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How ‘Feierabend’ helps Germans disconnect from the workday

By Krystin Arneson 7th October 2020

The lines between life and work have never been so blurry. A German word shows us the importance of disconnecting, and may even help us reclaim some of our free time.

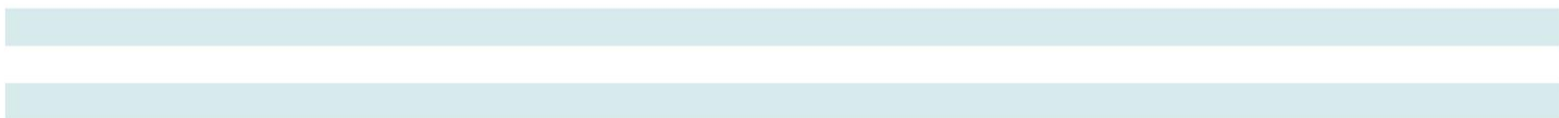
Many of us are relieved to have ditched office commutes amid Covid-19, but what some see as a grind, others view as a ritual. For Nils Backhaus, who lives in Bochum, just outside Dortmund in Germany, even when he’s working from home commuting is still an essential part of his day that he can’t go without. At the end of the working day, around the time of 1700, the 34-year-old research and policy adviser for Germany’s Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health puts on his shoes, and gets on his racing bike to cruise through the tranquil landscapes along the Ruhr River.

This daily ride – what he calls his “fake commute” – mimics the trip he used to take returning from the office, before he transitioned to home working. It’s Backhaus’s way of recreating a more traditional start to ‘Feierabend’, a German word describing the time after work is done, and a period of leisure and rest begins.

“‘Feierabend’ has two meanings,” says Christoph Stengel, a 41-year-old Berliner who works as a software developer at price-comparison website Idealo. “First, it’s the moment you stop working for the rest of the day – of course, [it’s] a good feeling then. Second, it’s the part of the day between work and going to bed.”

It might seem surprising that Germans, who are often stereotyped as hard, efficient workers, cherish their leisure time so protectively. But the concept of Feierabend is also linked to a very capitalist mentality that companies get more productivity – and therefore more value – out of their labour force if workers are allowed clear periods of rest after work.

“You have to rest after work directly, you can’t do double time the next day,” says Backhaus. “The stress and recovery go hand in hand. It’s like a bodily rhythm.”





Even though he's working from home, Nils Backhaus, 34, goes on a daily "fake commute" to help separate career from personal life (Credit: Nils Backhaus)

For workers struggling to adapt to remote work – and as many freelancers well know – one of the largest issues with the shift is that there's no clear end to the workday. Even if you work abnormal hours due to other demands in your life or personal preference, remote working makes it easy to put in more hours than you should. Many Germans would argue that a clean disconnection is needed — and that's where Feierabend can help.

For non-Germans, the concept of Feierabend can get a little murky in translation. Roughly speaking, it's a portmanteau of 'celebration' and 'evening' that's sometimes interpreted as 'quitting time' or 'happy hour'. But that's not quite right.

"Some translations mix it a little up," says Backhaus. "The original meaning isn't to party. When this word was dubbed for this, it was like the beginning of leisure time or free time and rest in the evening, and so it's attached to the time when we had a lot of religious life in the evening."

In early agricultural days, the ringing of the church bells signalled the end of the workday and the start of evening prayers and rest. Later, "in the context of industrialisation, questions of how to handle 'time' on a daily basis became vital to an increasing number of people due to new kinds of labour and changing working conditions", says Dr Caroline Rothauge, assistant professor of modern and contemporary history at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. "Factory workers and trade employees fought for shorter working hours and, thus, resting periods such as a 'Feierabend' or a weekend." She adds that a common idea around the 1900s was that 'free time' should be used to regenerate body and mind. "Thus, work and free time were conceived as two sides of the same coin. Using free time adequately makes one fit for working again and, at best, even increases one's performance."

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Advocates of this "hygiene of work" philosophy recommended measures like going for walks



outdoors and avoiding drinking or dancing (especially for young women). “They gave a lot of thought to, in their words, reforming and refining factory workers’ and trade employees’ ways to recreate and entertain themselves,” says Rothauge. “Only then could ‘real rest’ and thus ‘the functional use’ of their ‘free time’ be guaranteed.”

While the concept of Feierabend has evolved, there are still some legacies from its religious ties. Holidays and Sundays are known as Feiertage, or “rest days”, and protected under German law as “days of rest from work and of spiritual elevation”.

“I strongly believe Feierabend means to connect to your core, meaning your family, your friends or your hobbies,” says Gene Gerrienne, a 31-year-old partner/country manager at start-up tracking service Early Metrics. Born in Köln, he lived in Germany until he was 22 and is now based in Greenwich, England. “Germans like to have a clear split between work time and me time. Because of that, I believe they put a lot of effort into being as efficient as possible at work, which enables them to fully switch off once the computer is, too.”

Feierabend isn’t just a German word for ‘work-life balance’. While it’s related, ‘work-life balance’ is a term that can often end up just as nebulous in meaning as the problem it’s trying to correct. Instead, the German approach seems to acknowledge that there will always be tension between the work self and the private self. Rather than attempting to reconcile the two, the disconnection that comes with Feierabend establishes boundaries between them. It also usually creates a path between the two states, like dressing for the office and changing after work or, like Backhaus, replacing a commute with a bicycle tour.



31-year-old Gene Gerrienne, a German who is now based in England, implemented a strict schedule to ensure distance from working all the time (Credit: Gene Gerrienne)

Most importantly, the concept of Feierabend acknowledges that being at work, and in ‘work mode’, puts demands upon a person from which regular relief is needed.

In [surveys](#) that Backhaus conducted in 2015, 2017 and 2019, researchers asked participants how satisfied they were about their work and private life. Backhaus says that the responses showed “that if boundaries are blurring, or if work time extends into private life through overtime, long working hours, or working at unusual times, then their satisfaction with work-life balance decreases”.



“As a German, you can imagine that I love my routine,” says Gerrienne. But when lockdown set in, he switched to working from home, which affected his usual schedule. He says: “The boundaries between my work and personal life became more and more blurry. I remember one day, I was wondering why no one was responding to my Slack messages. It turned out it was Saturday – that’s when I realised I had to go about things differently.”

To help cope with the transition, Gerrienne says he began “a very rigid structure” that began in the morning with meditation, exercise, stretching and journaling. As he is a faster, he also trained himself to start getting hungry at a set time in the evening. “That’s when I would stop working unless something very urgent popped up,” he says. “I closed the laptop and either studied, cooked or read a book. Discipline was key here!”

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A clean cut-off between the work-self and life-self, and finding a way to transition between the two states of being, isn’t just beneficial to the worker but beneficial to employers as well. “Even companies see that there’s a problem if people are always on and working 24/7,” says Backhaus. “So, they have to take more time off, they’re more often calling in sick. There are a lot of problems that can be seen if this detachment is not possible.”

Of course, Feierabend is some days more of an ideal than others, and even Germans work longer hours than they should. One [working time survey](#) showed that full-time German employees work a weekly average of [five hours more](#) than their contracted hours. But even with longer hours, putting a hard stop to the day when work is done can still be restorative.

And to Paula McLeod, founder of US-based executive-coaching company Success by Design, Feierabend “makes perfect sense”. Throughout the pandemic, McLeod has been coaching clients to take similar measures to distance themselves from work, since shifting to working from home. “People need something to replace the shift that happens when they commute to and from the office,” she says.

Backhaus says that even something as simple as changing clothes from something a bit smarter during work hours (say, switching from wearing trousers with a waistband during work to comfortable jogging pants after work) can help your mind switch from being “on” and in work mode to turning off for the evening. It’s important that “your mind is in line with what you’re doing right now”, he says. “These routines get lost in Covid-19’s boundarylessness of work and private routine, but help the body to adapt.”



Mindset is key, but so are new habits. Adopting a routine and establishing boundaries to help disconnect from work can begin with the individual, but they also resonate with colleagues – and, if you’re a manager, leading by example can help your team feel like they can disconnect too. For example, if childcare, obligations, time zones or personal preference have you working outside traditional hours, schedule emails to be sent during usual business hours so clocked-out workers don’t get a push notification or sense a need to respond just because someone else is on the clock.

Ultimately, drawing on the lessons of Feierabend might help remote workers who are feeling overwhelmed to reclaim both their personal life, and by extension, their work life – at least a little bit. “When it comes to work-life balance, every individual has to find out what works best for them, and I believe there is no right or wrong answer,” says Gerrienne. “I think the biggest benefit of Feierabend is being in control of your life and making conscious decisions, rather than letting life take control over you.”

