

Hard at Work? Relax, You'll get more done!

By Andrea Konuma with Dana Cogan

Do you regularly work 11 or 12-hour days? How about on weekends and holidays? Of course, you say, who doesn't? And vacation, what is that? Many of us these days find ourselves working under more stress and putting in longer hours. But what is it getting us? If you think all of that hard work is going to get you to the top, you might want to stop and reconsider. All work and no play might not only make Jack a dull boy, it might also be counterproductive.

Such work habits are not difficult to understand given that most companies, in theory, now measure performance in terms of results rather than time. In the pursuit of performance it is common for employees to work long hours, outside of regular business hours, and often sacrifice weekends or holidays as recovery periods. Some researchers argue that it is the application of "lean production" techniques (e.g. business process re-engineering) that has led to intensified work pace and work demands.⁽¹⁾ These initiatives relentlessly pursue efficiency — reducing the cost of labor through the elimination of "waste" or anything that is not absolutely essential to production. In a professional workplace, such waste could include waiting time, walking time, rest time, chatting time, lunchtime and Starbucks time, not to mention holidays and vacations. It might also include some activities that are good for long-term productivity, but conspicuously unbusy, such as reading.

Japanese labor law attempts to protect employees from excessively long hours by delineating number of work hours in a day, hours worked late at night, and holidays and vacations. Yet these laws, written originally with factory workers in mind, do not wholly address employee protection and safety in a knowledge-based economy. For knowledge employees, focusing simply on the number of hours at work misses a big part of the work picture. Nowadays the lines between work and life are easily blurred and many people continue to work at home in the evenings. Even for those who don't turn on their laptops after hours, the issues of the day re-emerge in their mind long after they have left the office. Many think this is what it takes to get ahead.

But is it really? A recent study suggests that if work is the central focus of our lives and we regularly spend more than 11 hours at the office each day, our lifestyle could be putting us on the fast track to a heart attack.⁽²⁾ Several studies have shown that individuals exposed to extensive overtime periods demonstrated markedly

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elevated levels of the stress hormones – adrenaline, nor-adrenaline, and cortisol, which not only cause long-term damage to the heart but also interfere with the brain's ability to think and create memories. These hormones have deleterious effects on both short-term productivity and long-term health. In short, jobs entailing prolonged effort and emotional distress can both wreak havoc in the human organism and can undermine an employee's performance goals.

Research into how our brains operate suggests that we need to rethink our approach to improving workplace productivity. We humans are not robots — recent neuro-science research shows that our brains (not to mention the bodies in which our brains are housed) need and make valuable use of the "wasted" time for recovery, associative thinking, and problem solving. When we "waste" a day by sleeping on a problem, we actually give our brains time to tap into powerful associative integrative intelligence. When we take time out to share a laugh with co-workers, we boost our immunity and lower our blood pressure. When leave the office "early" at 6pm to exercise at the gym, we increase our ability to make complex decisions. When we take a moment at our desk to close our eyes, plug in our headphones, and listen to some relaxing music, our brain releases calming chemicals that ward off the damaging effects of stress and supports our ability to think clearly.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review (November 2005) highlighted the work of Herbert Benson, founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute and Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School. (3) Benson's research shows that mental productivity is maximized through systematic transitions between stress and relaxation. Periods of intense (stressful) mental efforts are often characterized by heightened concentration and efficiency. However, if we push too hard too long, stress chemicals start to undermine mental performance. Benson's research has revealed that the smart thing to do at this point is to disengage temporarily from the problem and do something that is purely and simply relaxing. When stress is followed by a pleasant and relaxing experience, the "relaxation response" (a set of chemical and structural changes in the brain) allows our brains to leverage the performance enhancing effects of stress. We experience insights to solve the problem we are working on and when we go back to the problem we are able to attain an even higher sustainable level of focus and productivity. Without the

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periods of relaxation we simply burn out, and in the process we miss an opportunity for insights and sustained mental performance.

As it turns out, it isn't how much time Jack works that determines whether he is dull, it is how he brings play into his day that determines how bright he will become. So when there is a lot to be done at the office, the best question to ask your colleagues may be: 'Anyone up for a walk in the park?'

By Andrea Konuma with John Chambers and Dana Cogan

References:

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