

# Work, Rest, Play, Repeat

16th September 2017

## How many hours should we work?

I wonder how many hours a week you work. It is only in the last generation or two that working long hours has been seen as a mark of respect and wealth, rather than as a sign of poverty. The suggestion that the longer you work, the more you get done prevails, but spending ever longer in the office is also resulting in increasing levels of stress and burnout.

Counting hours is probably the easiest way to measure work, but perhaps also the most flawed. We've all had those days when a simple 30 minute task ends up taking 10 hours or more. And then there are those other days, when everything goes right. Weeks of anguishing over a problem, a person, or a problem person, melt away when we find a solution - those magic hours of highly effective work seem a lot more valuable than the clock watching distracted hours, the ones that don't seem to get much done. And that's without taking into account the hours wasted (er invested?) in unproductive meetings.

Increasingly, more and more people work flexibly - from home, from the airport, early morning, late evening, managing around the other priorities of life. For the knowledge worker, 9-5 (or 8-6) in the office, 5 days a week is no longer the norm.

### **Relationships and Outcomes become key**

As well as an unwavering commitment to clear outcomes, a clear focus on key relationships is paramount. If you can get the right things done, to the right timescale and quality, with the right people on board, it matters less where you do it, and frankly how long it takes. And yet, in an age of continuous improvement, yesterday's good enough is today's poor performance - and tomorrow's high performance must be faster, better, cheaper, without compromising on customer satisfaction.

So perhaps outcomes are far more important than measuring the input (or the number of hours worked). We're hearing more and more about countries where employees work fewer hours but are much more productive - it sounds too good to be true. We've been told that we procrastinate too much and spend too much work-time on the internet or domestic chores whilst at work, and yet studies have shown that shorter working days actually encourage employees to work more efficiently and more creatively.

So. Back to the question. "How much proper brainwork – not zoning out in meetings, or reorganising the stationery cupboard, but work that involves really thinking – should you aim to get done in one day?" asks Journalist Oliver Burkeman. It sounds like a trick question, he goes on to say. We think of creativity as fundamentally mysterious, and of humans as extremely varied. Plus there are so many kinds of white-collar work: why assume the same answer for lawyers, academics, investment bankers and engineers? So how can we be definitive?

## 4 Hours

But the answer, he explains, isn't some sophisticated version of: "It depends." The answer is four hours. That, anyway, is the persuasive conclusion reached by Silicon Valley consultant Alex Soojung Pang in his new book:

### **Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less.**

"What's so striking about Pang's argument is its specificity", explains Burkeman. Ranging across history and creative fields, he keeps encountering the same thing; the mathematician Henri Poincaré worked hard from 10am till noon then 5pm till 7pm; the same approximate stretch features in the daily routines of Thomas Jefferson, Alice Munro, John le Carré and many more. To avoid charges of confirmation bias (what if he's only mentioning those who prove his point?) Pang draws on the research of the Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson, whose studies of violinists – also the basis for the much-debated "10,000-hour rule" – support the same finding. We're rhythmic creatures, and the part of the cycle that involves not taxing the mind is no less essential to the result. For Pang, there is a causal relationship between taking the right amount of rest, and delivering high performance.

The point isn't that the world would be a lovelier place if nobody felt forced to work long hours, though that maybe true. It's that in any remotely creative job, a culture that doesn't allow for rest is self-defeating, even just for the bottom line. Adam Smith, renowned as the father of modern economics, had it figured out: "The man who works so moderately as to be able to work constantly not only preserves his health the longest but, in the course of the year, executes the greatest quantity of work."

### **Take a Nap**

"Decades of research demonstrate that the correlation between the number of hours worked and productivity is very weak," according to Pang. Both Charles Darwin and Charles Dickens reportedly worked for only four hours a day, and they seemed to achieve a fair amount in their lives. Darwin is thought to have carried out scientific work and theorised for just three 90-minute periods every day. The rest of his days were spent reading, walking, writing letters and napping. And these aren't the only historical figures who achieved great successes whilst working short days - Thomas Mann, G H Hardy and Edna O'Brien did too, according to Pang. He believes the amount of time they devoted to "deliberate rest" was just as important as time spent working.

A study from the 1950s (cited by Pang), concluded that scientists who worked for 25 hours a week were equally productive as their counterparts who spent just five hours a week in the workplace. Incredibly, scientists who worked 35 hours a week were actually half as productive as those who worked 20 hours, and it was the ones who spent 60 hours a week at work who were the least productive of all.

You can read a fuller article here in The Week: <http://theweek.com/articles/696644/why-should-work-4-hours-day-according-science>

So next time you find yourself counting the hours, or in a meeting lasting more than 4 hours, maybe you need to see which of the hours in your day really count towards your goals. And consider whether Rest needs a higher priority in your life. Work, Rest, and Play - has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?