perma-guilt suffered by most

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working mothers who are constantly torn between the demands of work and children. It is therefore worth examining whether such guilty feelings are justified.

Vanderkam cites data from the American Time Use Survey which reveals that the average stay-at-home mother spends 25.5 hours per week on housework whereas her earning counter-part reduces this to 17.9 hours. That sounds like an argument for going out to work in itself! The trade-offs made by working mothers may not be as stark as people often imagine.

Home-based mothers are more likely to spend time co-located with their children. However, just as I argue that professionals should not charge their clients simply on the basis of the number of hours that they have worked, we cannot judge the quality of mothers' interactions with their off-spring based simply on the number of hours of face-time. Readers of this blog who have children will probably have experienced being physically present but mentally absent – minds frantically processing a work issue whilst lackadaisically minding a toddler. Well, stay-at-home mothers are no more immune to this than those with office jobs and can find themselves, multi-tasking with half an eye on the kids. Whilst stay-at-home mums do play with their children more than other mums, the American Time Use Survey, mentioned earlier, states that, on average, all mums spend just 36 minutes per day playing with their children. That's enough to make one think twice before giving up the day job.

Putting it to the test

So, as a working mother with two school-aged children and my own coaching, consulting and training business which I run from my home office, I thought I would test-drive a Vanderkam time sheet. I picked the week before my summer holiday, because that is when I happened to finish reading her book. Although my vacation hadn't started yet, the children's had and I was fretting about how to fit in all my pre-holiday work, not to mention my packing, on top of having considerable (albeit, often pleasant) child-led distractions and obligations. I am lucky to have amazing child-care arrangements and high levels of personal autonomy but during the holiday season, home calls more loudly to me.

I was very pleasantly surprised by my results. I spent 34 hours working which is just shy of the official definition of working full-time. I also devoted an astonishing 45 hours to my children which included a family outing to a museum. I expect, and indeed hope, that in term-time the proportions are reversed. On top of that, we had both friends and family visit us and my husband and I went out for dinner. With

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all that eating, I was fortunate to be able to build in three exercise sessions. It looks manic when set down in print but I maintained my 8 hours per day sleep quota and even enjoyed a pre-holiday pedicure.

All in all, far from the time sheet being a drag, I found it a very liberating and validating experience. Although recording time might be considered backward looking; to me it is a catalyst for looking forward. I intend to repeat the exercise periodically and to use the data to take more deliberate decisions about how I am going to allocate my time and energies. I may not be able to control time but I shall now be more mindful about how I spend it.

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