

## MODULE 8: WORK–LIFE BALANCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

### Module Introduction

Mobile devices, work digitalisation, online communication allow for more flexibility as to when and where people can work. 10-15 years ago, when distance work with the help of digital technology was first being introduced, it was considered as an opportunity to improve work-life balance. Less than two decades later, after COVID-19 pandemic actually forced digitalisation and distance work wherever possible, we already can see the consequences. We know better now the actual effects of digitalisation on our work-life balance, which tend to be not as positive as expected, even dubious. [The research we have done as part of the STRESS-LESS Project](#), has shown that many people complain of stress, related to not being able to find a good work-life balance as a result of digitalisation.

The main reason for this is that if we don't manage mindfully the way we use technology, it can blur the boundaries between work and private life. Here is what research found about these effects of technology:

- Due to digital technology the expectation of being constantly online and available has developed.
- Smartphones also add to the after-hours availability pressure.
- Digitalisation can give rise to difficulties with psychologically detaching from work during free time.

Blurring the boundaries between work and the rest of your life may have two main negative effects on you:

- first, you don't get the chance to recover, to replenish your energy and resources, because work is constantly on your mind and
- second, it may lead to distancing you from the meaningful connections in your life (like friends and family).

As a result, your efficiency and effectiveness in your work will fall and you may experience negative effects on your overall wellbeing levels.

That is why The Stress-Less team has devoted this module to re-discovering work-life balance in the digital era and to being able to set back the boundaries where they belong. Digital technologies and teleworking really do have the potential to help us even improve our work-life balance, we only need to be self-aware and disciplined to do this.

In this module we share with you what you can do for yourselves in order to improve your work-life balance in relation to the use of digital technologies. We shall help you develop the right mindset and the skills to set the boundaries. For this we shall use some lessons from the ancient philosophy of stoicism. Don't you need to be a stoic not to check your email or messenger first thing in the morning?

The stoic philosophy will help you develop work-life balance not as a one-time achievement, but as a mindset. With the constant changes in our life this is a process – continuous exercise that requires us to be vigilant, mindful, self-aware and self-controlled.

Stoicism, as per the ancient Greek philosophers, is about gaining control over your own impulses and finding balance. It was a school of philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. It was centred around enforcing the 4 so called cardinal virtues: self-control, courage, justice and wisdom. Stoics believed that developing these virtues helped people live happier. Later many romans in important positions of leaders even emperors found their way to stoicism and its virtues. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius is one of the famous stoics, as well as Zeno, Epictetus and Seneca. They all tried to answer the question: What is the best way to live?

In this modules' Activities you will find 7 lessons from stoicism about improving work-life balance, which are also very applicable to dealing with digital transformation. You will also find 2 other strategies that can help improve your work-life balance with regard to digitalization.

Since not everything depends on us, sometimes there are also organizational measures that need to be taken to protect our private life and leisure time. That is why the Stress-less team has developed also a Training for Company Digital Stress Coaches (IO4), where you will find additional information, including measures at organisational level. This module is focused on digital intrusion in our work-life balance, whether working from the office or from home. Additional ideas about finding work-life balance in home office environment you can find in Module **Home Office Stress Management**.

You can listen to the material [here](#).

## Activity 1

“Wake up Early’

Yes, getting out of the warm bed isn't very pleasant. And it may be very tempting, especially if we work from home, to spend more time under the warm bed covers. But it is also true that we are more productive if we wake up early. Even if you are not an early bird and 6 a.m. is not your time to wake up, 7 a.m. might be a good choice. Try it out and see that just getting up one hour earlier in the morning opens so much productive time for you during the day.

From stoic perspective waking up early gives us quiet time to reflect on the day, to plan and organise. If you wake up early enough before the phone calls and emails start coming in or before your kids wake up, you can reflect, think, be by yourself, have a quiet cup of coffee or tea. If you wake up early though, but immediately check your emails, the goal of this activity (to provide you some quiet time and a self-aware start of the day) will not be accomplished. The quality of your day will be decided by the emails that came while you

slept, the Facebook posts and instant messages that appeared meanwhile. The idea is to devote this time to yourself, may be to meditate a little bit, to watch the beauty of the world outside, to experience a moment of humility without rushing out into the day. Yes, it is not easy at the beginning, but when it turns into a habit you will enjoy it 😊. Start tomorrow.

## Activity 2

### “Manage Expectations”

The stoics would rather be surprised that something bad didn't happen than that something bad happened and they did not prepare for it. The Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius in the morning was thinking about the kind of people he was going to meet during the day. He thought that some of these people were going to be envious, mean, angry. He wrote that we want the best out of people and that is why we are continually disappointed. Something similar happens with contemporary people and digital communication. We plan our time as we always did and we forget to include in the plan the amount of time we spend answering unexpected emails, calls, WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger and whatever other messages. Also, the amount of time for checking our social media and the latest news is severely underrated. So, in order to be able to manage our expectations in terms of digital interference throughout the day we need to actually find out what happens in reality. The stoics say that the worst excuse is “I didn't think this could happen.” So, let's figure out what we can expect in term of digital disturbance during the day:

From [here](#) you can download a data worksheet that will help you gain this understanding. Fill in the data for today, or better for at least 4 days ahead, so you can have realistic expectations and also a contingency plan.

You can also answer the following questions and go through the subsequent steps, writing in your diary.

- How many emails did you expect today ..... and how many did you receive.....?
- How much time did you expect to spend answering emails..... and how much did you really spend.....?
- How much time did you expect to spend answering instant messages..... and how much did you really spend.....?
- How much time did you expect to spend reading news online..... and how much did you really spend.....?
- How much time did you expect to spend using social media..... and how much did you really spend.....?
- How much time did you expect to spend solving technological issues with digital tools (ex. setting up a printer or installing new software, learning how to use new software)..... and how much did you really spend.....?

Now follow the steps:

1. What is the difference between expected and actually experienced?
2. Can you eliminate tomorrow some of the extra, unplanned time?
3. The extra, unplanned time that cannot be eliminated should be incorporated in your daily plan? Reflect on how you can do this?

More about planning of your day and prioritisation can be found in Modules **SINGLE-TASK STRATEGY** and **HOME OFFICE STRESS MANAGEMENT**.

### Activity 3

“Experience Moments of Stillness”

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone," wrote the French philosopher Blaise Pascal.

Stoic wisdom suggests that we deliberately create moments of stillness, which means freedom of disturbances. Contemporary research into the psychology of positive experience as well as productivity also has found that when we are happiest and also most productive, we don't do 10 things at the same time, we do only one thing, in which we are completely immersed. Think of the moments when you were most balanced. What were they like? Chances are you are thinking now of times of stillness. Most often these times of stillness do not happen by themselves. We have to carve time for them during our day. It is not enough to leave them for the 2 weeks in a year when we are on holiday. We have to have daily moments of stillness, when a million different digital stimuli are not thrown at us, when we are not trying to do multiple things. As Seneca would say: “The mind is like muddy water, in order to have clarity we have to let the water settle.” Find today at least 10 minutes for stillness. Turn off the news, sit alone in utter silence, go for a long swim or walk.



Or you can do a mindfulness practice. Here is a short one. It is called “STOP”, and here is what this abbreviation stands for:

S = Stop

If you need to boost your mindfulness, just Stop what you are doing for a short moment.

T = Take

Take at least 3 deep breaths to ground yourself and bring your attention to the present moment.

O = Observe

Observe what is going on with your thoughts, emotions, breathing and scan quickly your body for any sensations.

P = Proceed

Proceed with whatever you were doing, making a mindful choice or action.

STOP mindfulness practice can be done quickly but it is a powerful tool to get back into balance and regain equanimity when needed.

## Activity 4

“Focus on the Essential”

Learn to say NO to things that don't matter. Every time we say yes to something, even if it is something small like an email or a message, we simultaneously say no to another thing that might be more important. Have in mind that our time is our most precious resource, and it is limited. If we act reactively, i.e. react to everything that the digital world serves us, then we are saying yes to someone else's agenda, not our own. Seneca said: “It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it.” The “digital era time” just seems to fly faster than ever before, because of the many distractions offered by technology. Seneca also said that “Life is long if you know how to use it.” We just have to focus on what is essential. We have to remember that the time we give to one or other thing must be in due proportion to its worth (Marcus Aurelius). We should ask ourselves:

- Is this essential?
- Do I have to do it?
- Why do I have to do it?
- What if I say no and don't do it?

This activity asks you that today and in the next days you start asking yourself these questions about your routine and non-routine activities of the day. Do it deliberately at least 10 times a day, until it becomes a habit for you.

## Activity 5

“Look for the Good”

“The task of a philosopher: we should bring our will into harmony with whatever happens, so that nothing happens against our will and nothing that we wish for fails to happen.” — Epictetus

The path to peace according to the stoics is to not hope for the events to happen as we want, but to welcome events in whichever way they happen. Epictetus also said that “It is not things that upset us, but our judgements about those things”. This idea was also shared by Shakespeare: “...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Think about for example when you are stuck in traffic or when the internet stops and you can't do what was planned for some time. It is not that this is good or bad, this just happens. Question is how you choose to use this time. Do you get nervous that things didn't happen as planned or you accept and make the best out of what is at hand. Do you use the quiet time without internet for a task that requires focus or for a still time to rest and recover your energy?

Activity: in every situation that presents itself to you, whether with regard to digital work, or not, which you would instinctively judge as bad or unpleasant, stop and look deeper into it. Think about what is the good in it? How can you make the best of it?

If you want to understand better how and why to refrain from judging events you, can read this [short excerpt from the book “If You are so Smart Why Aren't You Happy” by Raj Raghunathan](#).

## Activity 6

“Take a Walk”

Seneca would say that we should take wondering outdoor walks, so that the mind is refreshed. Aristotle conducted his lectures while walking. Nietzsche is said to have walked up to 8 hours a day. Darwin took a walk 3 times a day, like a meal for the brain. Every day should have a walk in it. Walking has many psychological benefits and benefits for the mind, in addition to the benefits from exercise. You can do your phone calls, while walking. Also a good idea would be to have a walking meditation.

Here is [a guided meditation](#) that you can use for today's walk.



## Activity 7

### “Evening Review”

Getting up early and planning the day is important, but according to the stoics the evening review is as important. Seneca used to sit down and ask himself, what bad habits he cured during the day, what temptations he resisted, in what specific way was he better today than the day before. A good practice for the evening review would be journaling. Journaling is very good for your overall sense of wellbeing. It is good to also make notes on the progress of improving your ways to deal with technology overload and intrusion. We suggest that you start journaling today, at least for some time on paper, so that you get used to make this daily review. Here are some questions that you might want to pay attention to in your daily journal.

- Significant things that happened today & why they happened
- Failures I had today
- New things I tried today
- Acts of kindness I did today
- Good things that happened today!
- What did I manage to improve today in the way I deal with digitalisation and technology?
- What can I improve tomorrow?

## Activity 8

### “When We Are Home, We Are Home”

One of the main problems, created by digitalisation is that very often we come home or go on holiday, but our mind is still processing things from work or planning things for work. It happens without even noticing, during holidays, causally browsing your phone, you go through your emails and you see that the contract for your new project has arrived. You are not supposed to do anything about this until end of holidays, but your mind starts thinking: it is a big project, a lot of tasks, pretty complicated, it needs careful planning, maybe it will be difficult to implement it and s.o. Even though you are not doing anything about this until you go back to work on 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, your mind is mulling over it and as a result it is not getting its fully deserved rest. That is why we need to devise our own strategies to filter work-related communication and information during leisure and holiday time.

Here are some ideas:

- Use multiple devices. It may be practical and convenient to use the same mobile phone and laptop both for work and for personal use, but if you are not a real stoic and able to resist multiple digital temptations you might find it more useful to have separate devices for personal and for work use.

- Holiday planning: do not to bring company mobile phone and laptop to the family holidays.
- Split your work laptop in two. If you have administrator access to your laptop you can separate your hard drive – part for work and part for leisure.
- Set up separate profiles and accounts for work and leisure. If your phone allows it, create an additional user account for leisure time and switch between the two accounts, depending on if you are working or in time for rest. You can also set up separate work and personal web browser profiles on your laptop. Or you can use two different browsers on your computer and phone, allocating one for work and one for personal use. Do not check your personal email account through the same browser or app, where you check your work one. This will allow you, on holidays for example, to check only your personal email.
- Learn about the connectivity features of your phone. Maybe you can make different groups of contacts. Some of them may be able to reach you all day long, while others only in working hours (iPhones allow such settings, for example).
- When on holiday, even for a day or two, set your email to be forwarded to someone else in your company and also set up a message, saying to the sender that you are temporarily unavailable.
- Use an app like StayFree, mobile app that tracks and limits screen time, to help overcome phone addiction.
- Write down your own ideas about how to exclude work invasion during leisure time.

Choose the ideas that you like most or that are applicable to your work situation and make them part of your daily/holiday routine.

## Activity 9

„Reflect and change”

As a wrap up we propose to you a 5-step process for implementing changes in your work-life balance with regard to digitalisation. This is a kind of self-reflection process similar to the one used in Module **DIGITAL SELF-AWARENESS**:

1. Pause and think about which beliefs have been normalised, but are untrue and not productive for you or causing you stress. For example: “In order to do a good sales job I need to be available for my customers 24/7.”
2. What is the emotion that the identified belief causes – do you feel angry, sad, energised?
3. Reprioritise. Ask yourself, “Is being available 24/7 for customers really worth cutting back on my sleep&relax time?”, for example.



4. Consider alternatives: can you negotiate a new type of arrangement with your customers, according to which they only call you outside work hours in case of emergency?
5. Implement the identified changes, for example talk to your customers and tell them that the time after 18.00 or 20.00 in the evening until 8.00 in the morning is off limits.

Go through this process now and make it a habit to use it every time that your feel your work-life balance is off balance 😊

### **Suggested Further Readings and Bibliography**

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. Harper Perennial

Ragunathan, R. (2016). If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy? Portfolio

Seneca, L. A., & Campbell, R. (1969). Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae morales ad Lucilium. Penguin Books.

Aurelius, M. (2002). The Meditations. Random House.