Can you achieve perfect balance as an illustrator?

Artists discuss balancing personal work, clients and downtime.

Considered to be the definitive snapshot of the UK illustration industry as a whole, Ben O'Brien's annual Illustration Survey always throws up interesting results, making for interesting discussions online and IRL.

One issue raised by the results was the tricky balance illustrators need to maintain when freelancing. Finding that equilibrium between work, play and personal projects isn't easy, and is a topic close to the hearts of many illustrators.

Reaching out to the illo community, we've gathered thoughts and advice from Katie Chappell, Andrew Thomson, Helen Friel and Emma Reynolds on finding that perfect balancing act without sacrificing too much of an income.

Yes, it's not impossible!

Why it's important to balance work and pleasure

"The balance between work and personal life is crucial," says wondrous . "It's tempting, especially when you're starting out, to throw yourself into work at the cost of time off. But I've very rarely produced my best work when I'm exhausted and stressed.

"To maintain the balance I no longer reply to emails at weekends and make it clear to clients that I only build weekdays into schedules. Almost everybody I've worked with has been absolutely fine with this and it also helps if you need to charge a rush fee for jobs with a quick turnaround – people

are less likely to see weekends and holidays as ‘free’ days. I’ve found that the stronger boundaries I’ve set for myself, the better clients respond, usually very positively.”

Warm and fuzzy is also careful at delineating between weekdays and weekends.

“I try to keep to a Monday-Friday working week, so say it’s Wednesday and you’ve got nothing on – and assuming you’re not burnt out and need a day for yourself – I’d take this time to either do admin in between, self promotion, or work on a new piece,” she writes.

Emma Reynolds
“It’s also a matter of finances and individual situation – large gaps of no work is terrifying, so it’s about balancing

sending those emails out to clients and posting your latest work on social, having a breather in this down time.

“The classic freelancer feeling is having either too much work and being desperate for a break, or having not enough work and worrying about money. It’s hard to balance this, but using those gaps to hustle for new work and also taking a chance to have a breather in those quiet times can be useful,” Emma adds.

“I don’t think we have to use every second of our down time on our career; we are humans, not efficiency robots. The ‘sleep when you’re dead’ attitude is dangerous, because you will damage yourself long term if you don’t take breaks and look after yourself.

“Life is for living, and as much as we love our jobs, having time for our other interests and feeling unguilty about not drawing 24/7 is vital.”

How to make time for personal projects

“When you’re completely focussed on getting the next job it’s hard to find the energy and enthusiasm to do personal work in your downtime,” says Helen Friel.

“I’ve recently started working three days a week in a studio and it’s been a welcome change to be able to pick and choose the jobs I do outside of that. It’s taken a while but my drive

to create my own work is returning and I’m starting to look forward to making personal work again.”

… And time for yourself.

The tough question maybe is whether working on personal projects takes away from socialising and all the fun non-art making things you can be doing in your personal time.

Emma Reynolds has some wise words on this.

“For me, downtime is for resting. As illustration is my job, when I have my weekends off I like to spend them outdoors, with friends or sometimes just lying down and watching Netflix or playing *Pokemon*!

“But if we’re talking about downtime in the week where you might not have any commissions on, this is when it’s a good opportunity to work on new idea generating, story ideas and portfolio pieces to help get more clients.

“Or, if you’ve just had a massively busy one, take a rest midweek and recharge! Or go and take a walk outside or in a new city and take some new things in. Allow yourself time to just BE as well. This is so important.”

certainly lives up to this ethos.

“Last year I took a month off and went to the south of India to draw and paint,” she tells me. “It was incredible, and I was able to work on whatever interested me – no clients, no deadlines, no art directors. There was definitely some anxiety in doing that; I felt awful saying no for a whole month to projects, but I was able to pass most on to other illustrators.

“Free time is a luxury, a privilege, and not something to be taken for granted. Taking time off to do absolutely nothing is equally (if not more) important than taking time for personal projects.

“Burn out is real, and as freelancers we have to take extra good care of ourselves mentally and physically.”

Don’t feel guilty if you have more personal time than work

But being your own boss has pros and cons, Katie admits.

“At both ends of the extreme, it’s stressful,” she continues.

“Having loads of client work and no free time is stressful (but hooray! Money!) Having zero client work and loads of free time is stressful (but hooray! All that free time!)

“It’s a balancing act of teetering in the middle. I’m still trying to figure it out myself.” This new drawing from Katie perfectly illustrates her views on the issue (pardon the pun).

“Last year I had a long stretch with very little work and felt simultaneously bored and guilty for most of it,” admits Helen. “To combat those feelings I took an online drawing class as I found that, most of all, I needed a bit of structure.

“Personal work is so open that the thought of starting can be

overwhelming, so having someone else give me ‘briefs’ really helped me get past the ‘what do I do?’ stage.

Helen Friel

“The other thing I’ve found helpful when work is quiet is to collaborate with other people. Being accountable to someone else helps get through the days when you don’t feel like picking up a pencil.”

Indeed, *Digital Arts* has recently reminded artists of the beauty of collaboration.

… And don’t undersell yourself!

concludes with a valuable reminder that not all work is good work. Turning down gigs on the lower end of the scale will free your time up a lot more – but that’s just the start of it.

“Personally, I’ve built a set of recurring clients and jobs that allows me to work full-time as an illustrator. It took time, a few leaps of faith, just like setting up any business, but it’s more than possible,” Andrew says.

“The work is out there, often in unexpected places, and you have to push for it and hunt around – which is difficult to do if you’re working full-time at a job (related or unrelated to

illustration) and then coming home to fill your evenings with £50 private commissions that take ages to start and finish.

“An illustrator’s work and time are worth much more than that. I know it’s hard to turn down a lower-paid job when it feels like an early opportunity to get started, but it’s very hard to break the cycle of being paid low amounts.

“Set your prices higher to begin with and hunt down the clients who can see you’re worth that. It’s a much better use of an illustrator’s time early on!”

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