

Work-Life Balance Round-Table Discussion at the Joint Observatories Kavli Science Forum

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One of the main goals of the Joint Observatories Kavli Science Forum held at ESO Vitacura in April 2022 was to bring to light common problems shared by personnel working at Chile-based observatories and universities. The difficulty of balancing a highly demanding work regime and personal life was identified as a common challenge faced by people working in astronomy-related environments, as discussed in a round table on work-life balance. No matter whether you work at an observatory or in academia, trying to maintain a reasonable balance between personal life and work is a difficult task, as a result of working shifts at the observatories, travel to national or international conferences, teaching duties, the continuous exposure to tight deadlines, or a combination of all of these. Remote working in the worst times of the pandemic made this balance even more difficult, and after the peak of the pandemic many people suffered burnout and exhaustion. A three-hour round table divided into two sessions was organised on 26 April 2022 to share and discuss the main issues that affect a healthy work-life balance in astronomy. This forum provided a good environment for discussion of how to improve this situation, in preparation for once the pandemic is under control.

A panel composed of a diverse group of astronomers at different career stages, of different genders, and working in different environments was convened to propose a set of topics for discussion by the participants at the meeting. Specifically, the panel consisted of: professor at the University of Valparaiso and former ESO Chile Fellow Yara Jaffe; telescope operator and technical assistant at Las Campanas Observatory, deeply involved in outreach inclusive initiatives, Carla Fuentes; ESO Fellow with duties at Paranal Observatory Camila Navarrete; former president of SOCHIAS and recent Premio Nacional de Ciencias Exactas by the Chilean government Mónica Rubio; and ESO Astronomer Sergio Martín, manager of the Operations

Performance Group at ALMA. The panel was chaired by ESO's Head of the Office for Science and Faculty chair in Chile, Itziar de Gregorio-Monsalvo.

The discussion also extended onto social media networks, where members from the local organising committee created a dedicated account for the forum and posted several questions related to the topics that would be discussed in the work-life balance session. This gave people the opportunity to comment on them, propose new topics, and vote for the questions of most interest to them.

In the first session two topics were addressed, concerning the workaholic culture in astronomy environments and the search for work-life balance when working far away from home. The competitive nature of jobs in astronomy, the tight deadlines to which we are continuously exposed, and the workaholic culture that surrounds us all serve to create significant pressures in jobs that are already quite demanding by definition. From working in the middle of an emergency or a catastrophe or going without sleep for nights and days, it is incredible what people will do to reach deadlines, which are so common and frequent in astronomy. And despite the heroic or funny anecdotes we may share with our colleagues afterwards, these sorts of pressures have a bad impact on our physical and mental health that could be addressed if we properly faced those deadlines with some better organisation. The capability to classify and set the right priorities between urgent and important tasks was considered key to survival in a world where at any moment one can receive a new message containing new requests, via multiple online channels.

Working shifts in remote places, where most observatories are, or travelling around the world several times a year to maintain international scientific collaborations or attend technical or scientific conferences makes it even more difficult to reach a healthy work-life balance. While some hobbies can be done at observatories, maintaining social relationships with outside coworkers and the family can be very challenging. In this specific matter the support and flexibility of the institutions and the need to develop specific policies

to help people to reconcile work with personal life were identified as key parameters to help facilitate a work-life balance.

In the second session the importance of disconnection from work and the need to have a list of good practices at work to encourage a healthy work-life balance were discussed. Continuous online connection with work-related activities is something that has been exacerbated in the last few years because of the pandemic situation. While mobile working from home is considered good for keeping a healthy work-life balance when selected on a voluntary basis, over the long term, when it is maintained by, for example, an imposed quarantine, it can have the opposite effect and lead more easily to burnouts. Social media recently became another powerful engine for advertising, discussing, and connecting colleagues on work-related matters. Well managed, it can be a useful platform to access recent astronomy news and to build new connections in astronomy, but it impacts on the number of hours people stay connected to a computer and should also be done with awareness and for a limited time.

For those in positions of responsibility, who manage and look after a team of people, it is even more difficult to avoid being connected to the computer for too long. Since they act as role models and help to propagate the organisation's culture, they need to set a good example with their own healthy practices. An effort must be made to interact with colleagues within normal office working hours, unless there is a justified emergency case. The use of automatic tools to send deferred emails and a healthy and organised work agenda were identified as basic tools to assist in this matter.

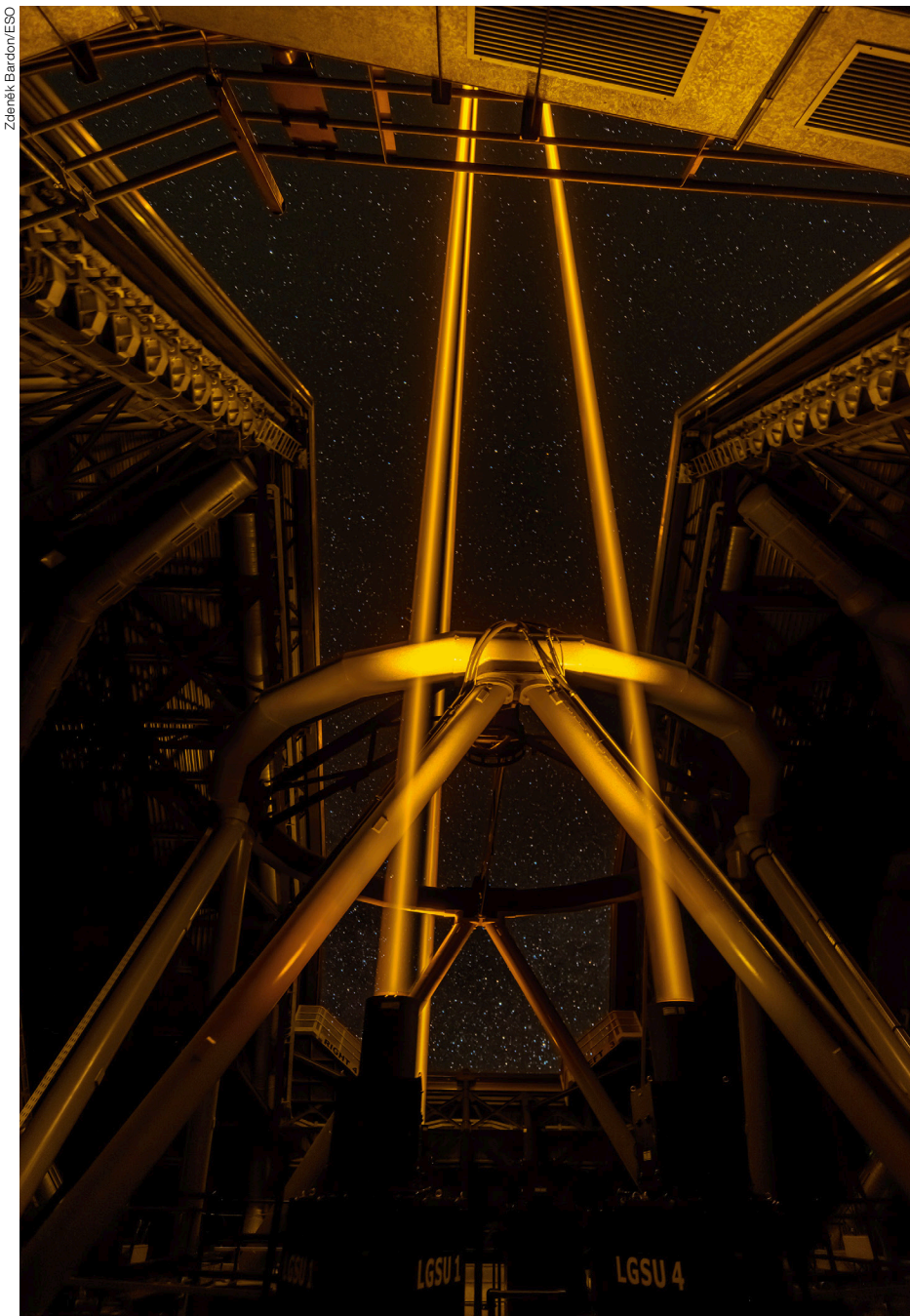
The general conclusion of this discussion session was that "work smarter and not harder" should be a slogan adopted by all of us no matter our career stage, as the first step towards reaching a successful and healthy work-life balance while we continue contributing to the production of cutting-edge science at the observatories or at the universities. This may imply receiving training and coaching sessions to develop our time management skills and resilience, which should start from

the earliest career stages. Raising awareness of the importance of disconnection was also identified as a key contributor to maintaining a good work-life balance. Those in positions of responsibility should help to maintain and promote healthy work practices, acting as role models.

The implementation of mobile working policies, aligned with people's needs and having a good degree of flexibility at work, were identified as essential ways to support work-life balance, especially for people with families.

Acknowledgements

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With advanced instruments designed to catch the light from extrasolar worlds and the Universe's most distant stars and galaxies, crystal clear images are a must. To achieve this, Unit Telescope 4 (Yepun) of ESO's Very Large Telescope (VLT) in Chile has an adaptive optics facility equipped with four sodium lasers, aimed towards the sky. When the laser beams reach about 90 kilometres into the atmosphere, they excite sodium atoms that start to glow, creating artificial stars in the sky.