

CASE STUDY 1

What happened to my work–life balance?

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Claire has been working in the insurance industry for 15 years. Her career began after she completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree. Initially she was hired on a casual basis to work in the marketing department for NDI, a large Australian insurance company. After six months as a casual, she successfully applied for a full-time permanent position in the same department. Claire always wanted to have children. However, she felt it was important to finish her degree and gain a number of years' work experience before she did so. She would then go back to work after her children started school. At this point she hadn't yet found the right man with whom to start a family, but it was still early days.

In order to develop a sustainable career in the insurance industry, Claire's plan was to move to different departments in the company so she could gain knowledge of all of the different business units. After 18 months she took a promotion as a product manager, still within the marketing department. This was a demanding job, but Claire, along with her team, successfully launched a number of new products onto the market. Claire's leadership abilities and drive to succeed were noticed by NDI executives and as a result she was quickly promoted into a middle management role and then, a few years later, to a senior management position. Although Claire's initial plan was to move around the different sections and departments of NDI to gain a better understanding of the insurance industry as a whole, she felt suited to the area of product management and with her quick promotions she decided this was the place for her to stay.

As Claire was progressively promoted she found that the demands on her time and energy began to increase. By the time she found herself in a senior management position, she was working long hours, attending numerous weekly meetings and constantly travelling around the country. She

often needed to work weekends to catch up on emails and paperwork because this was the only time of the week when she wasn't interrupted by the day-to-day running of her department. As a consequence, Claire found she had little time to spend with her friends or to develop the sort of long-term relationship she desired; it was this aspect of the job that she found most disheartening. She'd had a number of short-term casual relationships throughout her career. However, these never seemed to last because either her partners were not ready to settle down and have children or they found her job too demanding and never saw enough of her.

A life-changing decision

After Claire turned 37 she realised that if she didn't have children soon she may never get the opportunity. Although she did not particularly desire to be a single parent, she knew in her heart that she still wanted to be a mother. Without a long-term partner she decided to undergo in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Over the years Claire had saved enough money and annual leave to be able to take two years away from her job to look after her baby before returning to work.

The IVF was successful and Claire left her position eight months later to have twins. After the babies were born, Claire was able to do small projects as a casual employee, working from home for NDI when her babies slept or while they spent time with their grandparents.

When Claire eventually went back to work at NDI two years later she took a first-line manager's position. She hoped that because her children were now in nursery she could spend at least one day a week working from home and that some of her working hours could be arranged flexibly. This meant she could drop off and pick up her children at least one or two days a week. The rest of the time this was done by her mother. However, while NDI had been willing to give her casual work she could undertake from home directly after the birth of her twins, when she tried to negotiate this into a more formal arrangement, she encountered a lot of resistance. Claire had spoken with a senior human resources manager in the company who told

her that NDI was very traditional when it came to working arrangements and that she should look at working for another company that was more progressive in terms of its work-life balance arrangements. The human resources manager told her about another insurance company called Surelife, which had a good reputation in this respect.

A new start at Surelife

It was at this point that Claire decided she would make the move. After doing some research on Surelife she was happy with what she saw, so she contacted the CEO, Brian Campbell, to register her interest and sent out her CV to find out what opportunities might be coming up in the future. Campbell was very impressed with Claire's experience and skills and got back to her straight away to organise a meeting. At the meeting, Claire talked about her work experience and how she thought she could contribute to Surelife. She explained that she was looking to work for a company that took work-life balance seriously. Campbell reassured her that Surelife's policy was to attract more women into their ranks and that they were looking to achieve this by introducing initiatives that supported employees' non-work demands such as childcare. When it came to negotiating a position and pay, Claire conceded that she would consider a role with fewer responsibilities and demands as long as her flexible working arrangements would be honoured.

Six weeks later, Claire was offered and took up a new position as a team leader in Surelife's products department. Although this was another step down from her previous position as a first-line manager and prior to that as a senior manager with NDI, it was Claire's belief that taking a pay cut and a job with less responsibility was the price she had to pay for working at a company that allowed her more flexible working arrangements. Prior to taking up the position, Campbell had advised Claire to organise her flexible working arrangements with her direct manager, and as long as these were reasonable her manager would accommodate her schedule.

On her first day with Surelife, Claire had a meeting with her manager, Peter, in which they discussed her duties in more detail, the team she would be leading and the projects she would be working on. Claire then discussed her wish to work from home at least one day a week and to arrive late and leave early on one other day. Peter told her this would be OK except during busy periods when Claire would be required to work normal hours at the office.

In the first month, Claire was able to work from home, arrive early and leave early one day a week. By the second month there had been two weeks in a row when her flexible arrangement had been interrupted due to what Peter claimed was a heavy workload. Claire was able to deal with this because her mother stepped in at the last minute to pick up her children. However, as the months passed by, the interruptions to her flexible schedule continued to occur. As Claire was never sure when these so-called 'busy periods'

were likely to come, she was often left in a situation where she had to make alternative arrangements for her children at the last minute. She became more and more frustrated, particularly as there had been occasions when her mother wasn't available to pick up her children and she had had to rely on friends or ask the nursery to keep her children back late, which incurred a penalty fee.

She felt that on a number of occasions the workload and the confidence she had in her team to complete the necessary tasks did not warrant her physical presence in the office and that she could easily have led her team working from home. She also felt undermined by the lack of confidence that Peter had in her abilities. Claire felt that in the six months she had worked at Surelife she had successfully facilitated a self-managing team, which she had worked hard to achieve in the first few weeks of her new position. Claire had developed these skills in her role as a senior manager at NDI—where she was frequently out of the office travelling and had to rely on and ensure her departmental teams got on with the job while she was away. As a result, Claire found herself becoming stressed more easily and this was interfering with her sleeping and eating patterns.

When Claire spoke with Peter about her frustrations he reassured her that it had been a particularly busy few months and that in time things would settle down. However, this didn't turn out to be the case. Claire found that on average there were interruptions to her flexible arrangements on at least two out of every four weeks. This included Peter requiring her to come in on the days she normally worked from home. The situation compounded Claire's stress levels and the effects this had on her health became more serious. She visited her GP on a number of occasions, who initially prescribed her sleeping tablets and then eventually recommended she take antidepressants.

Locking horns with Peter

Things came to a head one afternoon when Claire left early to pick up her children. Peter rang Claire on her mobile and asked her to come back into the office. Claire couldn't believe it. She told Peter that she was already halfway to the nursery and that there wasn't enough time to arrange for someone else to pick up the children. Once she got home and got the children settled she rang the office back to check on the problem. The next day Claire found a note on her desk asking her to see Peter straight away. In their meeting Peter told Claire that he wasn't happy that she had not done as he had asked. He said he realised the difficulty this had presented, however, and suggested to Claire that she put in place a permanent emergency pick-up for her children in case this happened again in the future. Claire told Peter of her frustration at being asked to come back at a most inconvenient time. She also voiced her frustration about her flexible working arrangements in general, which she felt had not been honoured by the verbal agreement they had made when she first started working for Surelife.

Peter responded by saying that he did warn her that from time to time there would be interruptions during busy periods. Claire said she respected this and was happy to abide by it, but that these so-called 'busy periods' were all-too-frequent. She also said she felt that on most of these occasions they didn't warrant her staying behind late or not being able to work from home. At the end of the discussion, Peter told Claire that this is what the job entailed and that if she wasn't happy with it she should start looking for a job elsewhere.