

The eternal triangle

Must work and home life always suffer when studying appears on the scene, asks **RICHARD CURTIS**.

- Work and home life will have to accommodate study time.
- The importance of effective time management.
- Ensuring that colleagues understand study commitments.
- Separate sittings should facilitate exam plans.

The work-life balance. We're all so busy these days that we need advice on getting our work and personal lives in the right proportion. But let's say that you have read a few self-help books and have just about managed to get your tax work hours and private life sorted. All's well in the world and your career and home life are happily rolling along hand in hand – with home life meeting up with work life in the evening, perhaps for a film and late supper, and in the morning seeing work life on to the train with the other commuters. Meanwhile, work life is merrily toiling away with just the right amount of stress and corporate tax planning to keep things interesting, but knowing that home life would be there with a soothing massage and a nice bottle of red in the evening.

However, like in all the best stories, you know that it can't last. After home and work have been getting along famously for a couple of years the inevitable happens, things become over-familiar and routine and the eternal triangle rears its ugly (or, more likely, not so ugly) head. Yes, you guessed it, along comes qualifications tossing its golden-haired exams and fluttering its hope of promotions and salary increases in front of work, with whispered promises of a better life: riches; benefits; more holiday entitlement; and maybe even foreign secondments and travel thrown in. 'Just think', says qualifications, 'with me, who knows what could happen', as it carelessly lets its study manuals fall open in front of work, who is now well and truly captivated.

Poor old home-life can only look on while remembering the happy times it spent with work. Later that evening, work's dinner gets fed to the dog by home, after work phones to say that it's going to be unavoidably detained at the office because it's involved in 'a heavy study session'.

The juggling trick

But does studying for exams have to be like an episode from Dear Deidre's casebook column in *The Sun*? Does your significant other have to lie in bed at night facing the wall while you snuggle up instead in a threesome with *Tolley's Yellow* and *Tolley's Orange* handbooks? Well, fortunately for the future of this article before it morphs into something totally unsuitable – no. But if you have decided that you should be studying for a tax qualification (sharp intake of breath at this point) you are going to have to manage to find time to study when your hours are full of work and relaxation with some eating and sleeping thrown in.

Coincidentally, the three-way pull of work, study and a home life seemed to strike a chord when we asked Siobhan Gillespie, a solicitor in the tax disputes and investigations department at McGrigors LLP, for her experiences.

'While juggling a full-time paralegal job and a "full-time" LLB course at Birkbeck college (three evenings a week, 6pm to 9pm and associated studying), I came to one inescapable conclusion: I could pass my degree, keep my supervising partner happy or have a social life. However, I could not simultaneously do all three. So the social life had to go. As I was without dependants at that point, thankfully my social life was the only major sacrifice over the three-year period of my degree. However, I have nothing but admiration for those fellow students (and there were many) who somehow managed to combine full-time employment, full-time studying and family life. I genuinely have no idea how they did it.

'While I am not sure if I would recommend full-time studying combined with full-time work to everyone, especially if you enjoy your sleep, I do have to say that my time at Birkbeck was a truly fascinating and rewarding period and helped me immensely in furthering my career. I would also thoroughly recommend the college to anyone who wants to expand their horizons, or simply be exposed to a different way of thinking than that which is required for their day job.'

Psychology and motivation

So if you are thinking of becoming involved with studying what should you do to fit this in with the other areas of your life? As with most things nowadays, advice is always close at hand and the CIOT and ATT websites have advice on 'How to study' (www.lexisurl.com/howtostudy). This notes the importance of playing the role of an amateur psychologist when taking exams. It doesn't mention any need for a white coat or leather couch, but taking on the role of 'agony aunt' again, what can we do to help work and home get along together.

The CIOT and ATT's advice is that the first thing to do is to find the motivation for taking the exams. 'If you can find no reason to pass, then there is little point in taking the exam.' Both work and home need to know that they will together benefit from the motivating factor, whether it is job security, higher income, increased opportunity, etc.

Time

The CIOT notes tell us that time is often like money – 'in short supply and used too quickly'. It's a valuable commodity and, also like money, needs some planning to make sure that it is used effectively. It's here that home and work will probably have to make adjustments to balance the requirements of studying.

'Good time management skills are the key to successful studying', says the CIOT website, which recommends drawing up a time plan chart showing each available day until the exam. There is also some detailed advice for completing the chart at the web address above. Having prepared your chart put it somewhere visible. This will help encourage you to keep to it.

Perhaps work (you, dear reader, in this case) can get the support of home (your loved one) for its study plan by involving it at this stage. Work and home need to understand that they are partners in this enterprise and that qualifications is there to help them both, not steal one away from the other. This way they should be able to come through the experience with a better and stronger relationship.

Of course, it's not always going to be easy and both the CIOT and ATT suggest that family and friends need to realise that you should not be disturbed during your study time. And you also must not be distracted by other siren calls such as the phone (get an answering machine or use the '1571' voicemail service); the telly (record '*Stenders* for later viewing); and the doorbell (they'll come back – they always do don't they?).

This is work calling

Remember, it's not just your loved ones at home who you have to keep happy. Because it's tax, I can understand that you love your work but while you might not have quite the same level of feeling for your bosses, you do need at least to keep them happy while you are studying. Someone else with a considerable experience of study and qualifications, both in her own career and in mentoring and supervising others, is Grant Thornton's head of tax, Francesca Lagerberg.

'Fitting in work commitments and career-enhancing study can feel like juggling with double-edged swords. You want to keep the boss happy but you also need time to make sure you give yourself the best chance to pass. Some of you will be working with people for whom exams will be a hazy memory and therefore they might have forgotten the grind involved. As with your family, the best thing is to be honest with those around you about what support you need for your exams while they are honest about their expectations of you. By talking through any concerns you have they will have the chance to offer you alternatives. The best gift you can give to yourself and to your firm is to get the qualifications you need to take your career on to the next level.'

Tailored to fit

James Morley ATT, senior manager at EDF Tax, obviously remembers his own time studying with clarity.

'Your employer is fully aware of the dedication required to take you as a student through your study course, be it CTA or ATT, because the likelihood is, unless they are super-beings, that they have been in exactly the same boat and experienced exactly the same anxieties and pressures that you are feeling. With this in mind there is an empathy with the employee/student, and I find that by providing motivation for the student to commit to their study plan and maintain the high quality of work in the office the employer should provide as much encouragement and direct support to give you the best possible opportunity to succeed. After all, it is the employer that is investing in you and your time, as well as their own, to hopefully, from their point of view, gain a fully-qualified member of staff.'

‘Giving the student all the tools to help them throughout the study period will increase the chance of passing – these include day release and correspondence courses, access to student forums, audio/visual online study packs, tutor support on-line, as well as in-house assistance via staff who have recently sat the exams, or the resident guru!

‘Now that the exams can be taken in separate sittings they can be tailored to suit the student and, for example, some students may prefer to sit all exams together, whereas others may feel more confident concentrating on one subject at a time and taking the exams (hopefully successfully) over four separate sittings. In terms of maintaining a healthy mix of study, work and your social life, a realistic, honest study plan is key. Here, you may find that a frank discussion with your line manager when drawing up your plan should help you to find the best route to success, which is the ultimate aim of you both.’

Conclusion

So that seems to be the secret. Don’t let your involvement in the ‘eternal triangle’ of work life, social life and studying be your downfall. A healthy balance should see you successfully come out of the other side, not only as an older and wiser person, but as a better qualified one as well.