

## Rejecting the Million Hour Work Week

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Academia can be challenging, demanding and overwhelming, and the way that I used to deal with this was to throw every free moment into what I was doing. I distinctly remember pulling all-nighters in my office as a graduate student and watching in jealousy as other students went home to their friends and families. I just accepted that they were better academics than I, and that I was just going to have to work a lot harder to be successful. This way of thinking followed me into my job as professor, and even though the context had changed, my habits of working long hours at the office and at home persisted. I had just become accustomed to the idea that this is what it took to be successful.

Everything changed after I had my first child. I had been used to working whenever I felt like it, or felt compelled to, which was way more than I should have. And then, all of a sudden, I couldn't work from home anymore because we had a new person to take care of. Even if I tried to work after my baby went to sleep, I was exhausted, and work I did at night was full of typos and errors. Furthermore, because I was staying up late, and sometimes getting up with the baby in the middle of the night, I often found myself unable to be productive with my time at work, and scrolling Facebook seemed like all I could manage. This life-style was not working for me, and I had to find a different solution.

I'll be honest and tell you that there wasn't a quick fix for me. I really struggled with this change in my responsibilities and my new identity as a parent. Academics may like to tout that academia is flexible and allows you to work whenever, but a consequence of this is that you feel like you should be working all the time. I felt guilt and anxiety doing something as simple as enjoying a meal with my family because I knew there was work I needed to do. These feelings led me to consider leaving academia completely. I didn't think being the parent I wanted to be was compatible with my job. However, as I thought more about leaving, I started to realize how much I loved most aspects of my job and that the main thing that made me dislike it was that I was working too much. This is where my philosophy changed, and **I started to reframe my relationship with my job by rejecting the idea that in order to be**

**successful in academia I needed to work a million hours every week.**

In thinking about how I actively carry out this philosophy in my daily life, I can categorize how **I actively reject the million-hour work week** into four broad topics, Boundaries, Efficiency, Community, Advocacy.

Setting and Maintaining Boundaries: In principle, limiting work to 40 hours a week seems easy. Just stop working. But as someone who loves what they do, and wants to do a good job, at first there didn't seem like there was anything I could cut. So, I started by prioritizing what absolutely needed to get done. Following some of the ideas I learned from reading a productivity book called "Zen to Done," (Babuta, 2008) I specifically scheduled time for everything in my to-do list. I prioritized getting the most important and urgent things done first. Then, if I didn't get something done, I "rescheduled" it for later in the week sometime. Having scheduled time to do the things on my list helped me relax more at home, and stop worrying about work I should be doing. Every time I agreed to do something new, I added a space in my calendar to do it. Then if it didn't look like I had any time in my calendar to do something, I either needed to rearrange other items deliberately, or I needed to be realistic that the thing was not going to get done right away. This kept me from agreeing to do too many new service items, which was a habit I picked up. I reminded myself: if something is important enough to do, it's important enough to do well. If I can't allocate the time something deserves, the job should go to someone else or wait until I have time to give it proper attention. With time, I was able to stop emailing after hours. Next, I stopped working and emailing on the weekends. It didn't happen overnight, but eventually I was able to get to a point where I was consistently working no more than 40 hours per week.

If this seems insurmountable, remember that as a graduate student, you are still learning how to navigate academia, and you can and should ask for help with this. You might also ask your advisers or teachers, "What kind of expectations do you have for how much work I should be putting in each week?" Or you could ask for more explicit help, "How should I be prioritizing these items?"

Efficiency: I have never described myself as an efficient person. But I noticed that once I implemented my boundaries, I automatically became more efficient. I was

more productive when I was at work because I was rested and eager to get started. Instead of starting my day at work by scrolling social media for an hour or so, I immediately got started on my to-do list. Also, because my schedule was changing with childcare constraints, night classes, and prioritizing outside work things like exercise, I realized which hours I was most creative and motivated, and scheduled work that required those skills at that time. It turned out that I am REALLY productive between 5am and 7am, and I am also more productive in the afternoon if I schedule exercise in the middle of my day. I only figured this out because I stopped trying to work during every free moment. I saved most email for the end of the day because that was a task that usually took less brain power. For tasks that I really didn't want to do, I used The Pomodoro Technique (Cirillo, 2013) which a system of working in 25 minute increments with short breaks. I also found a way to automate tasks that should be mindless but were sucking up a lot of my time. For example, the youcanbook.me web app has saved me countless hours scheduling. Not every productivity method works for me, I can't zero inbox for example (Mann, 2007), so everyone needs to find their own. Trying out a bunch of different things helped me figure out how to be better with my time.

I recommend actively scheduling time to try out productivity methods. When you have a ridiculously long to do list, it might seem like there is no room for it, but this will save you time in the long run. You can also ask your mentors efficiency questions, "I am spending X amount of time on this every week, is this reasonable? Can you help me figure out how to be more efficient?"

Community: Many of my ideas about boundaries and efficiency were born out of conversations with colleagues. The techniques I discuss in the efficiency section were recommended to me when I explicitly asked others how they stay productive. In seeking advice and mentorship from more experienced colleagues, both at my institution and in the larger PER community, I challenged my own previous ideas about work-life balance, and I aim to help my students do the same. Another aspect of community is establishing a local support network where we help each other when work and life are difficult. When my mother was suddenly ill, and I had to travel across the country, an army of folks stepped up to help out. This would not have happened as seamlessly if I hadn't spent time developing relationship with others and establishing a network of people I could trust.

It's particularly useful to identify multiple mentors when you are a graduate student. Your adviser might have different ideas about work-life balance than you, but they aren't the only perspective out there. It's important

that you have mentors in your life that don't expect you to be the "perfect" academic. Seek other viewpoints by starting conversations with individuals by sharing what you do outside of work and school. Be explicit that you are looking for ideas about how to manage a life outside academia.

Advocacy: Because so many academic norms are centered around the myth of the singular male genius, it's important to me to advocate for myself and others when I encounter policies that appear to have this underlying assumption. One of the clearest examples of a way I advocated for myself occurred before I had my second child. For my first child, I spent an entire academic year pumping breastmilk in a storage closet twice per day. I didn't ask for anything else because it simply didn't occur to me. I was doing something "hard" (breastfeeding) while doing a "hard" job, and so it made sense to me that enduring this discomfort would be necessary. After reframing my relationship with my job, I realized that I should not be experiencing this discomfort, when a reasonable solution existed. I petitioned my sympathetic dean, and he allocated funds to renovate a larger space into a nursing room, and now there is a beautifully carpeted and decorated room with a mini fridge, sink and everything needed for anyone that needs to use it for this purpose.

On the topic of advocacy, I would like to say that I always advocate for my graduate students to prioritize their life over academia, but the truth is that I don't always realize how much time students are putting into something. More than once I have benefitted from graduate students voluntarily doing something for me because I appeared to be too busy and they wanted to help. Sometimes I forget that the amazing work my students might be at the expense of their personal life. We faculty need to be better about addressing work-life balance with our students and we should be discussing this with each other and directly with our students.

As I close this article, I want to recognize that I am writing this from a position of many privileges. During this reframing process, I never felt like I was going to lose my job. Furthermore, I knew that even if I chose to leave my job, my family and I would not suffer major life consequences. My pressures were internal, not external. I also feel that being an academic mother allows me more permission to enforce my boundaries, as cultural norms suggest that mothers should be caring for their children. Obviously, the previous statement is problematic on many levels, but in this case, I felt my "mother" status allowed me more boundary privileges. It shouldn't be this way; everyone's life outside of work has intrinsic value, and this time should be respected equally. And now as I sit here on the other

side of tenure, it's possible you do not share many of the lived experiences I discuss here. Knowing all this, I share this as one personal example of many and encourage you to seek out other perspectives. (There are many in the [PERCoGs Newsletter's](#) archives!) Academia can and should be intellectually challenging but it shouldn't need to be so "hard."

1. Babauta, L. (2008). *Zen to Done*. CreateSpace.
2. Cirillo, F. (2013). *The Pomodoro Technique*.
3. Merlin Mann. (2007). *Inbox Zero*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9UjeTMb3Yk>
4. You Can Book Me. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://youcanbook.me/>