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Fake Commutes and New Work-Life Balance

Learn about some of the major changes in work-life balance that took place in the past year, and get a few creative tips to find your balance – including the new concept of the “fake commute.”



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Prior to the pandemic, an active work-life balance was much easier to achieve, though it remained among one of the most talked-about topics of employee engagement. Before March 2020, the idea of balance amid well-being in a chaotic world filled with regular business travel, daily commutes, and family outings was difficult to master. Now, remove the central catalysts and one could assume that work-life balance is better among working Americans. While the early idea of spending more time at home and having more personal freedoms allowed many to explore a previously unknown balance of life, those prior catalysts quickly shifted and now, more than ever, there is an imbalance in our work-life.

Some are now finding that the parts of their work routines that they once considered frustrating, actually gave them access to better work-life balance. This includes the daily commute.

Fake Commutes

Prior to last year, the average one-way work commute in the U.S. was 27 minutes. That's nearly one hour a day, 18 hours a month, or roughly nine days a year spent commuting. This is a staggering number that prior to 2020 many would argue was mostly wasted time. Couple that with the frustration of traffic, crowded public transportation, and the cost associated with lost time, and the imbalance mounts.

But as it turns out, the commute was actually a very important aspect of indirect work-life balance. This is because it was similar to free time in that it could be spent listening to music, podcasts, or audiobooks, reading a book on the subway, or mindfully observing your surroundings as a way to peacefully start and end the workday.

The emergence of the "fake commute" is now being seen as beneficial to the adjusted work-from-home life that nearly 80 percent of us are now experiencing. Some have taken up new routines to get back that free time of sitting in traffic or meditating to the sounds of a crowded transportation space. The old adage, "you don't know what you have until it's gone," has taken on a new meaning. Something as routinely maddening as commuting was actually very important for the balance of our psyche.

To supplement, more and more at home workers are finding new routines and rituals that help create a balance between the work-life and the home-life. These include leaving the house even for a few minutes to reset for the day and then repeating the pattern at the end of the day, taking active time for breaks during the workday, and many other supplements now being labeled as "fake commutes." Something as simple as listening to a podcast for 20 minutes while sipping your coffee could constitute a fake commute.

Segmentation

Many psychologists agree that the commute was more important than we realized and therefore the fake commute might be something to adopt. This is part of what is known as

segmentation. Segmenting our day, while seemingly a small measure, gives a major opportunity for clarity. Segments are transitions in our day. These include getting ready, commuting, taking lunch, and building time for individual routines. But when we remove these factors, as we did during 2020, we have to create new segments in order to maintain emotional balance.

Here are some basic ideas to establish critical segments throughout the day:

Get dressed for the day.

It has become very easy to roll out of bed, dress comfortably, and begin working. But that doesn't allow our subconscious to separate from "home" and "work". So, following a morning routine and getting dressed for work will help.

Build in commute time.

Take time in the morning to focus on yourself. If you were a regular commuter, what did you do during that commute? Listen to music, find a podcast, read a book, or otherwise take personal time to start your day.

Close out your workspace.

Many are probably working at makeshift locations within their home. It is important to be able to walk away from these spaces at the end of the day. Find a place you can close off the working space from the home space, even if that's just putting away the work material.

According to the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#), the average American has expanded their workday by nearly one hour since the pandemic began. That extended work time, combined with no commute and minimal daily breaks, clearly exhibits an increasing imbalance between work and life for many Americans.

Remember to take time for yourself. Build new routines to help you stay well and thrive in the year ahead. You can still take joy in not commuting, but also keep in mind the importance of downtime as you find a healthy work-life balance that fits your needs.

by [Seth Barnett, VP Content Development](#)

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