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I, **Bowei Zhang**, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design in Design.

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Guidelines for identifying and combating over work for creative worker while working from home.

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Abstract

COVID-19 greatly accelerated the adoption of work from home, and exposed many more people to the challenges of keeping a healthy work-life balance without commuting. At the same time more and more people are choosing to freelance instead of work for an employer. However, there is limited information on how to maintain a healthy work-life balance while working from home.

This paper uses a wide range of sources to discuss the impact of overwork and some possible causes, as well as provides information on how to maintain a healthy work-life balance while working from home. Although the focus is about young unestablished freelancers, much of the information should be applicable to others working from home.

To address the independent nature of working from home, and the differences between individuals, this paper provides several broad suggestions on building and maintaining work-life balance while working from home. The suggestions are categorized into three categories: 1. schedule management, 2. workday management, 3. reflection and improvement. This paper can be used as an introduction on building a systematic working from home habit which will maintain a work-life balance.

Keywords: Work-life balance, Work from home, Telecommuting, Creative work, Freelancing, Schedule management, Time management

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1 Introduction

Although working from home has been gaining popularity for some time, the pandemic drastically accelerated the process of its adoption. At the same time, there is more and more attention and conversation regarding this work style. With a new round of economic change, more and more people are starting to adopt work from home, especially freelancers since there are even less options and choices for work locations. Without a physical commute or the option to go to the local coffee shop to work, working from home can easily introduce difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance or a healthy work style. Due to the nonlinear nature of creative works, workers working in the creative industry are facing more of these difficulties. The attempt to limit working hours might result in breakage of creativity flow. However, long periods of overworking will also negatively impact creativity. All these challenges can be especially hard to resolve to the younger unestablished freelancer population. The goal of this paper is to help such a population gain more focus on the problem of overworking as well as an attempt to provide more systematic information on how to achieve and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

2 Methodology

Academic papers, media articles and sources from industry organizations is referenced to evaluate the harm of overwork. Online resources like blog posts, video publications, and other self-published sources from creative workers with freelancing experience, along with design-oriented website articles are

referenced to provide the suggestions. All the information is curated in a more systematic format with an easier to follow structure.

3 History

3.1 Telecommuting

The history of telecommuting, or teleworking can be traced back to 1970s as an energy saver, and became more utilitarian in the 1980s, thanks to the widespread use of computers¹. The discussion of its impact on work-life balance had arisen not long after its existence². However, due to its popularity and its often-optional nature, research was more around its effects and impacts, and theories trying to explain them, instead of providing guidelines. Workers were usually left on their own to find ways around the obstacles.

Although teleworking is not a brand-new concept, the number of workers that shifts toward working from home has expanded greatly since the beginning of the COVID pandemic³. This poses many new challenges for keeping a work life balance. Previously, the idea of work life balance largely was based on the assumption of having commuting as a physical boundary. However, with this new shift towards work from home, there is an unprecedented number of workers that will need to change how they handle their work responsibilities temporarily or even permanently. Combined with the complications of logistics

1 Caves, *Encyclopedia of the City*, 664.

2 Shamir and Salomon, "Work-At-Home and the Quality of Working Life."

3 World Economic Forum, "The Future of Jobs Report 2020."

caused by quarantine and the epidemic, people have been forced into change and were and still are largely unprepared for it. Although teleworking, as well as work life balance, is not a new topic, the pandemic instigated forced change put people into a situation that they might not have the resources needed to keep a desirable work life balance or even a desirable working environment, nor did they have time to build or adapt to it.

3.2 Crunching

Creative workers are usually familiar with the idea of crunching. Although this word got popularized by the video game industry, the phenomenon should be relatable across all creative fields. Crunching means trying to work extensively, especially before deadlines, as a way to try to achieve a better result. Because of the non-linearity of the creative process, there are many situations that a creative worker may not be willing to interrupt the work even though it may take an unreasonably long time to finish in one session. This kind of working is not good for the health of the worker and will hinder creativity⁴. However, it is very easy to lose the sense of time if the worker is extremely concentrated, which is usually the case when dealing with creative works.

With the elimination of a physical barrier, creative workers who are working from home are more susceptible to this issue, along with other general issues caused by working from home. With this reduced barrier there are fewer

⁴ Cote and Harris, "Weekends Became Something Other People Did."

outside cues⁵ in a home setting for them to realize they have been working extensively, which in turn worsens the problem.

Although some may think that the overwork coming from the passion of a creative worker can be positive, these workers are still subject to the issues caused by over work. Issues like burnout and lowered health⁶. This means that being able to identify and regulate work sessions remains important for creative workers.

3.3 The impact of overwork

Overwork is bad, it hinders productivity, upsets family, and causes mental and physical health issues. Published in 2005, the report from the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) called *Why Crunch Mode Doesn't Work: Six Lessons*, shows how overwork impacts final output. Although the report is from the video game industry, the lessons can be applicable to other creative fields. First, according to Sidney J. Chapman's theory, the productivity of a worker follows a curve that increases at first, then after the peak point, drops continuously and eventually become negative. It shows that the greatest productivity occurs in the first four to six hours of the day, and overwork reduces, and eventually hurts, overall productivity.⁷ Second, it is hard to quantify the productivity for knowledge workers, yet companies are using a simple

5 Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, "All in a Day's Work: Boundaries and Micro Role Transitions."

6 Take This, "Crunch Hurts."

7 Robinson, "Why Crunch Mode Doesn't Work."

published-or-not metric that is not useful for even measuring overall productivity, not to say daily productivity⁸. Third, many experiments and experiences in the manufacturing industry across the world have proven that overwork reduces daily output from workers⁹. Fourth, when working for 60 hours every week, in about two months, the tipping point of when the loss in productivity caused by overwork exceeds the extra output from working extra hours can be reached¹⁰. Fifth, for every 24 hours of continuous work, the cognitive function of the worker reduces by 25%, and the effects will cumulate during multiple consecutive overnights¹¹. Sixth, the error rates climb during work hours, and the loss of sleep worsens this effect which in turn increases the chance of a catastrophe failure¹². This kind of errors had been seen in incidents across many industries, from a higher software defect rate¹³ to developing the infamous exploding cell phone¹⁴.

Furthermore, overwork is bad for the worker's health, both mentally and physically, and is one of the major risk factors for health problems including

8 Robinson.

9 Robinson.

10 Robinson.

11 Robinson.

12 Robinson.

13 Akula and Cusick, "Impact of Overtime and Stress on Software Quality."

14 Pang, "Use Deliberate Rest to Promote Creative Thinking."

insomnia, anxiety, depression, heart disease, and job injuries¹⁵. Overwork harms work-life balance, causes workers spend less time with family, which will impact the well-being of the worker, in turn, impact their productivity¹⁶. Overwork and stress also contribute to burnout which may impact not only short-term productivity, but also the career of the worker¹⁷. Research also shows an interesting path by which overwork negatively impact worker health, by encroaching upon the time for physical exercise which exacerbate the impact of overwork itself¹⁸.

3.4 The cause of overwork

During the COVID-19 pandemic, longer work hours have become common across the world¹⁹. In some instances, quarantining orders greatly limited the social activities for workers. Combined with working from home, workers found themselves in a weird position where they had very limited options for activities to do, and some of them chooses to use work to help kill time²⁰. This causes self-motivated overwork though it is far from the only way or

15 Take This, "Crunch Hurts."

16 Take This.

17 Take This.

18 张, 何, and 薛, "工作时长如何影响科技工作者的身心健康——基于北京市调查数据的实证分析."

19 "People Are Working Longer Hours during the Pandemic"; PARKER, HOROWITZ, and MINKIN, "How Coronavirus Has Changed the Way Americans Work."

20 CNBC Make It, *Why Working From Home Is Here To Stay*.

reason one can willingly push themselves into overworking.

On the one hand, overwork has been turned into a culture, or even a “cult”, as was called by the New Yorker²¹.

“Millions of us overwork because somehow we think it’s exciting – a status symbol that puts us on the path to success, whether we define that by wealth or an Instagram post that makes it seem like we’re living a dream life with a dream job. Romanticisation of work seems to be an especially common practise among “knowledge workers” in the middle and upper classes.” ²²

On the other hand, the motivation can come from a pure economical source, like the desire or need for more income, or a better position²³. This is present all over the world and can be the major reason of why workers work longer hours in many developing countries, like China ²⁴.

Overwork can also happen as a way to improve on their quality of work, and as an expression of their passion, especially for creativity workers²⁵. Also, with economic globalization, more and more workers need to deal with overseas

21 Surowiecki, “The Cult of Overwork.”

22 Lufkin, “Why Do We Buy into the ‘cult’ of Overwork?”

23 Lufkin.

24 梁 and 魏, “自主性过度劳动形成的经济分析.”

25 Noodle, *The Crunch Culture Conundrum*.

time difference, as meetings often happen during normal non-working hours²⁶.

This can easily extend the length of work time.

Although some of these kinds of overwork are self-motivated, it doesn't mean that they are free from those drawbacks come with overwork.

4 Argument

To help young freelancing creative workers maintain a work-life balance which includes avoiding or reducing overwork, suggestions were taken from established or experienced freelancers through news publications, blog articles, online videos, and other social media sources. The suggestions are put into the following categories: schedule management, workday management, and reflection & improvement.

4.1 Schedule management

The first category is schedule management. The aim of suggestions in this category is to manage work through a longer period of time, as it relates to the process of accepting jobs and arrange deadlines. Depending on the creative work and workstyle of the worker, the time span of the schedule can vary between weeks to months or even years. Although what is an appropriate workload is still a question that remains to be answered, one of the most important goals of this category is to make sure the overall workload is appropriate.

²⁶ Lufkin, "Why Do We Buy into the 'cult' of Overwork?"

The first suggestion is having a schedule²⁷. A very important part of avoiding overwork is to avoid overbooking yourself. To achieve that, you need to have a clear understanding of your current workload, and ongoing projects, all of which a schedule will help to achieve.

The second suggestion is analyzing cost and benefit. One of the most precious resources you have is time. A little bit of economics can be very helpful for making sure you are spending it wisely. The ultimate goal here is to avoid overbooking, of which an important part is to reject or avoid certain work. As such, you need to know your price and benefits. This suggestion includes four parts.

The first part is knowing your price, and setting the correct price is hard. There is only one guaranteed way to do that properly, which is trial and error. But there are still some tricks that can be referred from experienced freelancers. Adam Savage, the former TV host from Myth Busters, shared one of the key rules he used to set his price, which is to aim the first offer at 10 percent above what the client is willing to spend²⁸. If the client is flexible with the 10 percent, then the worker is extracting that as an extra, if not, this still gives the worker flexibility to shave that 10 percent off and offer a discount²⁹.

27 Becki and Chris, *3 FAVOURITE Productivity Apps + Tips on Working From Home*; Vanderkam, "Yes, You Can Do That During the Work Day."

28 Adam Savage's Tested, *Ask Adam Savage*.

29 Adam Savage's Tested.

After knowing your price, the second part is understanding each job. Continuing the tips from Adam Savage, it is very important to understand the request of the client to calculate the amount of work correctly. He gave an example of a listed job of making a whole stage set as multiple parts, which in all required a lot more work than he originally anticipated³⁰. As for designers, a similar suggestion by the dribbble resource article about contract is to limit the scope of the project, the deliverables, and the revisions³¹.

The third part is including the opportunity cost. Being an economical terminology, opportunity cost means the benefits given up in order to achieve something³². It is the cost, or trade off, of not pursuing an alternative. Understanding the opportunity cost is critical in getting your cost analysis accurate. For example, the time and effort not spent on a poorly paid job can be used to improve your skill and benefit you in the long run.

The last part is knowing your benefit. Continuing the cost-benefit analysis, benefit is what you get from a certain activity, which can come in many ways. Apart from the obvious paycheck, industry connections, self-fulfillment, and even joy itself can all be part of it. When deciding which work to take, you should consider them all to get this half of the cost benefit equation accurate. A simplification of this can be how Carly Ayres puts it, "Do the work you want to

30 Adam Savage's Tested.

31 Fleck, "8 Must-Haves in Your Freelance Design Contract."

32 Bannock, "Opportunity Cost."

get more of.”³³ As a last note, don’t forget the overhead cost, like taxes, insurance, and other things that will impact your final income.

The third suggestion is planning off time. Being your own boss and living in your office can cause you to constantly want to work. In the video *What Your Early Twenties Will Be Like* from popular YouTube channel TheOdd1sOut, host James Rallison suggested that there will never be a time when you finish everything, so it is easy to go into a state of thinking and anxious about the work needing to be done all the time³⁴. This kind of mind set can easily cause burn out³⁵. So, plan for the rest, take days off, and join social activities if you like. Finding your own sweet point is hard but important. Being a young freelancer, it might not be practical to work only four hours a day as Alex Soojung-Kim Pang suggested in his book,³⁶ but adding rest to your plan is a good starting point to keeping a better workload.

4.2 Workday management

The second category is workday management, which includes the management of both time and working environment. The aim of suggestions in this category is to plan and execute day to day work in a balanced manner.

The first suggestion is finding your work style. As Becki from the YouTube

33 Core Jr, “Freelancing Tips from Core77’s Own Carly Ayres.”

34 TheOdd1sOut, *What Your Early Twenties Will Be Like*.

35 TheOdd1sOut.

36 Pang, *Rest*, pt. 1.

Channel Becki and Chris suggested, working nine to five is not for everyone, and one of the biggest benefits of working on your own is that you can take control of your time, find the time of the day when you are the most productive³⁷.

Likewise, working alone might not work for everyone. Work from home for freelancers can also mean work from anywhere, so find a community,³⁸ or set up co-working sessions³⁹. This can be achieved either physically, like a local coffee shop or a friend's house⁴⁰; or virtually, like on Slack⁴¹.

The second suggestion is prioritizing. Once you find the time and location that work best for you, the next step is to start working. But don't waste your most productive hours with the unimportant, most tedious, and least enjoyable tasks⁴². Leave these works till when your brain power has been drained and focus on the more important ones first⁴³. In the blog of the Evernote team, they suggest using procrastination as a hint. Find out why you don't want to work on something. If it is because that important work is difficult, consider conquering it

37 Becki and Chris, *3 FAVOURITE Productivity Apps + Tips on Working From Home*.

38 Core Jr, "Freelancing Tips from Core77's Own Carly Ayres."

39 Becki and Chris, *3 FAVOURITE Productivity Apps + Tips on Working From Home*.

40 Becki and Chris.

41 Core Jr, "Freelancing Tips from Core77's Own Carly Ayres."

42 "Guide to Time Management for Freelancers."

43 "Guide to Time Management for Freelancers."

first, which will make next time an easier one⁴⁴. Another part of prioritizing is focusing on one thing at a time. This can help avoid constantly thinking about the final outcome and avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of work left⁴⁵.

The third suggestion is setting achievable goals. Whether in the form of a to-do list,⁴⁶ or if you are an aviation nerd, paper flight strips. Finishing a goal can provide the gratification that makes you satisfied and happy⁴⁷. To make sure these goals are achievable, it also involves breaking down large tasks. The task needing a month is not the same as the one needing an hour. Treating them as equal can easily lead to unnecessary anxiety⁴⁸. Splitting the bigger task into smaller goals can help you avoid being overwhelmed and can help you chip away at the task bit by bit. And it can reflect the progress of finishing a larger task better⁴⁹. When it is hard to split the task, maybe split the time it takes. Set a unit of working time and use it as the smallest goal.

The fourth suggestion is taking a timed break. Our brain is not designed to stay focused for a long period of time⁵⁰. Science study shows that if people

44 Evernote, "Rewire Your Brain to Beat Procrastination."

45 Evernote.

46 Becki and Chris, *3 FAVOURITE Productivity Apps + Tips on Working From Home*.

47 Becki and Chris.

48 Meersman, "Here's How to Make Long-Term 'Work From Home' Work."

49 Meersman.

50 Evernote, "3 Surprising Secrets to Maintaining Your Focus."

introduce brief and controlled disengagements from a vigilance task, the overall level of vigilance can stay higher for longer periods of time⁵¹. In other words, taking a break can help us stay more focused, for a longer period of time. There are many flavors and systems about this kind of time management. From the famous Pomodoro Technique, 25 minutes work with 5 minutes breaks, to 52/17, 52 minutes work with 17 minute breaks, as the name suggests, to Pulse and Pause, with the longest work period among the three, 90 minutes⁵². Whatever flavor you choose, there are some important suggestions to make the breaks more effective. Starting with planning, like in the schedule, plan for your breaks for the workday. Use timers, apps or other methods to help remind yourself⁵³. Also, just like that, you should focus on work while working, focus on rest while resting, detach from your work, and avoid other forms of work⁵⁴.

The fifth suggestion is having a work area. Having a regular work area makes it possible to make this area more ergonomic. While working from home, it is inevitable that you will be using the working area a lot. Although the decoration tips from the previous mentioned YouTube channel Becki and Chris might not suit the space you have, there are still some easy to achieve goals that can help you. Building an area that you will work in, that has all the essential

51 Ariga and Lleras, "Brief and Rare Mental 'Breaks' Keep You Focused."

52 Evernote, "3 Surprising Secrets to Maintaining Your Focus."

53 Evernote.

54 Evernote.

equipment that can make you seat comfortably, appropriate lighting to make you read comfortably, and a work surface that can make you work comfortably⁵⁵. The goal is easy. Take good care of your body during the long working hours.

The fifth suggestion includes movement in the environment. As suggested by the staff of design website Design Milk, actually use your standing desk if you got one, or simply do a silly dance during your timed breaks are both valid ways to achieve movement⁵⁶. It is also a very easy way to make sure the break is efficient,⁵⁷ and that you are not using your brain during the break. Move whenever possible, even during work, for example, stand up and pace during a phone call,⁵⁸ or while reading articles. To achieve this, the minimum requirement is to have the space you need for this kind of movement. Maybe not go as far as a treadmill desk, but a small area without clutter that you can safely do some physical movement is a good starting point.

4.3 Reflection and improvement

The third category is reflection and improvement. Although all the suggestions above are trying to be helpful to everyone, everyone is different. The only guaranteed way to build a work habit that suits your needs is through trial and error. It is important to be able to evaluate the performance of a

55 Han, "Designing a Comfortable Space to Work From Home."

56 Design Milk Staff, "The Importance of Movement in a Work From Home Environment."

57 Evernote, "3 Surprising Secrets to Maintaining Your Focus."

58 Design Milk Staff, "The Importance of Movement in a Work From Home Environment."

solution, which is what suggestions in this category will be focused on.

The first suggestion is tracking your time. Logging your time can provide a very easy metric for evaluating the ratio of work and life, and it can also be a useful resource in evaluating the productivity during the work hours. It can help identifying the fluctuation of the workload, by comparing between days and weeks. And it shows when time is being wasted, which can indicate room for further improvement.

The second suggestion is making small changes. Find out the parts you like about your work plan, and the parts you don't⁵⁹. Change the parts you don't like and keep those you like. However, to make things easier and more manageable, consider making changes one at a time, and evaluate the result afterwards.

The last suggestion is regularly repeating the process. The projects you work on will change over time, so will you, so keeping the work plan up to date is as important as first setting it. Regularly evaluate the performance of your work plan, as well as the time you spent on both in and out of work and make adjustments accordingly. This way, by keeping your work habit suitable for your current situation, you keep productive and balanced.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

Because the private nature of the home environment and people are

⁵⁹ Vanderkam, "Yes, You Can Do That During the Work Day."

working individually at home, research about the work from home experience is limited. It is hard to obtain trustworthy valuable information on how to build a healthy workflow for the workers working from home. This does not mean however, that maintaining a healthy work-life balance is not as important in the home environment. Because of the lack of physical barrier created by commuting, it can be more challenging in keeping a healthy work-life balance while all the damages of overworking are persisting. These problems can also impact family members which will cause more damage to the daily life of the worker. Adding the truth that there is difficulty in accessing valuable information, working from home can easily become a challenge on its own even before the worker has realized.

With its independent nature, individual differences further complicate this issue. Every worker can have a different work type, different working environment, different preference, and different outside responsibilities. This makes it almost impossible to create a system that will fit everyone, which may be a possible reason of the limited amount of information available regarding this topic.

Although the same information should be applicable to a wider range of workers, this paper is focusing on the young unestablished freelancer working in a creative industry. This adds the complexity from the nonlinearity of creative work, making it more of a challenge to keep a work-life balance. At the same time, creative workers are more impacted by overwork because overwork

damages creativity. At the same time, unestablished freelancers are facing the challenge of not having enough leverage to set desired prices or enough stability to reject jobs.

The suggestions in this paper are curated from multiple types of sources, many of which directly or indirectly from established freelancers across design, visual effects, photography, animation, and other creative fields. As mentioned previously, the goal is not to compose a step-by-step set of instructions, but rather broad suggestions that can help guide workers to achieve a better work-life balance. With many of the information coming from non-academic sources, there is a higher chance of errors, but by trying to cross reference different sources as much as possible, the information should be mostly correct. However, it still does not take individual scenarios into consideration, which means the reader needs to compose their own implications. Because the suggestions are rather broad, there is room for interpretation, as well as further refinement.

This paper should serve as only an introduction on building a systematic working from home habit which will maintain a work-life balance.

6 Future research

Due to the limitation of the achievable scope of this thesis project, more in person study could be done to refine the suggestions and get a better understanding of the effectiveness of each one as well as their advantages and drawbacks.

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