

Work life balance: “You have to decide, it’s either your job or me”

Is it necessary to sacrifice your relationship in order to manage your business? How can you find a work life balance and protect your mental health? Thibo Mc Fly was confronted with these questions and more during the course of his entrepreneurial adventure, and he didn't come out unscathed. Here's his story.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Today, far from the glitz and glam, I want to share a part of my life with you. The life balance of an entrepreneur is not all “cool, I’m my own boss, I can do what I want”. Behind each man and each woman who starts a business, there is often a dating life or relationship that is sacrificed for productivity. This happened to me more than two years ago and I think that all entrepreneurs will one day be confronted with this reality.

In life, there are entrepreneurs and there are the others

This story takes place at the beginning of my adventure, during the honeymoon phase of entrepreneurship. The early stage has something about it that is exhilarating. We leave the desk job and we spread our wings. Everything is new and we are happy with this new world that is filled with possibilities, “easy” money, and freedom. Our friends and family push us towards the new Eldorado because the grass is always greener on the other side.

Our friends are happy for us and give us all sorts of hopes and dreams. “When you’re rich, you can...” or “I have always known that you were good at...” The future is bright, each meeting is a way to feel like part of something important. We see it in colleagues, mentors, and people who we want to be like. From this point on, we are different because we are part of the “pioneers.”

A feeling of déjà vu

Six months into it, the charm of the beginning is starting to slowly wear off. Nothing has changed, however... it is exactly that: nothing has changed! In six months, these people, my “startup family,” seem to have rooted themselves in something strange. The smiles are the same, the pitches are all similar, and the promises never seem to be realised. I hear some people, after a few drinks, talk about the darker stories.

“I’ve been waiting to be paid for more than four months, but still nothing”

“Already £30K in the hole and not one client,” “I’ve been waiting to be paid for more than four months, but still nothing,” “We aren’t getting anywhere, soon the unemployment benefits will run out.” It’s like having the world’s longest hangover, day after day. The world that helped create a new me is starting to crumble. I keep holding on though. I tell myself that failure is for losers.

I'm not going out tonight

My partner's eyes are just killing me. She seems upset, but that's not what's important: she can't understand. My computer will be my trusty friend. Another night of squinting my eyes, redoing drafts, finishing files, sending emails, certainly no time for thinking about my mental health. Tonight, I will go to bed alone. Not to sleep, of course, my mind still has a thousand things to think about. The night allows anxiety to creep up from my stomach and slowly make its way to my brain. *Money, products, clients, paying the rent, counting down the months before unemployment...* the endless bloody spiral that leads to insomnia.

"Tomorrow will be another day"

I get up to smoke one last cigarette, hoping that sleep will follow.

"So, how does vacation work for you?"

Says a bloke who tells me that I look like I am having the worst day. But social life is important, at least it will get my mind off my business.

"So, how far are you?"

Always this question. It can be translated as "what the hell are you doing?" You will respond that starting a business takes time, that building a product and working with developers can't be done with the flip of a switch. Deep down, it's actually hurting you because you have no idea

where you really are. “Being an entrepreneur is fun,” they say... You don’t even dare to ask your parents for more cash even though you’re not making ends meet. You go home frustrated and distant.

Your partner, the one who's always on your side, doesn’t have much in common with you as your work life balance changes. You both try to keep fighting through your own things, but it’s been a while since you’ve worked together. Between fights, you throw out “you don’t understand, my priority is work.” You feel like it was too much, that you started breaking down the foundation of a bridge that you're still on. Tonight, you won’t sleep well, but the three pints of beer will at least help you forget why.

“Tomorrow will be another day”

Yeah, but while waiting for tomorrow, my head hurts.



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You can't take back what you said

Another work meeting and it's one too many. It's time to cut the cords. We're going in circles; we're sinking but no one makes a decision. Quitting is admitting that we messed up, that the last 12 months have been for nothing. Doing, undoing, and redoing for nothing. We had false hope for a long time. I can't stop listing all the mistakes that we could have avoided. Grieving will take a few days. So that we don't have to admit it to each other, we'll let the fire die out little by little. Sadly, the life and death of a project doesn't fit with a personal life. You can't use the "grieving entrepreneur" card as a real reason for ostracising yourself from everyone.

With her, the tensions rose until they imploded. It's been a while since we've really understood each other, so we might as well get it all out in the open now. The umpteenth fight will be settled by "it's your job, or me." Bad question or bad response?

At least I can really dial up the drama of the situation. The separation will consist of who gets which piece furniture and being reminded of her through the strangest things. Especially when I get the Facebook notification of her birthday. An infamous moment where the Messenger conversation looks like this:

16/8/2017 3:15

Happy birthday

(seen Tuesday 7:51)

16/8/2018 11:42

Happy birthday ?

(seen Tuesday 11:59)

And nothing else...

Being vegan and starting early

At this moment, entrepreneurship will make up for your lack of emotional stimuli. You will have a couple of joyful phases where you launch new projects, but straight after, a wave of depression will knock your mental health down (thanks hypersensitivity). But you're not the type to let yourself go and you want to strive to be like those who have been successful. "Wake up at 6 a.m., exercise, meditate, stop smoking, eat better, don't eat meat. That is the recipe of a champion." If others could do it, why can't I? Reconstruction includes self-discipline and unceremonious dedication.

"Wake up at 6 a.m., exercise, meditate, stop smoking, eat better, don't eat meat"

Without a stable base, it is easy to fall into extremes. You inspire yourself with self-help lectures, and you accomplish 12-hour days, *NBD* right? You, of course, don't have a social life; you don't have time for one. You take on all the freelance tasks that fall into your lap because, in 6 months, you won't be able to count on unemployment anymore. You've come so far, but there is still so much to do. Yet life is deceitful. Slowly but surely these tasks will replace your morning exercise time, and then your meditation. A full ashtray will be the sign that you picked up the bad habit again. Fast food every now and again and the lack of money will make you say "the price of vegetables is outrageous."

Reconciliation

And one day, a mate manages to drag me out of my lair. He is with a girl. Great, I'm going to be the gooseberry. The night continues and for once, I don't want to talk about my startup or about developers and clients. I want to have a simple discussion, to drink and laugh "just because." On the way home, I finally realise that this girl and my mate aren't together. When I say good night, she smiles at me. A couple of dates later and she moves in with me. A couple of adjustments had to be made for my new girlfriend and my work. We make it work. She's the one that finally helps me sleep again.

"Life is like a box of chocolates..."

Conclusion

After some time and reflection I can observe two things:

- Failure is a necessary step towards success
- Experience is inertia. Whether it be in work or elsewhere, from the moment that you are in movement, taking a break will never be the death of you, it will just give you time to take a step back

I have an anxiety of emptiness. I need my days to be filled with something so that I don't feel inactive or useless.

I feel like we don't talk enough about depression and mental health among entrepreneurs and the pain that they hide. We think that it's easy to be an entrepreneur. Let's be honest: entrepreneurship is hard. You'll

have times when you feel empty, you may risk losing your partner, you will make bad decisions but think that they were the right ones. And one morning, maybe you will wake up like me, and you will have to close a door even when it costs you almost everything.

However, by analysing these experiences I came up with my current project: Spartan Week, a five-day intensive training for new entrepreneurs that helps them build skills to help them launch their startups. The format is difficult and demanding because the students must face their fears in a very short amount of time. They do this by working on production tools and the results are better than they imagined.

I will conclude this article with one of my favourite quotes:

“An entrepreneur is someone who will jump off a cliff and assemble an airplane on the way down.”

Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn



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