

# MINIMALISM AT WORK: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE FOR PUTTING WORK IN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade or so, the topic of minimalism has become increasingly popular in the media. Despite the plethora of resources directed at helping people simplify their lives (e.g., Kondō, 2014, Millburn & Nicodemus, 2015), surprisingly little has been written regarding how to implement minimalism in the workplace. After introducing 10 tools for applying minimalism at work as presented in Grimard (2019), this paper presents an experiential exercise intended to help participants put work in perspective by reflecting on their work-life balance.*

## MINIMALISM AT WORK

Minimalism is: “a tool to rid yourself of life’s excess in favor of focusing on what’s important—so you can find happiness, fulfillment, and freedom” (Millburn & Nicodemus, undated). In a work context, minimalism means “working in a way that brings a sense of peace, meaning, and joy to your life” (Grimard, 2019, p. 2). As presented in the following list, there are 10 tools for applying minimalizing in a work context (Grimard, 2019). Tool 2 is what people typically consider to be the starting and final task of minimalism at work. But, minimalism at work extends far beyond the task of removing physical clutter. Indeed, these tools are organized according to difficulty, from the easiest to the most challenging. In general, the tools that are further down the list require greater effort and are directed at removing clutter that is more fundamental to simplifying one’s life at work.

1. **Find your “Why”** – Identifying one’s underlying motivation and rationale for making changes inspires individuals to persist in working towards their goals. “When the going gets tough, your ‘whys’ will help to pull you through” (Grimard, 2019, p. 10). As Frederick Nietzsche once said, “He who has a *why* can endure any *how*.”
2. **Create a Peaceful Workspace** – Working in a cluttered environment is distracting and reduces concentration and productivity (McMains & Kastner’s 2011).
3. **Simplify your Work Wardrobe** – Carver (2010) and others propose that streamlining one’s work wardrobe simplifies decision-making in the morning.
4. **Reduce Commuting Time** – Workers with a long commute have higher levels of absenteeism (Van Ommeren & Gutiérrez-i-Puigarnau, 2011).
5. **Avoid Electronic Time Eaters** – Focusing on one’s priorities rather than simply responding to emails when they arrive is more likely to result in the accomplishment of those priorities. Having a cellphone close by even when it is on mute results in reduced concentration (Duke, Ward, Gneezy, & Bos, 2018).
6. **Focus on the Vital Few** – According to Juran’s (1992) ‘law of the vital few,’ it is important to avoid the ‘trivial many’ and, instead, focus one’s efforts on what is vital to success.
7. **Eliminate Mental Clutter** – Focusing one’s attention on the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2009) and eliminating perceptual errors and cognitive distortions (Burns, 2008) are two important mechanisms for eliminating mind clutter.
8. **Relax and Enjoy** – Much research has associated dealing with stress and finding ways to relax with positive outcomes (e.g., Dhand & Sohal, 2007; Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016; Jaffee & Scott, 1984; Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014; Rosen, 2018).
9. **Eliminate People Clutter** – Whitfield (1993) points to the importance of finding the right balance between dependence, interdependence, and independence in managing interpersonal boundaries.
10. **Put Work in Perspective** – This tool is grounded, in part, on Gini’s (2013, p. 3) contention that, “If we are not satisfied with our work...even if this discontent doesn’t spill over into our social and family lives – we are, at the very least, unhappy in well over half of our daily existence.” This tool also builds on Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski’s (2013) notion of job crafting.

## CONTEXT OF THE EXERCISE

It is only after having employed the first nine tools that individuals are likely to be *prepared* to employ the 10<sup>th</sup> tool: putting work in perspective. This tool invites individuals to answer fundamental questions about their work life. Here are some examples of such questions (Grimard, 2019, p. 134):

- “Why are we working: do we work to live or do we live to work?”
- “Are we tethered to our work?”
- “How much of our work seeps into our leisure and family?”
- “Does work or thinking about work dominate our lives?”
- “How much meaning do we derive from our work?”
- “Are we working our job, or is our job working us over?”

According to Gini (2013, p. 6):

Too many of us come home at the end of the day feeling like the working wounded...Only a few of us feel engaged, energized, or ennobled by what we do. Most of us feel used rather than useful. .... We cannot always find the perfect fit: sometimes the fit is fractured. But it is demeaning to think that we must separate labor and love. For work without love is servitude.

Gini argues that work takes up such a significant portion of our time that we should try to improve our work lives rather than simply accepting the status quo as unchangeable. The exercises associated with tool 10 help individuals consider their overall work-life balance, explore their ideal work life, compare their ideal work life with their current work situation, and then re-work their current situation so that it is a closer fit with their needs (Grimard, 2019). The exercises in tool 10 are centered on the idea that individuals have agency and should use it to create a work-life that is peaceful and meaningful. The exercise described below is based on the “Finding your Sweet Spot” exercise presented in Grimard (2019). It is a ‘starting point’ for exploring how to put work in perspective.

## EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE: PUTTING WORK IN PERSPECTIVE

### OBJECTIVES

The focus of this exercise is to help participants determine their unique preferences regarding work-life balance. This exercise can be used in a number of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels including:

- Organizational Behavior (organizational commitment, work-life balance, stress, and person-job fit).
- Human Resource Management (work-life balance policies, flex-time, person-job/organization fit, job analysis and design, and employee retention)
- Career Management or Counselling (personal conceptions of career structures, career commitment, career planning, and work-life balance)
- Management Skills (building employee commitment, work-life balance, stress management, job design)

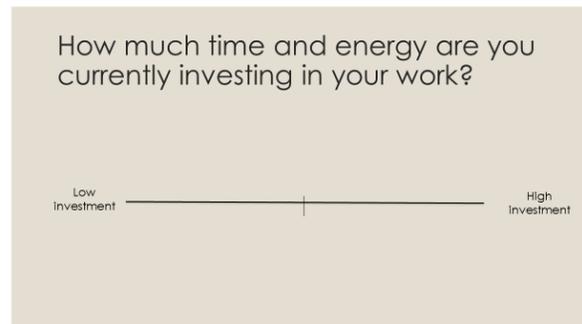
### TIME REQUIREMENTS AND REQUIRED MATERIALS

It can take anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes to complete this exercise depending on the depth to which the debriefing occurs and whether small-group work is included. Although no materials are needed for participants to undertake the exercise, the instructor should have either: (a) a series of PowerPoint slides that will serve to guide the exercise (available from the author) or (b) a plan for presenting the exercise on a whiteboard. Below, I present a series of diagrams that can serve both purposes.

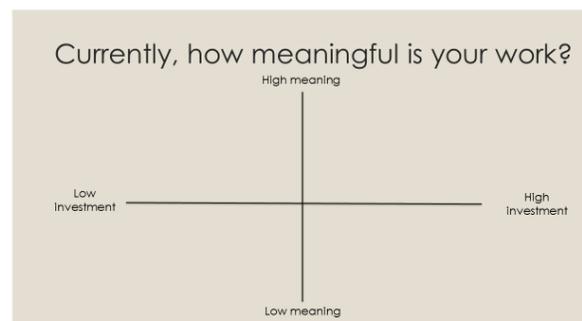
### CARRYING OUT THE EXERCISE

1. The instructor introduces the exercise by using the text presented in “Context of the Exercise” and “Objectives” above and by linking the topic of work-life balance to those that are currently being addressed in the course.

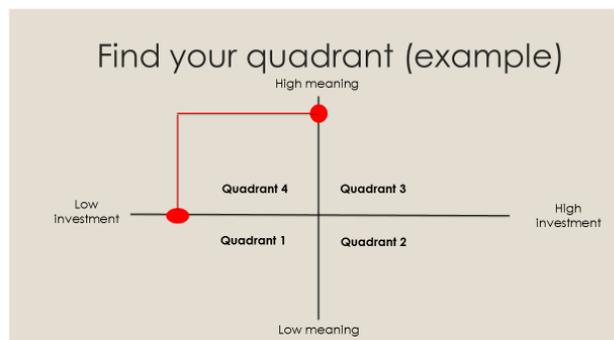
- The instructor draws the following on a whiteboard and asks participants to draw a horizontal line on a sheet of paper and estimate [from very low (1) to very high (10)] how much energy and time they are currently investing in their work. The instructor should emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that each person's answer will differ. The instructor should wait until all participants have completed the task before moving on to the next step.



- Next, the instructor draws a vertical line (see diagram) on the whiteboard and asks participants to draw this second line and estimate [from very low (1) to very high (10)] how meaningful their work is (overall). The complexity that may arise here is that some participants may consider only a portion of their responsibilities to be meaningful. As such, participants may be tempted to produce separate ratings for each of their primary responsibilities. However, given that they estimated their investment of time and energy for their job as a whole, the same should be done for 'meaningfulness.' Later, participants may choose to do a more fine-grained analysis of investment and meaningfulness based on their key responsibilities. Again, the instructor should emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers here.



- Next, the instructor invites participants to identify their "quadrant" using the following example. Participants whose score is very low in investment but high in meaning would find themselves in quadrant 4.

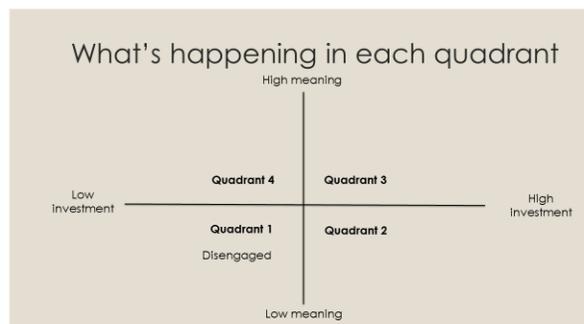


5. At this step, the instructor asks participants to momentarily set aside their personal results while they consider the model more generally. Pointing to quadrant 1, the instructor says that employees in this quadrant invest very little time and energy in their work, and they do not derive much meaning from their work. The instructor then invites participants to: “Take some time to put yourself in this quadrant for the moment. Imagine that this is your work life. How does it feel – viscerally, emotionally, and psychologically? Tell me what words come to mind?” The instructor should write in the quadrant all of the words offered by the participants. Some possible words include:

- Stuck the mud
- Disengaged
- Avoidant
- Worthless
- Insignificant
- Hollow
- A big void
- Grind
- Surviving

This step is very important since it gives participants the opportunity to “feel” what it would be like to be in each of the quadrants. This ‘experiential’ aspect of the exercise should not be skimmed. Indeed, it can serve as a powerful motivator to find the ‘right’ work-life balance. Also, at this point, it is very important that participants focus on experiencing these feelings and sharing them. Instructors should be careful that a broader discussion or evaluation of the quadrants does not occur. There will be time for this later.

The instructor should then underline the word “disengaged” on the whiteboard (or write it on the board if it hasn’t been suggested). Alternatively, if using PowerPoint slides, the instructor should move to the following slide:

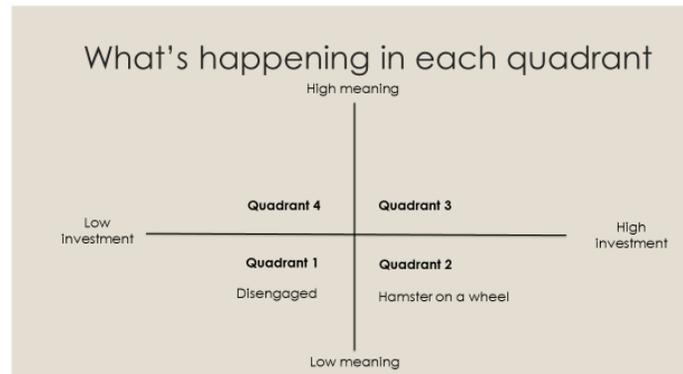


Then the instructor should provide some information about Quadrant 1. As Grimard (2019, pp. 144-145) suggests, these employees are: “‘surviving’ the workplace, rather than thriving. Work is a means to an end. In other words, they do the work but they don’t let it interfere with their life. Work pays the bills so that they can do meaningful/fun things outside of work. In this way, work and ‘life’ are segmented: work and life are separate. They mostly get meaning and joy from their personal lives.”

6. Next, the instructor asks participants to consider quadrant 2, where employees invest a great deal of time and energy in their work but do not derive a sense of meaning from their work. The instructor then invites participants to: “Take some time to put yourself in this quadrant for the moment. Imagine that this is your work life. How does it feel – viscerally, emotionally, and psychologically? Tell me what words come to mind?” The instructor should write in the quadrant all of the words offered by the participants. Some possible words include:

- Hamster on a wheel
- Frantic
- Joyless
- Striving
- Spinning wheels
- Overload
- Anxious
- Restless
- Stress
- Consumed by work

The instructor should then underline the words “hamster on a wheel” on the whiteboard (or write them on the board if they haven’t been suggested). Alternatively, if using PowerPoint slides, the instructor should move to the following slide:



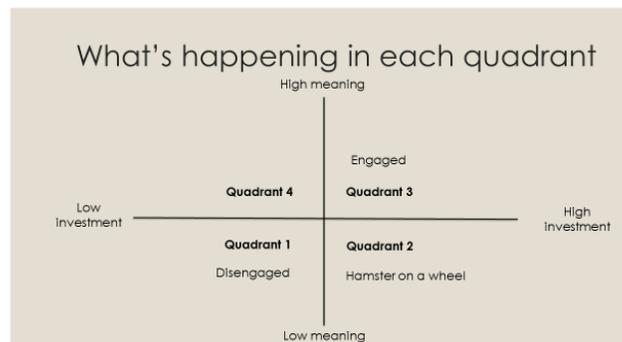
Then the instructor should provide information about Quadrant 2. As Grimard (2019, p. 145-146) indicates:

For these folks, work crowds out and floods into their family and leisure time. The boundaries are diffuse.... they may be striving or frenetically trying to make some headway on their excessive workload. However, the hamster wheel keeps spinning, and every day seems to run into the next day...it seems that they ‘live to work’ and have zero work-life balance...They work very hard, but they’re not feeling engaged or excited about their work. ...They are far too exhausted to do much when they arrive home from work.

- Next, the instructor asks participants to consider quadrant 3, where employees invest a great deal of time and energy in their work AND also derive a sense of meaning from their work. The instructor then invites participants to: “Take some time to put yourself in this quadrant for the moment. Imagine that this is your work life. How does it feel – viscerally, emotionally, and psychologically? Tell me what words come to mind?” The instructor should write in the quadrant all of the words offered by the participants. Some possible words include:

- Engaged
- Pedal to the metal
- Hopeful
- Committed
- Impact
- Excited
- Focused
- Invested

The instructor should then underline the word “engaged” on the whiteboard (or write it on the board if it hasn’t been suggested). Alternatively, if using PowerPoint slides, the instructor should move to the following slide:



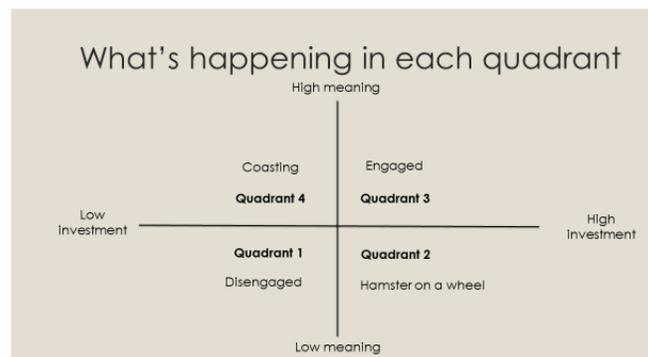
The instructor should now provide information about Quadrant 3. Based on Grimard (2019, p. 146), these employees:

... highly value their work and place it at the center of their lives.... They have the ‘pedal to the medal,’ but they’re enjoying the ride. They believe that they’re making an important contribution, so their huge investment seems worth it. As in Q2, work may be still crowding out their personal life, but they’re getting a reward in return for their investment.

8. Finally, the instructor asks participants to consider quadrant 4, where, despite investing very little time and energy in their work, employees derive a sense of meaning from their work. The instructor then invites participants to: “Take some time to put yourself in this quadrant for the moment. Imagine that this is your work life. How does it feel – viscerally, emotionally, and psychologically? Tell me what words come to mind?” The instructor should write in the quadrant all of the words offered by the participants. Some possible words include:

- Coasting
- Cruise control
- Relaxing
- Lucky
- Enjoyable
- Focused
- Peaceful

The instructor should underline the word “coasting” on the whiteboard (or write it on the board if needed). Alternatively, if using PowerPoint slides, the instructor should move to the following slide:

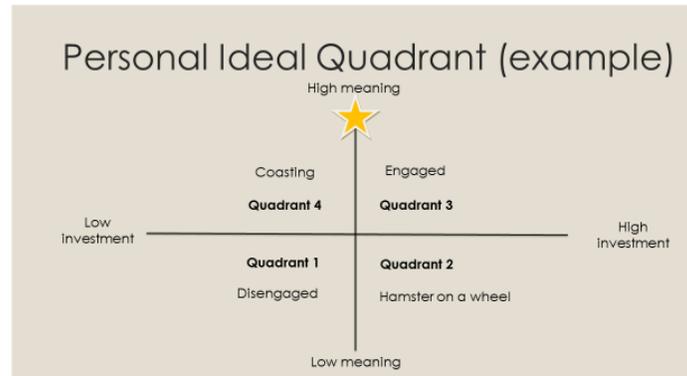


The instructor should now provide the following information about employees in Quadrant 4 (Grimard, 2019, p. 147):

Whatever little time and energy these folks invest in their work, they derive lots of meaning from it. Are they simply coasting and cherry-picking their tasks, so that that they do only those tasks that bring a sense of contribution? Perhaps, these folks are doing part-time work, consulting, engaging in self-employed pursuits that are highly enjoyable and not too demanding.

9. The instructor then asks participants a series of debriefing questions:
- In reflecting on your feelings and thoughts while considering the quadrants, which quadrant felt the most comfortable for you? The least comfortable? Why is this the case? (Participants are likely to say that quadrants 3 or 4 are most comfortable because work is highly meaningful in both quadrants. Quadrant 2 is likely to feel especially challenging and fruitless because little meaning is derived from their high levels of effort and time investment.)
  - Looking at your personal results, how comfortable does your current quadrant feel? How did you get there? (Participants often say that there is room for improvement. They usually add that they didn't actively 'choose' this quadrant, but, rather, their level of work-life balance evolved over time and seems to have settled into a pattern without their being aware of it. They may also say that they moved through the quadrants as they progressed through their careers. This is especially likely of participants who find themselves in Quadrant 2 because “that's what my organization expects” or “everyone else is there.” Participants who feel that their employers have broken their psychological contracts (not lived up to promises, subjected them to mistreatment, made unfair decisions, etc.) are likely to say that they have settled into Quadrant 1 as a way of 'protecting' themselves from further disappointment. For example, they may ask, “Why commit to an organization that doesn't commit to me?” Pre-retirement or part-time participants may consider themselves to be in what they consider to be the 'ideal' quadrant – Quadrant 4.)
  - What do you think is THE 'ideal' quadrant? (Participants may identify Quadrant 3 as being what organizations and HR folks consider to be ideal, i.e., maximum investment and maximum meaning. However, participants may consider Quadrant 4 to be ideal because a high level of meaning is derived without needing to 'sacrifice yourself or your family life.' The instructor should point out that there is no 'single' ideal quadrant for everyone; i.e., it is an individual preference and may change over time.)
  - Where is your personal 'ideal' quadrant? Why? (The instructor should invite each participant to place a star somewhere on the grid that best represents their own ideal quadrant. The instructor should ask participants to explain their choice. Typically, participants choose Quadrant 3 or 4, not realizing that they can choose both.)

Once participants have identified and explained their ideal quadrants, the instructor should show the following slide.)



The instructor should explain that, in this example, “Roxanne” is straddling two quadrants. She wants to invest a moderate amount of time and energy at work and, yet, thrive and be fulfilled. Most participants do not realize that they can choose a position that is absolutely anywhere on the grid; i.e., they don’t necessarily have to choose one quadrant.

- e. What can you do to bridge the gap between your current and your ideal quadrant? (The instructor leads participants in a planning exercise that involves finding ways to derive more meaning from work, if possible. The instructor can discuss the following slide with participants.)

### Bridging the Gap Between your Current and your Ideal Quadrant

- For small gaps, adjust current job:
  - Get rid of 'meaning-less' tasks
  - Spend less time and energy doing 'meaning-less' tasks
  - Make 'meaning-less' task more meaningful
  - Bundle tasks so that, together, they are more meaningful
  - Reframe 'meaning-less' tasks
  - Add more meaning-full tasks
- For huge gaps, consider your options:
  - Do a 'reality check'

10. The instructor concludes the exercise by showing the following slide and encouraging participants to consider the importance of work-life balance.

### Parting Wisdom

- “Remind yourself that you are much more than your job. However much you love your job, it is a mistake to define yourself too closely to your work. Take time to reflect on what you want to achieve in life and think about your definition of personal success.” – Gill Corkindale
- “Your life is a reflection of your choices. If you don't like what those choices have gotten you up to this point, suck it up and admit it, and then make different ones.” – Paula Renaye
- “The surest sign of the higher life is serenity. Moral progress results in freedom from inner turmoil. You can stop fretting about this and that.” – Epictetus
- “Instead of nurturing your life purpose, you may have put it aside in the dark, closing the door on the idea that you can ever achieve fulfillment. When we have allowed ourselves to get smaller and smaller, we wind up living without the fullness of our being.” – Carol Adrienne

## CONCLUSION

Putting work in perspective is a powerful exercise that permits individuals to reflect on their work-life choices, whether they have been made consciously or unconsciously. More often than not, participants have not taken the time to reflect on their pattern of work-life balance and its impact on their personal lives. Or, they consider an 'unbalanced' situation to be temporary or necessary until they reach the next rung on the career ladder. Unfortunately, it is likely that pre-existing patterns simply continue and become reinforced as individuals progress along the career ladder. However, as this exercise demonstrates, individuals can make some choices regarding their work-life balance. Becoming aware of our choices is the first step toward re-visioning one's future and putting work in perspective.

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