

Work-Life Balance: Does “Publish or Perish” Mean Cancelling Holidays?

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Have you ever worked on Christmas day? It is one of the most depressing days of the year to work. I had been working hard to finish up my projects ahead of the holiday season, and my husband had been decorating the house with our young son. Christmas in the US is a big deal, and we had planned for all of our family to fly in and celebrate together this year. Our son was five, and I was looking forward to seeing his excitement on the big day, opening his presents underneath the Christmas tree.

But I was worried about taking time off. Others in my department were [submitting articles detailing their latest research](#), and I didn't want to show up to our staff meeting in January with no new publications to discuss. No matter how hard I try to manage my

time, taking holidays off makes me feel like I am falling further behind. Instead of thinking warm thoughts of Christmas, all I could think was that if I didn't publish one more article by the end of the year, I would be lagging behind from my colleagues. So, to my family's disappointment, I stayed up late on Christmas Eve working on a new submission. I made a brief appearance on Christmas morning to say hello, and then went back to my office, working alone as my family celebrated without me.

My story sounds like I am feeling sorry for myself, and the truth is, I am. But I feel more sorry for this academic culture that has made it so difficult for researchers like myself to take any real time to relax and enjoy a proper holiday. "Publish or perish" is a real phenomenon, and once you have worked in research long enough, you saw colleagues who attempted to maintain work-life balance [lose out on opportunities and promotions](#). But does it have to be this way?

New Study Reveals Researchers Frequently Work on Holidays

In fact, a recent study by BMJ investigated the likelihood of academics from different countries to [work during weekends and holidays](#). The results showed that like me, several researchers prefer submit articles, manuscripts, or peer reviews on weekends and holidays. The BMJ study reviewed submission times of manuscripts and peer reviews to its journals. This was done to find how many were submitted outside of normal working hours. The results were as depressing as a lonely academic working in her office on Christmas Day while her family celebrates downstairs. Academics in Belgium and Japan were the most likely to submit work on holidays, with Americans coming in third place. The study found that more than a tenth of Americans who submitted to the journals did so during a national holiday.

What is behind this trend? While the US and Japan researchers are [known for working long hours](#), Belgium does not have the same reputation. The reality is, as competition increases for tenure-track positions and career prospects for researchers become less certain. As a result, many feel the only way to stand out is to work harder than everyone else. This phenomenon is true globally. A survey conducted by the Young Academy of Europe suggests a staggering 95% of young researchers work more than 40 hours per week.

Publish or perish culture persists no matter where you are in the world, and [the failure to publish constantly has real impacts](#) on your career. But this increased competition traps all of us within a vicious cycle. If my colleagues work on Christmas, I look lazy if I don't do the same. Increasingly, the future for researchers and academics seems to be one of endless work. This, in turn, has negative effects on work quality and efficiency.

Researchers in Asia and Europe Work through the Weekend

The BMJ study also recorded submissions made on weekends. According to the study, one-fifth of academics in China submitted work on Saturday or Sunday. Researchers in Japan, Spain, and Italy also had a tendency to submit manuscripts and peer reviews on weekends. More than one tenth of US researchers turned in manuscripts on weekends, and 15% conducted peer review. It's no wonder, with these working hours, that there [is a growing mental health crisis](#) among PhDs. I am reminded of a controversial (and now-deleted) Tweet from 2018 by Nicholas A. Christakis. In his tweet, he told his graduate students and postdocs that working less than 60 hours per week put them behind their peers and professors. The tweet [launched a fierce argument](#) over work-life balance in academia. The argument is another example of how difficult life is for postdocs and graduate students dreaming of working in research.

Is Work-Life Balance an Unachievable Goal?

The fact that work-life balance is such a hot topic of discussion in the field means it is important to many. Some labs and universities are working on crafting work-life balance policies. In fact, there are countless blogs recommending hacks to make your academic life manageable. As much advice comes from seasoned academics and researchers who have faced the same problem that you (and I) are facing, it can be worth considering how to reorganize the way you do work to [improve your work-life balance](#).

I had a disastrous Christmas. I missed out on the love and companionship of my family in favor of publishing one more article. After Christmas was over, I did some reflection. I realized I wasn't utilizing all of the resources at my disposal, and decided to change that in the new year. One tool that has helped me immensely has been taking advantage of a citation manager. Because I went to school before these tools became popular, I never bothered to learn to use one. I have also decided to start using a professional [editing service](#) to help with my papers. Some of these services really know their market, and offer discounts during the holiday season.

If you worked on the holidays, you're not alone. Please let us know your thoughts on this issue and how we can cope with this as academics.

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