

Fasting Without Falling Behind

Balancing a demanding career with fasting in Ramadan

Ihsan Connect, Cohort 2, Session: Ramadan and Professional Life

An unanswered question that resurfaces every year as Ramadan approaches: how does a working professional hold a demanding career in one hand and an equally demanding act of worship in the other, without either one slipping? The session answered this question from lived experience, drawing on the habits, trade-offs, and small disciplines that carry professionals through the month without letting either their careers or their *Taqwa* slip.

Before turning to the practical habits, it is worth pausing on the goal of Ramadan: Taqwa. Taqwa is the careful navigation of life to avoid what displeases Allah, acting on what has been revealed. It is described as the best provision in Allah's sight (2:197). How does Taqwa link with fasting? The command to fast in Al-Baqarah (2:183) carries two lessons. First, the phrase "as it was prescribed for those before you" is a reminder that fasting is not new: farmers, laborers, and entire nations observed it long before modern conveniences, so the excuse of being too busy or too tired holds no weight. Second, the verse closes by stating that fasting is prescribed so believers "may attain Taqwa," and the Arabic conveys possibility rather than a guarantee. Completing the month brings reward and forgiveness, but Taqwa must still be actively pursued, which makes the real question not whether the fast was completed, but whether character and devotion improved because of it. Hence, as Muslims and working professionals, we should aim to complete the requirements of fasting and also increase in our Taqwa in this month.

The following paragraphs will discuss the points related to fasting and working productively in Ramadan, and also take plausible steps to increase in our Taqwa.

1. Managing Health and Routine During Ramadan

Ahmed Jarrar, a senior consultant at Bain, argued that the real work begins before Ramadan does. He described a colleague who tapers off caffeine weeks in advance to avoid withdrawal headaches once the fasts begin. A small act of foresight saves him from miserable headaches while fasting. He extended the same principle to the workplace: align with managers early, making clear the specific hours you will need around Iftar and Taraweeh rather than discovering conflicts in the moment. Ahmed Makki added the physical dimension, pointing to the Prophet's (ﷺ) practice of fasting more in Sha'ban than in any other month outside of Ramadan (Sahih al-Bukhari 1970). Consider fasting or skipping lunch to prepare the body in advance.

For better worship during Ramadan, the mind and body must be well cared for by focusing on diet, sleep and setting professional boundaries. Remember to skip fried food and prioritize quality over quantity at Suhoor and Iftar. Protect five to six hours of

sleep as non-negotiable, and do not waste evening hours on errands that can wait. On setting boundaries with clients, always pair a time constraint with a solution rather than presenting only a limitation. This can be achieved by stating your available hours as clearly as your unavailable ones. Most clients, especially in regions where Ramadan is widely observed, are more accommodating than professionals assume.

2. Engineering the Day Around Energy

Asad Husain, a McKinsey partner who has fasted through North American Ramadans for two decades, offered the technique to accomplish work in a hungry state: match the task to your energy, not the clock. Deep, complex thinking belongs early, right after suhoor, or at the start of the workday, when focus is strongest. Mechanical, low-stakes work can be pushed towards the end of the workday, when energy is thinner. Working on a consistent schedule personalized to energy highs and lows safeguards quality of work and ensures the best time for focus is consistently used for the most complex tasks. A focused schedule also includes ease, such as a deliberate hour of disconnection each day. Asad treats the window between Asr and Maghrib as personal time rather than a continuation of work. He also does not rely on food as the only source of energy. A phone call with his daughter or a few minutes of quiet reflection can restore him in ways a meal never could. For Asad, social and personal connection often recharge the spirit more than food does.

3. Embracing the Identity of a Fasting Muslim

For professionals working in non-Muslim countries, being open about fasting with non-Muslim colleagues often does more good than harm: it satisfies curiosity, corrects misconceptions, and can become an unplanned, low-pressure form of dawah simply by being visible and consistent.

One of the enjoyments of Ramadan is in the communal experience. Experiencing religious activities with coworkers, partners and children strengthens bonds and enervates the heart. Even while travelling in North America, Asad found a Muslim colleague working on the same project. Routines were synced by checking in each morning, planning Iftar together, and finding a place to pray Taraweeh in congregation.

In addition to practical tips on how to manage your professional life, the session explored how to attain Taqwa, the true goal in Ramdan. It may sound daunting considering your work obligations, but Omer Mukhtar explains how to achieve it.

4. Finding Time for Spiritual Ascension

Rebalancing the Month's Rhythm: Omer Mukhtar notes that Ramadan's social calendar can look like a revolving door of Iftar invitations, which often leaves people exhausted. His advice is to shift focus from feasting to fasting. Treat the 30 days as a process audit of your life, stripping away what doesn't add value in this world or the next. Ramadan is a natural opportunity to disconnect from habits like nicotine, excessive sleep, or mindless scrolling. Allah provides the spiritual and mental energy and opportunity to let go of them permanently. The goal is to live like Imam Shafi'i, whose entire life resembled Ramadan, fasting or not.

Deepening Devotion: Ramadan also offers an opportunity for deep devotion and re-establishment of your spiritual connection with Allah. Tarawih is an important

means every night during Ramadan to spend time doing Ibadah on longer duration. Ideal is to perform with Jamat, but even a few Rakah offered with concentration at home can be spiritually beneficial. Omer takes the last ten days of Ramadan off annually for Itikaf. For professionals who cannot take out full ten days, 2–3 days over a weekend can spark real change. Women can observe Itikaf at home or in the mosque if there are arrangements. For those who can manage, Umrah is strongly recommended in the blessed month, given the greater spiritual reward.

Learning: If taking time off is not possible, maximize learning whenever you can. Ahmed Jarrar listens to the Quran and tafsir every night before sleeping, a habit he says sets him up for the next day. Ahmed Makki recommended taking up a new Islamic book of liking and finishing in the month of Ramadan.

Ending note:

The month should be dedicated to efforts we make for Allah. This should be a way of showing Him that we are serious about bringing lasting change in ourselves, even if those efforts are small and limited to Ramadan. Allah opens the doors of mercy in Ramadan and makes the process easier for us: "Allah intends ease for you, and does not intend hardship for you" (Al-Baqarah 2:185). We should therefore make this month something to look forward to, not a challenge that disrupts our professional lives.