Overbooked! Balancing work and life with continuing education

In today's competitive job market, continuing education is often the key to a rewarding, long-term career. College, university and other training programs can help you stay on top of changing trends and technologies, discover creative ways of solving practical problems and adopt new skills, among countless other benefits.

But with a full-time job and family responsibilities, finding the time and energy to go back to school can be more of a challenge than the courses themselves. And when you do make the commitment to upgrade your skills, it's easy to feel burned-out from the long hours or start neglecting your health and personal life. Fortunately, there's a lot you can do to make it easier to successfully balance work, school and family life.

Schedule for success. When it comes to staying on top of a busy schedule, organization is everything. Start by setting-up a good day planner or calendar and carefully note all upcoming commitments and deadlines. Pay close attention to weeks where there's a lot going on and, where possible, look for ways to finish projects early that are due around those times. It's also a good idea to put a little extra time into your schedule in case something takes longer than expected.

Once you have a schedule in place, look for opportunities to turn otherwise wasted minutes into productive study time. For example, you might use part of your lunch break at work to study for an upcoming exam, or take advantage of a subway or bus ride to catch up on readings. With only limited hours in each day, making the most of your downtime will help you accomplish more without really giving anything up.

Pace yourself. When responsibilities are competing for your attention, it's easy to start worrying about school assignments during your work hours or tomorrow's workday during study time. Resist the temptation to think about everything at once and instead focus your full attention on the task at hand. Limiting your attention to one project at a time can help make your workload more manageable and keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

On the other hand, it's important to recognize that there's a realistic limit to how much you can successfully balance at one time. If you find yourself constantly feeling overwhelmed by work, school and other responsibilities, it might be necessary to adapt to a more flexible schedule. For example, you might consider taking one year worth of courses over two years or asking your manager about the possibility of doing some work from home. Many schools and workplaces are very willing to make accommodations for people working while upgrading their education.

Make time for yourself. While it isn't always possible, do your best to schedule some time each week to visit with family and friends, enjoy your favourite hobbies or to unwind with a good book or television show. While it may seem hard to justify taking breaks with a busy schedule, an occasional step back from work can help prevent burnout and leave you feeling refreshed and reenergized to tackle your next project.

With so much on the go, it can also be tempting to skip meals, choose unwholesome fast-food options or put-off daily exercise. While balancing a healthy lifestyle with school, work and family can sometimes be challenging, good fitness and nutrition will give you the energy you need to get though the busy weeks ahead.

Focus on the future. Even though things may seem stressful and difficult now, you're gaining a lot by going back to school. Rather than dwell on what you're sacrificing today, stay positive and keep your sights set on the promotion, new career, improved skills or other goals you're working towards. Keeping a photo or description of your goal by your desk can be a great way to motivate yourself and stay positive.

You're not alone. With more and more working adults going back to school to upgrade their skills, chances are good that many of your classmates are in a similar situation. Connect with others in your program to form a study group and share tips and advice for balancing school with work and family life.

Juggling work, school, family responsibilities and a personal life can sometimes feel overwhelming to even the most dedicated, hard-working and ambitious professionals. But with the right attitude, time management and support, it is possible to successfully upgrade your skills without putting the rest of your life on hold.