"What work I have done I have done because it has been play," said Mark Twain, quite a master of meaningful work. By the time of his death in 1910, Twain had written some of the canon's best-known (and best-loved) novels. Despite a life marred by financial strife, Twain (aka Samuel Clemens) seems to have enjoyed his time on this rock.

He also lived in the time of typewriters. Twain did not own, nor conceive of, direct-push e-mail, virtual private networks (VPNs) and BlackBerries. He did not carry a laptop and did not drink lattes at a Starbucks with a high-speed hotspot.

But we do. Our technology, which has become a chief driver of the world's economy, also drives us to distraction, blurring the line between work and home and making even the lowest worker on the totem pole an asset to be called on well into the evening.

The Perfect Balance

If you no longer can distinguish work from play and last saw your family on a special occasion — a holiday, a birthday, a (forgotten) anniversary — then take heart in knowing some IT jobs lend themselves to work-life balance better than others. It might be time for a change.

If you’re just getting into the game, it might be wise to think about this before you finalize your plans.

The following 16 IT jobs vary in their ability to provide work-life balance. It's important to note, though, that where you work and how you work are just as impor-

tant as what you do. True, some jobs offer a better chance at work-life balance than others. But the culture of your company is just as vital. Do you work someplace where midnight oil is considered a commodity? Or do you work in an office where enlightened managers know happy workers are also the most productive? Slave drivers went out with Simon LeGree, but some persist — and happily exist — in the cubicle farms of today’s corporations.

Trainers

Training can be a good gig, all the more so if you’re an extrovert who likes teaching and learning. Even better, it rarely gets in the way of home life, unless you’re asked to hold court at nights or on weekends. But when it comes to work-life balance, training has a built-in perk. Unlike software projects or hardware deployments, training sessions start and end on a predetermined schedule. You know in advance when you’ll be working, and you can plan accordingly. The downside? Trainers often have to travel.

Help-Desk Agents

By definition, help-desk agents have a tough job. They deal with people exposed to badly behaved computers, which, in turn, makes people behave badly. Snarky calls and complaints are common. But help-desk agents who do nothing but support (and phone support above all) tend to work on well-
Work-Life Balance

defined shifts. Whether it’s 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 4 p.m. to midnight, they know when the work day starts and ends. And they rarely take work home.

**Help-Desk Managers**
As with the support techs who work for them, help-desk managers tend to work a sane schedule that is somewhat more flexible than support techs. Because they work as managers, they’re more likely to stay late or take work home. But good help-desk managers know how to make help desks run smoothly and get home on time.

**Network Administrators, System Administrators and Engineers**
These are not easy jobs, nor do they lend themselves to a sane work-life balance. Why? Because administrators and engineers are low enough on the
FINDING BALANCE

If you need some help juggling work and nonwork (also called friends, family, or having a life), try these tips.

1. Learn to Say No
   It’s a simple truth: Too many people work too hard because they commit themselves to too much work. Why? Fear of offending the boss. Fear of losing their job. Fear of loneliness, which is what some people return to when they go home at night. But no matter what the reason, “no” can be a word far more powerful than its scrappy two letters imply.

2. Too Much Tech
   The next time you see a person with two cell phones, a beeper and a laptop, run the other way — or look at your own life. Have your high-tech tools turned into a leash that keeps you bound to your job? Do you really need e-mail when you’re walking on the beach? Is it a sin to turn off your cell phone?

3. Entropy
   Quiz time: How many e-mails are in your inbox? Are the contents of your other inbox — the one that holds paper and sits on your desk — 1 inch high, 2 inches high or more? Remember that each piece of paper represents a task that can range from mere minutes to months.

Clutter, chaos and disorganization sap more time from lives than people imagine. If you spend five minutes a day looking for an e-mail or writing out a task list that looks, by and large, like the one you wrote yesterday, you’ll spend 30 hours a year on completely fruitless labor. Thirty hours is nearly a complete work week.

totem pole to do the dirty work, but they are high enough to hold responsibility. Translation: Everyone expects you to stay late when something goes wrong. And something always goes wrong. Administrators and engineers are also the first line of defense against downtime — if a server balks at 4 p.m. or 4 a.m., it’s your job to soothe it. The vast bulk of beeper-based alerts send their pings to network administrators, system administrators and engineers.

Knowledge Management Specialists
   Knowledge management is the far edge of IT, something with which few companies even bother, much less have a full-time specialist. But it’s a fun job that rarely calls for all-nighters or a mad rush to the data center to fix a wonky VPN. Of course, as with all silver clouds, there’s a gray lining: Don’t expect most of your colleagues to know what you do. In fact, some might even view the job with suspicion, as an odd field with no pragmatic value. (They’re wrong, of course, but seasoned knowledge managers will tell you they spend much of their time persuading people to listen.)

Field Service and Field Operations
   Nothing plays havoc with your home life like travel. Field agents — whether they’re support techs, administrators, engineers or auditors — live on the road. That means they live with traffic, a stress inducer par excellence. The day often begins before 8 a.m. and ends after 9 p.m.

IT Consultant
   Consultants work hard, and because most of them work from their homes, their work and their home are one and the same. There are first-rate rewards: Good consultants are paid handsomely, and you answer to no one but yourself. But if you’re not careful, you can be your own taskmaster, too. It takes a special talent to craft a life away from work when you live and work in one place.

Web Designers
   If they’re full-time employees, Web designers tend to work decent hours — until the launch date nears. As a Web site creeps toward completion, expect longer hours for last-minute tweaks and late-breaking additions. The week before launch can be a killer — all-nighters are not uncommon. But as with every job in this list, where you work (and how you manage time) are important factors.

Software Engineers
   Perhaps we can blame this on Bill Gates, who, legend has it, made “all-nighters” synonymous with “innovation” in the early days of Microsoft. Ever since, programmers, just like their archenemy hackers, have worked long into the night, all the more as deadlines near. But many programmers do so more by temperament than need. In fact, some are renowned for the odd hours they keep and seem to enjoy. If you’re a night owl, this could be the choice for you.

Information Architects
   As with knowledge managers, information architects work on the very edge of IT. But these experts, tasked with designing information itself, rarely face the late-night calls or all-night sessions of network administrators or programmers. The catch? Few companies employ full-time information architects. Most are consultants, which means they’re subject to the same work-life hurdles of anyone who’s self-employed.

Testers and Quality Assurance Specialists
   Testers rarely burn the midnight oil until a deadline nears. But when it does, they can live in the office. Why? Because coders and designers never turn their work over to the quality assurance experts until the
last moment, starting a mad rush of give-and-take between software testers on the one hand and software writers on the other.

**IT Auditors**
When it comes to work-life balance, IT auditors, who vet controls for Sarbanes-Oxley, HIPAA or simply IT governance systems, share a lot with testers and quality assurance specialists. As deadlines (audits) loom, late nights can be common.

**Project Managers**
Ditto with project managers. Despite the precision of their craft, project managers often work late and come in early as deadlines approach. But they also tend to be expert time managers, the type who can balance work and life under all but extreme conditions.

**Security Specialists**
Hackers, by long-established but annoying habit, do not give advance notice of their attacks. Intrusions are likely to spring up at 2 p.m. or 2 a.m., and when they do, it's the security expert who gets the call. Life among the malware fighters is a bit like life for doctors: always on call and every so often in a mad rush to get the office.

**IT Directors**
“IT director” is an amorphous term that can encompass everything from a well-defined, finite set of job responsibilities to de facto control over every computer, cell phone and fax machine in a firm. That's a lot of work. Whether IT directors have a decent shot at work-life balance depends on the nature of their job descriptions. Because the job can (and often does) entail management of everything from the help desk to squabbling employees, with a sprinkling of MBA tasks such as budget forecasting and ROI analyses, IT directors are rarely the type to leave at the five o’clock bell.

**CIOs**
Ah, the CIO — the top of the heap, the job that says, “You’ve arrived.” With it comes a big office and bigger salary. But remember: No executive’s job is ever simple. Because they belong to the echelons of upper-management, CIOs are widely expected to live in the office. And they’re often subject to weekend retreats and social obligations (the CEO’s party) that it’s prudent not to ignore, no matter how big the urge.

The bottom line? Some IT jobs lend themselves to having a life more than others. But as with all work, a simple truth prevails: Manage yourself well, and your job will follow. High-tech jobs demand intelligence — they attract people who solve problems and like puzzles. If you put your mind to it, you’ll find the tightrope that divides work and life, home and career, is not as narrow (or as hard to navigate) as you think.

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