A scientist on any schedule

At times, my life as a scientist has resembled what many see as the archetype: available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to go to the lab or out to the field, with no personal responsibilities that can’t be sacrificed or taken care of by others. I have lived this life—and enjoyed it. But since becoming a single mother, I’ve realized that it is only one of many ways to be a scientist. Now, I have a satisfying career as a professor with a reasonable work schedule, and I’ve come to appreciate that there is no one schedule that best produces excellent science or demonstrates dedication to its practice.

As a student in my 20s, I loved working all hours. There was a tacit system of bragging rights among students (and some professors) over how late we stayed on campus. I joined right in, never considering the impact of this culture on my peers who could not or did not want to live that way. I was a night owl and passionate about my research; I rarely went home. I participated in the night janitor’s coveted bartering club, where a plate of homemade cookies or a fruit pie would get me a jar of his homemade moonshine. Every spring, I moved 1500 kilometers away to live at a research site for 3 or 4 months. I just turned off the lights, locked up my apartment, and left.

In my 30s, I worked for a government lab, which required that my weekly 40 hours be arranged around “core business hours.” This meant that I left the office by 6 p.m., and I never met the janitor. I was frustrated. After 6 years, I left to manage a field project in Finland, where I happily resumed my long work days and weeks-long field excursions.

Then, my son was born. His schedule was uncompromising. While on maternity leave, I adjusted to a lifestyle with clear limits on when and how long I could work. To my surprise, this time I had no regrets. I appreciated the pressure to work efficiently and then step away. The constraints taught me to set achievable goals for each work session, and to be honest with myself about what I could accomplish. Working a strict schedule also allowed me to bond with my son.

Now, my son’s school and sports schedules limit my on-campus hours to weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and there is no amount of money, moonshine, or free child care in the world that could call me back to campus after I’ve gone home for the night. I am focused and productive during the day, and I have eliminated the time-wasting habits of my former lifestyle. My fieldwork is on hiatus (some mothers are brave enough to bring their kids out in the field, but not me), but I have learned new computer-based research techniques. These approaches sometimes turn into collaborations with people I never would have worked with otherwise, bringing fresh perspectives (and fun) to my work.

Like many others, I complete a good deal of my work while not “at work,” especially when deadlines are looming or inspiration calls. I revise manuscripts during bath time, read papers at the gym, and grade exams at my son’s hockey practice. Occasionally I resent this multitasking, but I remind myself of its necessity during these child-rearing years, which are just a short period over the long course of my career.

Other times, I avoid “homework” and simply enjoy my life outside of work. This time helps clear the cobwebs and allows me to focus more intensely when I am working. I’ve had some of my best ideas while changing a diaper or walking the dog. “Work-life balance” is not a zero-sum game for me. My work makes my life better, and my life makes my work better.

In 10 years, when my son goes off to college (or, as he plans, becomes a demolition derby mechanic), my hours may change. I might become acquainted with the night janitorial staff again. But I will strive to keep my good habits: to continue to work efficiently, set achievable goals, and take time off to recharge and brainstorm. And regardless of my schedule, I will always be a scientist.

Audrey L. Mayer is an associate professor of ecology and environmental policy at Michigan Technological University in Houghton. For more on life and careers, visit sciencecareers.org. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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