

Work to live

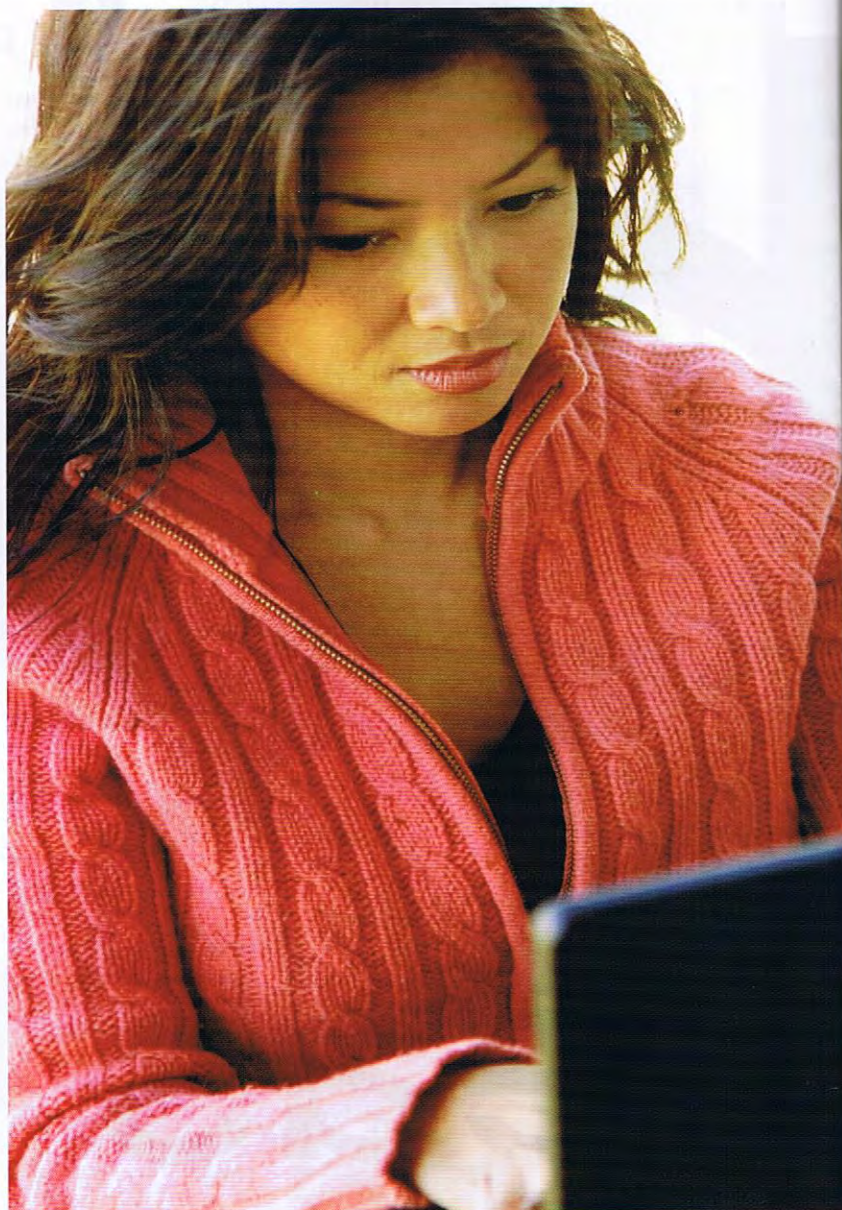
Don't let work take over your life, finding a happy medium is easier than you think **BY VANESSA TRIPODI**

Working flexible hours is a great way to remind yourself why you are working in the first place; you want to go on nice holidays, send the kids to good schools and buy that wide screen TV you have always dreamt of. But what is the point of having all of these things if you are too busy working to enjoy them? Our desire to enjoy life as well as have a career, is reflected in the numerous flexible working options that are becoming ever more available. These include, job sharing, working from home, flexitime and even having a nap in the office. While these all sound like great ways to achieve a positive work life balance, as a Personal Assistant can you fit them into your schedule? You might think it's a tall order to do your job on a flexible basis but it might just be possible with a little extra planning and consideration.

Keep your options open

Working flexible hours allows you to keep your career, position and income, without neglecting your personal life. Flexible working arrangements also have the potential to open the workforce to more people; mothers, parents or those close to retirement. For example, job sharing works when two people share the role of one full time job. This can be split to two and a half days each, two days for one worker and three for the other or one employee working full time and another coming in part time. Job sharing can either be implemented permanently, or when one or both workers are taking part time maternity/parental leave, are studying or are re-entering full time work due to health issues.

Job sharing is not generally an option for PAs in executive roles, as it makes it harder to build up the level of trust and respect which leads to positive and productive relationships between Personal Assistants and bosses. Job sharing does work well in more junior secretarial and administrative roles, as Lyn Prowse-Bishop, who now runs Executive Stress Office Support (eSOS), found when she was job sharing a legal secretary role. Lyn was able to work on the two days her daughter was at childcare, while the other employee was doing the same. In this instance job sharing worked well as both women had similar personalities and communicated well; Lyn received an email when she arrived at work telling her what had been happening, and what needed to be done. While Lyn was job sharing this position, she was able to spend time with her daughter, as well as begin growing her own business, and she eventually left to successfully pursue this full time.

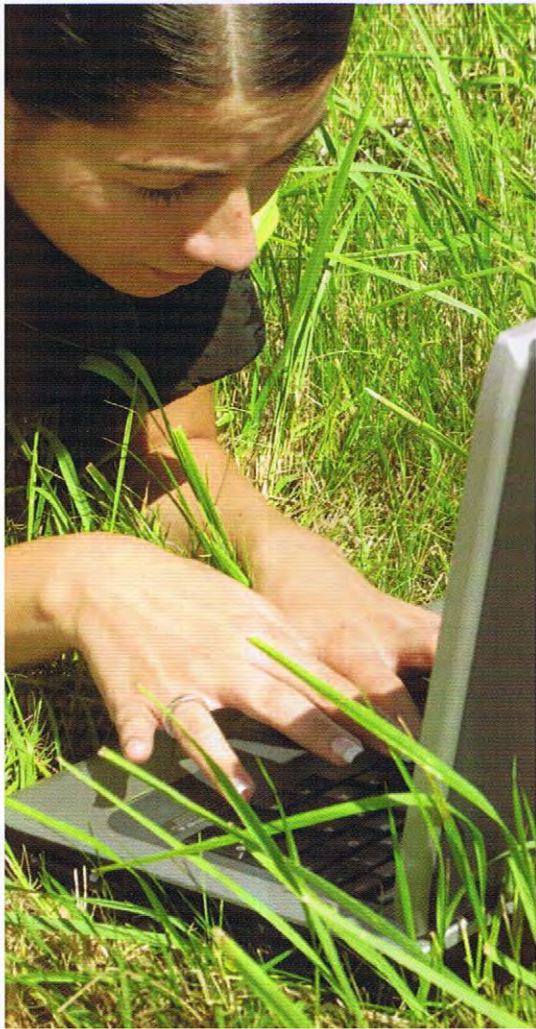


Virtual reality

Working from home is a great way to achieve a flexible balance between work and play. Employees can either spend a previously agreed amount of time working from home each week, make up time at home later in the evening if they need to leave early or work from home as needed. Working from home is a great option for PAs as there are many tasks which can be completed outside the office. Its popularity can be seen by the amount of Virtual Assistants (VAs), who work from home full time to complete administrative and assistant tasks. Many VAs were previously employed as Personal Assistants and have seen the benefits of running their own business.

Lyn Prowse-Bishop from eSOS is a VA and loves the fact that she is now her own boss, can make her own hours and no longer wastes time travelling to and from the office. Lyn originally started eSOS to look after her daughter and has since discovered a myriad of other benefits. Lyn has also found there is often a better relationship and more respect between herself and her clients;

Above: Working from home is a great way to achieve a flexible balance between work and play and still build your career



times of the year or during certain projects and are rewarded with time off when they need it. Flexitime is a positive system for many PAs as they often work longer hours but they know they will be rewarded.


Another initiative to improve job satisfaction is the siesta. With everyone working harder and longer, it is no surprise that employees are complaining of tiredness and workplaces are seeing reduced productivity. Afternoon naps have been shown to improve productivity and concentration, as being tired has the same affect on your body as being drunk. Naps must not last longer than 40 minutes as it will take longer to function normally again. Even a nap for as little as ten minutes will have health and alertness benefits; even if you don't fall asleep, it is still beneficial to take a break from your work and let your body and mind relax. Your office can even purchase nap pods, which encase you and play soothing music, then gently shake you awake. Napping is good for all workers and while it may have previously been seen as slacking off, just remember, sleep deprivation is a popular method of torture!

Convincing the boss

While working flexible hours is beneficial for your productivity and health, when approaching your boss to negotiate your work practices, make sure you fully research all aspects of the flexible option you are proposing and pick one that is right for you as well as your employer. Prepare all of the information for your employer and anticipate any questions they may ask. Identify the positives of the arrangement while not ignoring any negative implications upfront. Also, listen to any objections or concerns your employer has, they may be issues you hadn't thought of. When you have agreed on the terms of your new flexible work pattern put all the details in a signed contract. This includes the type of flexibility, the hours to be worked, where you will work from and the length of the contract.

While not all flexible work options are suitable for all types of Personal Assistants, you and your employer should be able to come to an arrangement which allows you to take advantage of the benefits of working flexible hours, and still do a job you enjoy. You may have to initially adapt to a decreased paycheque but aren't there more important things than money?

Make flexible working work for you

1. Due to the nature of a PA's tasks, working from home just may not be practical. But starting earlier or later may be more practical and fit around childcare.
2. If you're job sharing set out some guidelines for how you will make it work. Will you share an email address so you can both see correspondence? Will you split all the duties or be in charge of separate areas? Will you have an afternoon cross-over period to allow you to catch up?
3. Working just one extra hour a day will soon add up and leave you with enough banked time to take a whole day off. The nine-day fortnight is rising in popularity but you need to be prepared to be flexible with arrangements.
4. If you just aren't able to negotiate flexible working patterns then look at what else could be offered such as extra holiday or a salary increase. 

▶ she is now seen as a fellow businessperson, rather than just an employee.

Colleen Shephard from Your Virtual PA also testifies to the benefits of working from home but, like Lyn, she has found the biggest challenge is learning to separate work and home and allocate time for each. Virtual Assistants are increasingly popular with small businesses, who don't have the space or the capital to take on a full time PA; they avoid the costs of office equipment, WorkCover, superannuation and ATO responsibilities. Kathie Thomas runs the VA Directory and has clients who use VAs to complete confidential work they don't want their employees to see, while her overseas clients utilise the time difference and have work completed overnight and back to them by morning, their time. There are still many clients who insist on in-office assistants as they either need filing or bookkeeping done or they simply have trouble comprehending that the tasks can be done remotely.

Sleeping on the job

Flexitime is popular within government departments. It allows employees to accrue time if they come in early or work late. They can then use that time to leave early for an appointment or to pick up the kids. Flexitime is also used more casually in many other businesses where it is recognised that employees work longer hours at busy

CONTACTS

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
www.dewr.gov.au

Executive Stress Office Support
www.execstress.com

Flexibility Works
www.flexibilityworks.dewr.gov.au

Metro Naps
www.metronaps.com/pod

The VA Directory
www.vadirectory.net

Virtually Yours
www.virtuallyyours.com.au

Your Virtual PA
www.yourvirtualpa.com.au