Balance: Juggling School, Work, and Family

Tired of resenting your job? Looking for a new challenge? Going back to school can help bust open new doors to a more rewarding career. But what if you can’t ditch your day job to do it?
It’s not impossible

Keep your mind open to all the options that can help you manage life as a working student. There are certificates designed to take a few months’ time, as well as degrees that could take a few years to complete. You can study full-time or part-time.

Choose from online or on-campus programs, plus day or evening classes. Many schools cater to working adults and understand that students may want to take only one class at a time. They allow students several years to complete their degree—at some schools, up to 8 years for an online master’s degree.

It’s not a walk in the park. About 20 percent of U.S. adults have attended college but never finished their degree. If you want to help ensure you’re among the successful ones, read on for tips to help you manage your time.
you have more time than you think

Think there aren’t enough hours in the day for work and school? Consider this: The typical American spends 4 hours and 39 minutes a day watching TV.

Spread out over the course of a year, that’s 1,697 hours. Or a whopping 70 days.

That’s right. More than two months.

It’s safe to say that’s probably more than enough time to tackle coursework for a certificate or college degree.

do the hard things first

Take some advice from Peter Bregman, a time management expert who writes for The Harvard Business Review. His tip for people overwhelmed by a lack of time? Understand that you’re not going to get everything done.

Bregman says once you realize this, you’ll stop trying to cram too much work into each day. This means you’ll be less frustrated, and more productive.

Tackle what’s important first, even if it’s hard. (No making those endless checklists with little boxes in the margins—you know what needs to be done, and making a checklist is just a form of procrastination.) Then, if there’s time left for other projects, do them next, in order of priority.

That means if you’re working toward a nursing certificate or degree, your homework comes before “Modern Family.” But that’s a small, temporary sacrifice. Keep your eyes on the prize: You’re working toward graduating, which can help you boost your earnings and change your life for the better.

Time to get practical

Here are a few key questions to ask yourself as you map out your game plan:

Are you a sprint-to-the-finish or long-haul type?
• Do you want to take one class at a time for a few years?
• If you could, would you rather scale back on your work hours and earn your degree faster?
• Could an online program make it easier to set your own pace?

Can you change up your work schedule by:
• Working nights or weekends?
• Switching to four 10-hour shifts to free up a day for class time?

Can you get help to pay for your education?
• Many employers have tuition-assistance programs for employees. Does yours?
• Are there work-study or internship opportunities available at any of the schools on your list?
Monica Zamora is a Seattle nurse and single mom who went back to school in her early 40s. After completing her bachelor’s degree in nursing, Monica moved on to study for her master’s degree to become an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner.

She took the plunge at an extraordinarily difficult time. When she was five months pregnant with her youngest child, the girl’s father left without warning.

“I was terrified!” Monica said. “After I made it through the most difficult period, I began to realize that if I had the strength to go through that, at the age of 42, there was no reason that I couldn’t accomplish anything.”

Q & A

How did you get past the fear that you wouldn’t have time, money, or energy to go back to school?
I just decided not to think about the energy required, and as for the expense, I would rather be in debt in order to have the education and career I want than to have extra money to spend on accumulating more things. It’s all a trade-off.

What time do your days usually start and end?
5:30 a.m.! I am usually in bed by 10:30 p.m. but if I am behind on school I can sometimes make it until midnight.

What’s your work schedule?
28 hours per week (Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday as a clinic nurse manager, plus a clinic shift on Friday).

What’s your class schedule?
Different every quarter. I have four classes this quarter and spend 10 hours in class total on Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus the 8-hour day at my clinical placement on Friday.

When do you study?
Between patients at work, on the couch in the evening while the family is watching TV, and at family get-togethers in the middle of the chaos.

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