

Article

A new hope in the digital age: Carolyn Freeman on work-life balance

September 12, 2023



As the boundaries between home and work become blurred, we need to keep talking about the problem, and think more deeply.

Over the last few years, the debate over working from home, working in the office, and hybrid working has continued.

It can be pretty annoying hearing phrases like “Zoom fatigue” and “the new normal” being repeated over and over again.

At SPARCK, we’ve been trying to make sense of this in a more meaningful way.

What is truly a problem, and what is misplaced panic, or hype?

When we surveyed our team towards the end of 2022 the conclusion was clear: wellbeing was highlighted a key concern for many people.

So, in 2023, we ran a [wellbeing quarter](#) to dig deeper into the subject.

A particular highlight of this series of events and activities was hearing from cyberpsychologist Carolyn Freeman.

Taking control of our use of technology

Carolyn’s overall aim is to help people to consciously make strategic and tactical choices, every day, to gain greater control of our use of technology.

With this aim in mind, she has worked in a research context, but also with the media, and with organisations, to improve digital wellbeing in the workplace.

Given her wealth of knowledge and devotion to this cause, we wanted to hear what she had to say, and talk to her about how it might apply at SPARCK.

The specific topic of her talk was the blurring of boundaries between home and work-life, and how it affects us.

This was an opportunity for us to hear about the findings from her recent study and get practical advice on how we could improve wellbeing outcomes for everyone.

Speaking for myself, I got so much from the talk, and from the chance to engage with Carolyn. I keep finding myself referring to it in conversation with colleagues, and when I think about my own approach to work-life balance.

Takeaway 1: work-life balance doesn’t mean the same to everyone

Our sense of work-life balance differs from person to person and exists on a spectrum.

On the one hand, there are **the integrators**. They can happily stop work during the day to tend to household responsibilities and return to it later in the day.

These employees feel relieved and happy when they have the flexibility to juggle work demands around family responsibilities.

Then, on the other hand, there are **the separators**. They need to be able to block out the evening to give themselves time to recover from the stress and demands of their job.

They feel resentment when job demands infringe on the time and energy they prefer to spend with family, and on personal pursuits.

Although we all fit somewhere on this spectrum, we tend to skew heavily in one direction or the other, with our own variation and nuances on our preferred style.

But whatever our personal preferences around workplace technology we all need a strategy that is:

- Bespoke to life circumstance, work and home-life priorities, and world views.
- Strategic, with some allowances for breaking the rules, when home and work-life become blurred again.
- Aligned with company and team culture.

When we don’t define this properly for ourselves and others, personal conflict can arise, especially when there is a mismatch of work-life balance strategy vs organisational norms.

This is when stress and anxiety start to manifest themselves.

Takeaway 2: Our need for autonomy comes at a cost

Flexibility over how we do our own jobs can, paradoxically, contribute to a loss of control.

As Carolyn explained, those who are given the option of determining their own working hours tend to work much longer hours.

Often, we can feel like others are reliant on us, therefore we feel the need to be constantly connected, always keeping an eye on communication channels.

Nobody wants to let others down and we all want to keep our projects moving forward.

However, this constant connectivity creates an assumed normative behaviour and raises expectations around connectivity and commitment for others in the team.

If you are available all the time, especially if you’re in a leadership position, that tells others on the team that they ought to do the same.

To put all of this another way, allowing employees to disconnect when they want actually reduces their ability to do so, leading to reduced autonomy and increased stress.

Flexible work boundaries” can quickly become work without boundaries.

One of the key insights from Carolyn’s research is that when a company puts guidelines in place, it is easier for employees to manage their working times. It gives them ‘permission’ to log off from work responsibilities.

Takeaway 3: Being bored and taking time out can boost productivity

The conversation around flexible and hybrid working often focuses on productivity. To understand productivity, we need to think about two important neurological concepts.

First, there’s **boredom**, which isn’t always a negative thing.

We can choose to limit our screen-time and let ourselves get bored, instead of filling every moment with work screens, social media, or entertainment.

If we spend all our spare time looking at screens, we are constantly distracted from other aspects of our life and thought processes.

Recent neurological research has found that there is an inner section of the brain, nicknamed the ‘mohawk region’, that only fires up when we are not mentally distracted.

It is this region that is involved in the process of self-reflection. If we don’t reflect on ourselves, evidence shows we’re more likely to feel anxiety and lower self-esteem.

Secondly, there’s **distraction**. Again, we tend to think of this as a negative – the opposite of paying attention, or focusing.

But when we limit our screen-time, and give our mind time and permission to wander, we can unlock our creativity.

Recent research shows that creative and analytical thinking occurs in different regions throughout the brain. Some sections belong to the executive attention network and others to the imagination or creativity network.

Research conducted on freestyle rappers found that the creative sections of the brain were not able to function unless the attention network was deactivated or switched off.

You might well have experienced this yourself. Have you ever been thinking about a problem and felt stuck until you went for a walk or a run, and suddenly found the solution popping into your head?

This is why so many of us get ideas and see links when we’re in the shower. This also tends to happen in those moments just as you’re going to sleep or waking up.

Creativity is the process of connecting two seemingly unrelated elements to create something new.

When we are thinking rationally or analytically, the chemical reactions flowing through our neurons are fast. However, when those chemical reactions slow down, our neurons can more easily jump neural pathways. This is when creativity happens.

Carolyn’s talk has made me think about how often I whip out my phone when I’m sitting on a bus, standing in a queue, waiting for a friend to arrive, or cooking dinner. If I can break that habit, I’ll have reclaimed time for processing information and reflecting.

Coaching your way to work-life balance

Carolyn’s involvement in our wellbeing programme didn’t stop there.

She also conducted one-to-one sessions with SPARCKies to coach them in achieving a better work-life balance, tailored to their preferences and personality.

“I met Carolyn to talk about optimising my productivity,” says design consultant Jo Kilcoyne who joined SPARCK earlier this year. “Starting a new role, I wanted to change some of how I had felt in having jobs and start as I meant to go on. Working full time, often remotely and having two young children I often feel torn, as though I’m not bringing my best self to either work or my family. Carolyn worked through some really practical tips with me, such as setting a timer for bite-sized chunks of focused practical and turning off distractions. It’s worked brilliantly!”

Carolyn is on the side of humans

Listening to Carolyn’s talk, and chatting with her offline, I formed the impression of someone who is dedicated to defending human rights and values in the digital age.

She doesn’t fall prey to the mass panic and misplaced hype around technology.

She understands that just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should – and you shouldn’t fix what isn’t broken to begin with.

In the struggle to work out how the machines fit into our lives, she is on team human.

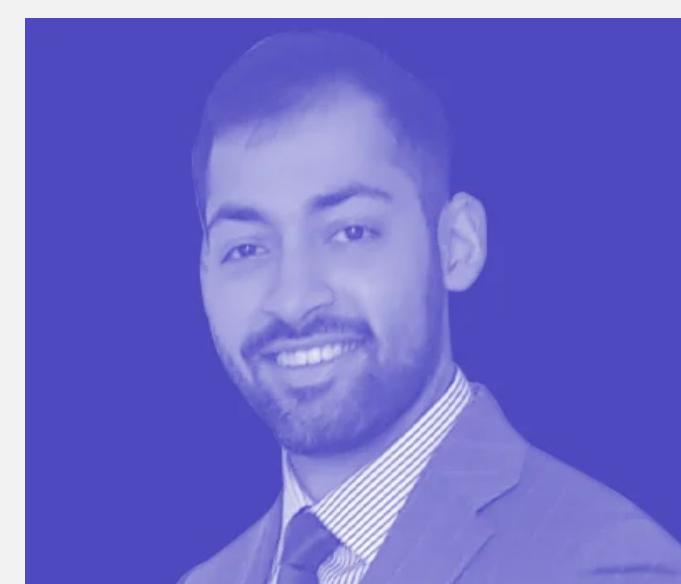
I strongly recommend following or connecting with [Carolyn on LinkedIn](#), and commissioning her to work with your organisation.

Learn more

- [Carolyn Freeman’s research at cybercology.com](#)
- [“The power of positive feedback”](#) by Julia Silva, with Anne Dhir
- [“How getting into the flow can unlock your potential”](#) by Azeem Butt
- [“What about the humans who practice human-centred design?”](#) by Harriet de Wet

Get in touch

If you’d like to hear more about how we can help you, including how you can adapt your own business to this remote working world, please [get in touch](#).



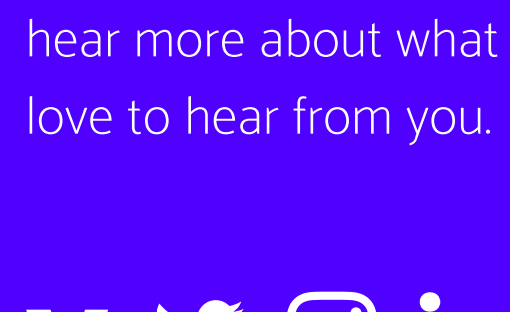
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Get in touch

Whether you have a business challenge for us, or you just want to hear more about what we do, we’d love to hear from you.



Join us

We look for people with a passion for making an impact by bringing their own unique energy, experiences and thoughts. So, if you’re someone who loves to collaborate, solve problems and get stuff done, then we’d love to hear from you.

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