

## What it is

An article and tool to help foster a more balanced life by creating clear boundaries between work and non-work time.

## What it can do

Help leaders to create a contract with themselves that:

- o Builds a container with clear, dependable boundaries around work
- o Creates work-free zones that support healthy relationships and a more balanced life
- o Embodies best practices for creating and maintaining a sustainable lifestyle
- o Help you clarify priorities at work by putting limits on your time

## How it works

- o Read the article to understand the key principles and building blocks in forging a contract
- o Use the worksheet that follows to draft your contract and plan for success

## Is work taking over too much of your life?

Do you:

- Have difficulty turning off your “work brain”?
- Start thinking about work within minutes of waking up?
- Have trouble finding inviolable space into which work doesn’t intrude?
- Struggle to find quality time to be with family and friends?
- Get distracted thinking about work while you are spending time with family and friends or doing other activities that you normally enjoy?
- Wish you didn’t have to work so much?

You’re not alone. There used to be clearer boundaries around work. Now, thanks to the wonderful “improvements” of technology, you can work 24/7... And too often, we do.

- Americans work 8 ½ hours more per week now than they did in 1979
- 80% of managers and skilled office workers work after leaving the office
- 69% cannot go to bed without checking their inbox
- 38% routinely check their emails at the dinner table
- 50% check email in bed in the morning<sup>1</sup>

Many people struggle to work extra hours in order to put food on the table. But most of you reading this article actually *choose* to work this much.

There’s always too much to do. It’s not your imagination. For those of us engaged in non-profit and social change work, we’re driven by the desperate needs we see in the world. We chronically try to do much with too few resources. We actively participate in failing to create dependable boundaries around work, and it tends to take over our lives in unwholesome ways.

## What We Need

Here’s a radical notion:

We need to go to work.

Then have a set time when work ends.

And then have some life into which work does not intrude.

This is possible. We can actually create space in our lives free from work—time to fully enjoy our family and friends, exercise and sports, reading, entertainment,

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobmorgan/2013/10/15/5-ways-email-makes-your-employees-miserable/>

hobbies, enjoying a good meal, a walk in the park, learning, community service... whatever brings you joy and fulfillment.

Work is never-ending, and left unchecked will fill all available space. Reflect for a moment on this unsettling quote by leadership expert Steven Covey:

*“Your inbox will be full on your deathbed.”*

My wife and I tried growing fresh mint in our garden, but it grew out of control, squeezing out the other plants. Then she put it in a big pot. We have plenty of mint, but now it's held within the boundaries of a *container*, allowing space for other plants to grow.

This is what we need: a container for our work. Having clear boundaries that both contain work and create space for the rest of life, can enhance both arenas.

### **A container for your work**

We want something similar to what unions struggled to achieve: a contract that provides regular, dependable working hours with clear time off. These days, “off” means time you can count on not being interrupted by texts, calls and emails — when your mind is not absorbed with your to-do list.

We enter a particular zone at work, an often high-paced energy that can be absorbing, quite compelling, actually addictive. You may notice when you stop working your mind is frequently still racing. Your body may be at the dinner table with family, but your mind is still at work. It requires some time to come down from the work buzz and settle into a different rhythm. But this relaxed state of being is tenuous. Simply checking your email or answering a text – even for just a few minutes – can catapult you back into your work buzz all over again.

We need significant work and buzz-free zones in order to enjoy other parts of our life and be present with our family and friends. In our work buzz, we get out of synch with our loved ones. It's also hard for them to relax knowing that at any moment your time together might be interrupted by a call or something you remember you have to do.

Imagine you had a fanatic boss who's always thinking of more things you should be doing. Well, many of us have such a boss. But it's in our own mind. A nagging voice that keeps pushing us, a harsh critic who's never fully satisfied with our performance, who doesn't seem to know the word “enough.” We'd never tolerate working for a person who treated us this way. We'd go on strike!

But we don't. We just tend to complain about how much we're working.

A container is like a contract for our labor: This is when I work, this is when I don't. It's a structure, a series of regular patterns and rhythms to which we commit. It's a tool to take charge of your life.

## A Contract with Yourself

In this day and age when there are no hard and fast boundaries around work, we need to make our own contracts to contain our work. We need a clear contract with ourselves, so we don't waste our energy endlessly negotiating with ourselves (and our loved ones) about how much and when we're working.

How do you want your life to feel? You may love your work, and you're free to choose to work as much as you want. But what else do you want time and space for? What kind of contract do you need?

In creating your contract, consider these four building blocks:

- Building Block #1. A cap on maximum hours per week
- Building Block #2. A beginning and end to work days
- Building Block #3. Work-free zones
- Building Block #4. Limits on travel

### **Building Block #1. A cap on maximum hours per week**

More than a century ago, blue-collar workers fought hard for limits on their workday, marching to the activist chant: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will." What is the contract you want to make with yourself about the number of hours a week you work? In order to make space for other priorities in your life do you want to limit your work to 40 hours a week? 50? 60?

### **Building Block #2. A beginning and end to work days**

When do you want your work day to start? Lying in bed? Over breakfast? Consider the possibility of starting your work day consciously at a specific time. Perhaps no work until after exercising, or until after eating breakfast, after meditating, or after getting the kids off to school. This means no checking your email...because if you do, your mind will start its work day and you may find yourself too mentally agitated to want to exercise or meditate, or to be present for your partner or kids.

When do you want to end the part of the day that you devote to work? If you work in an office, by when will you leave? And if you work at home, when do you declare, "The office is closed!" It's fine to include in your contract discreet, consciously chosen time to work in the evening. But did you know that being on your computer or smartphone within an hour of going to bed lowers melatonin and significantly impairs restful sleep.<sup>2</sup> Sufficient sleep has been shown to have a huge impact not only on health, but on cognitive functioning and work productivity. Consider a buffer zone between the end of your work and when you go to bed, to give your mind time to wind down and relax.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/10/really-using-a-computer-before-bed-can-disrupt-sleep/>

### Building Block #3. Work-free zones

We have discussed how important it is to have significant blocks of time into which work does not intrude. There are many ways to structure this.

For example:

- No work after 7:00 p.m.
- No work between the time I get home and when the kids are in bed.  
Then no work after 9:30 p.m.
- No work on Tuesday and Thursday evenings.
- No work on Sundays.
- No work Saturday afternoon - 6:00 p.m. Sunday

Think through what makes sense, then include in your contract with yourself specific times for dependable work-free zones. Then, don't let things slip – honor your contract.

### Building Block #4. Limits on travel

Travel is disruptive of schedules, family life, and sleep. A good container should include some kind of boundaries around travel. The simplest boundary is to place a limit on the number of nights away from home per month. Because work travel can tend to be episodic, you may need a formula with some flexibility. For example:

*"I will travel no more than 7 nights away per month. If I travel less than 7 nights in a given month, I can roll over no more than 3 nights to the following month."*

Your contract with yourself can use these four building blocks to create boundaries around work that help create and nurture a more fully satisfying life.

## Tips for Making it Work

### 1. Flexibility and dealing with exceptions

But what about...

- crises at work
- things at work taking longer than expected
- unanticipated important events
- regular periods of intensive work (such as political campaigns)

Fair question. For some of us, work is not always routine or predictable.

But we can deal with the ebbs and flows of work by building some flexibility into the container. For example:

- If I work more than my allotted total hours in a given week, I must make up the time by working that many fewer hours the following week.
- I will work no more than 50 hours a week, except
  - During the 6 weeks prior to elections when the limit is 60 hours a week.
  - There is no limit during our annual meeting.
- I will make sure to schedule time off to recover from these intensive stretches.

Be creative in creating rules in your contract that allow the flexibility you need to meet the nature of your work, while still creating good boundaries.

Warning! Be careful not to use flexibility as a substitute for cleaning up the self-created chaos that comes from poor planning, unrealistic deadlines, and failing to set clear and manageable priorities.

It's also important to avoid continually making exceptions to the agreements we've made with ourselves. Too many exceptions erode the foundation of the container, and suddenly work has again run rampant over other valued parts of our life.

Many things feel urgent at work, but it's easy to confuse the urgent with the important. On any given night you could probably find a reason to skip dinner with the kids and work late. But I worked in hospice for a number of years and in sitting with the dying, When people spoke of their regrets about the lives they led, I never once heard anyone say they wished they had worked more hours.

## 2. Engaging others to support your choices

In some cases, you may run into resistance from work cultures that are used to people having no boundaries. You may need to negotiate or organize to create the shifts that you need. There is a growing backlash against the 24/7 work day. At Volkswagen, their servers stop sending emails 30 minutes after the end of employees' shifts, and only start again half an hour before people return to work. One in four companies have adopted similar formal or informal rules.<sup>3</sup>

While non-profits have often lagged behind in adopting such policies, there is a growing appreciation for the value of work-life balance. If you are part of a team or organization, consider engaging your colleagues in a collective conversation around balance and boundaries.

But even in the absence of policies and collective action, once you become clear about your needs, you will find most managers, colleagues and boards willing to negotiate with you around reasonable boundaries.

It's critical to communicate the nature of your new schedule to all those with whom you work regularly. Explain to folks what you are doing and why. Ask directly for their support. You will find that most people are willing to respect your boundaries if asked proactively. Some will be inspired to follow your example. Your colleagues can help by not trying to reach you during work free zones, not expecting you to respond immediately to their texts and emails in your off hours, and thinking twice about when they send those messages. Given the challenges of changing our habits, it's also great to enroll others with whom you work to actively help in holding you accountable (Some teams share their weekly tracking sheets of hours worked.)

In many intimate relationships, there is chronic tension around how much one or the other person is working, when they come home, working at home, and amount of travel.

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/after-hours-e-mail-companies-are-telling-employees-to-avoid-it/2012/09/21/a95f53b2-fdba-11e1-a31e-804fccb658f9\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/after-hours-e-mail-companies-are-telling-employees-to-avoid-it/2012/09/21/a95f53b2-fdba-11e1-a31e-804fccb658f9_story.html)

If you have a life partner, you would be wise to engage them in a co-creative process around your contract rather than presenting them with a fait accompli. By coming to a shared and clear agreement around your contract with yourself, your loved ones can transform from being a nag to becoming your ally in creating the life you want.

### 3. Ways to support yourself

- Put your start/stop times in your calendar and block out your work-free zones.
- Use real data to help keep yourself honest. Track your cumulative weekly work hours closely so that you know when you're approaching your maximum and can adjust.
- Adapt your technology to support your boundaries. Separate your work and personal email addresses. Have special ring tones for friends who call your cell.
- Rewards actually do help modify behavior and form new habits. When you successfully complete a week in your new regime, find some easy way of rewarding yourself with something that feels pleasurable.
- You may find it helpful to make your contract with yourself for a discrete period of time. A month? Three months? Then stop and evaluate. What worked? What needs adjustment? Then make a new contract for another set period. Most people find this works better than making permanent vows, as it also allows for adjusting to shifting needs at work and at home.

### 4. Limits as a tool for prioritizing your work

Having clear limits becomes an incredibly useful tool for setting priorities. For example, if we know we can only be away from home seven nights in a month, we think much more carefully about the relative importance of invitations that involve travel.

It also makes it easier to turn down invitations when you can say things like, *"I would have loved to come, but I've already committed to my limit of seven nights away from home this month."* I have found that people are usually intrigued by the notion of these kinds of limits/agreements, and often become interested in hearing more about experiments in personal ecology and work-life balance.

### 5. Falling on and off the wagon

Repetition is a key to forming new habits. It takes considerable conscious attention to establish a new normal. Until the new pattern is set, it's quite common for people to find themselves starting to slip out of the container.

When we fail to keep agreements we make with ourselves, the danger is that we start feeling badly and give up on the program. We want to learn how to deal with slippage without breaking the contract. We need to learn to simply press the reset button and begin again.

Rather than a fixed condition, think of your container for work as a tool for repeatedly finding and re-finding the balance you want in your life

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art form of Aikido, was asked by a student, *"Master, how do you stay centered all the time?"* He responded, *"I'm not centered all the time. I simply recover faster than before."*

It's likely that you will sometimes find yourself working much more than your limit or your work-free zones start eroding. Don't beat yourself up! Be like the aikido master and re-find your balance. And when you start to slip again, simply notice it, and begin once more. Then you too will start recovering "faster than before."

## 6. What if I keep finding that I have too much work?

First, make sure you actually have too much work. Productivity is not always directly proportional to hours worked.

*"At the Boston Consulting Group, when a team of stressed-out consultants began organizing "predictable time off" – no-messaging zones during their off time – their total work hours dropped by 11 percent, yet the same amount of work was accomplished."<sup>4</sup>*

However... you may actually have too much work.

You then have two options:

### Option #1

Give up this whole container business, throw out the contract you made with yourself, and forget about having a sustainable life that you enjoy living.

### Option #2

Renegotiate with yourself and/or your organization your responsibilities and your workload so that it is truly manageable.

We have an excellent tool to help: [Managing Your Workload](#).

Many of you reading this are fortunate enough to have jobs that feel meaningful, in which you are highly engaged. While it can be challenging, it is possible to be devoted to your work while also being fully committed to a rich and fulfilling personal and family life.

**NOTE:** The following pages are a worksheet for helping draft your contract with yourself.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/end-the-tyranny-of-24-7-email.html>

# My Contract With Myself

## **Purpose of this contract:**

Why do I want to create boundaries around my work?  
What is my positive picture of the life I would like to lead?

## **Building Block #1. A cap on maximum hours per week**

What is the maximum number of hours per week I will work?  
How will I deal if I go over that maximum in a given week?  
Are there predictable exceptions to this limit that I can structure into my contract?

## **Building Block #2. Beginning and ending my work days**

When and how will I **begin** my work days? When and how will I **end** my work days?  
(e.g. no email before breakfast, a work-free zone one hour before bed, no work  
while kids are awake, etc.)  
Are there any habits I want to change or incorporate into the beginning or end of  
my work days?  
(e.g. exercise before work, or no computer one hour before bed.)

### **Building Block #3. Work-free zones**

What sacrosanct, work-free zones will I establish?

### **Building Block #4. Limits on travel**

What limits do I want to place on travel?

How will I manage the ebb and flow of travel opportunities?

### **Engaging support from others**

What might I need to negotiate with my organization to make this work?

How can I engage my colleagues in supporting my contract?

How might I need to engage my loved ones in creating and supporting my contract?

### **Supporting myself**

What systems, processes, tools etc. will help me implement this contract?

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

I commit to the terms of this contract through (date) \_\_\_\_\_